After the Bacchanal
by AstridContraMundum

Summary

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It wasn't until ten years later that Pagan discovered why.
An AU fusion of the episode Ride and Donna Tartt's The Secret History.

Notes

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Chapter 1

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Prologue —Summer 1957

Once the fire was lit, Pagan wished he had never come along.

But it had been Susan’s idea, and somehow he just couldn’t say no to Susan. He knew sometimes he should—that sometimes the way she shouted at him on the stairs, or seized his arm a little too forcefully when she was in a black mood wasn’t quite right. “Did you hear me?” she would say, snapping her fingers in front of his eyes, when he had simply been thinking of something else for a moment.

Was he that grateful to have someone of his own? Someone to take him away for the Christmas holidays? Someone to make sure he never had to face that grim brick house in Lincolnshire alone ever again?

Well, that could be it.

Endeavour had arrived at Oxford on a scholarship with only a suitcase, a record player, a coat with sleeves that rode an inch too high on his wrists, and an unfathomable Christian name.

There were many terrible things about having a name like Endeavour—the worst being that it ensured that even the simplest of social interactions could not unfold smoothly. He had two choices: he could give his surname and sound a bit frosty, or admit to his first name and invite a barrage of questions he didn’t want to face every time he met a new acquaintance. He felt awkward enough as it was around these strange new beings, who seemed to be raised in a swirl of manor houses and horseback riding, posh galas, elite schools and sophistication.

He saw Susan one day crossing the road—all long hair and confidence, a poise he not only lacked,
but knew that he would never have. He just wasn’t made that way. Rather than speaking to her, he had taken to gathering up his books and slipping quietly away whenever he ran into her and her group—and she was always at the center of a group. Then, one day, she had followed him into the hall. “You don’t have to leave on my account,” she said. Just that easy.

To find his attraction reciprocated was surprising enough, but to find himself welcomed by her set—that was beyond belief. For the first time in his life, he felt included, even loved. They gave him a new sense of belonging and a new name. When he introduced himself only as “Morse,” pointedly silent on the subject of his Christian name, they took to calling him “Pagan.”

His awkwardness they took for a charming, novel sort of quirkiness. If he said anything some might think odd, they didn’t look at him as if he were a hopeless misfit the way they had in Lincolnshire. No, it was all indulgent smiles, and, well, “that’s our Pagan.” He had never had a nickname before. He had never been anybody’s before. Well, not since he was twelve.

But how he got from that hallway to these woods, he couldn’t say. He knew sometimes his new friends could be uncaring, that sometimes they said things that were even a bit cruel. But, after all, they weren’t to blame for that, were they? Their lives had been so easy, he would tell himself, they just didn’t yet understand. And so he would blink and look away. After all, what was the alternative?

It would just be too hard to go back to being alone.

But this. This must be madness.

It was Susan’s idea—well, Susan and Henry’s—to try to recreate a bacchanal. It had become an obsession with them ever since Professor Morrow had brought up the topic in their Greek tutorial. Morrow was a controversial figure at Oxford; independently wealthy, he taught only as a hobby, refusing all pay, and even then, only to select students, hand-picked by him for certain qualities that he alone understood. He accepted male and female students, as well as students from different colleges.

On the surface, they didn’t have much in common—he, Tony, Bruce, Henry, Susan, Bunny, Kay, and Pippa. Unless love was a thing held in common. In their own strange way, they did have that.

Bunny had been excluded from the proceedings that night—they were supposed to have been fasting in preparation, and when Henry caught him earlier in the day devouring a steak and kidney pie at the Lamb and Ox, they had a terrible row. Henry decided that perhaps it had been Bunny putting a damper on the exercise all along—he never did take anything seriously. It was better, Henry decided, for the others to slip off without him.

There would have been a time when Pagan would have been heartbroken to be thus tossed out of their inner circle. But now, how he longed for that fate. To be deemed unworthy of the proceedings due to—well, anything—his middle-class Quaker veneer of otherness, his teetotalism (some of the earlier experiments had involved simply getting drunk)—anything.
Tony, too, was back at the house. He had left some twenty minutes ago, knowing how to excuse himself with ease—with a disdainful boredom only those in possession of vast sums of money can successfully pull off.

But Pagan could only remain rooted to the spot, watching as the fire roared higher and higher. He looked into it, into the heart of it, where the fire was not red or orange, but black. He felt dazed—he hadn’t eaten for three days, and his head felt light, like he could fall away from everything.

Then suddenly, the world turned violet—all was varying shades of violet and ultraviolet—and vines were shooting up from the ground. They twisted around his ankles. He kicked and struggled. He looked to the others for help, but the firelight had cast odd shadows across their faces—they looked not like themselves somehow.

Kay turned and ran, back in the direction of the house. Pagan wanted to follow her, but his feet were frozen.

Oh.

The vines.

How could he have forgotten? He reached down and tore them off while the moon and sun chased each other across the sky, as if years were passing in minutes. He looked up again to look at Bruce, Pippa, Susan and Henry—and suddenly, he felt filled with an electric sense of panic.

Pagan turned and ran.

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Summer 1967

Thursday stops at the edge of the woods, looking across a long lawn that rolls down to a lake. The water is flat and gray-blue under the July sun, reflecting the trees and sky in a darker, cooler echo.

Scattered across the grass like colorful butterflies, a group of people sit and stand, dressed to the nines in suits and pastel sundresses, chatting and sipping wine and looking blankly out over the water. No matter—people of their set can afford indolence—to tinkle ice in a glass, to stretch across a blanket, hands thrown out behind them in cool grass cared for by someone else. Thursday runs a finger along his sweat-drenched collar and sighs.
For the thousandth time in the past seven months, Thursday wishes that Morse were here with him. Strange is a well-meaning lad, and an earnest one—and a good copper, solid. But among people like this, he seemed always to lose confidence, to shrink a bit within himself, despite his bulk.

Morse would be at ease here—not just at ease, mind you—he actually seemed to enjoy taking some of the condescension that this set spoke as if it were some sort of secret language and tossing it back to them with a lazy flick of the wrist, the way someone might slide a paper across the table.

Not that Thursday gave a damn about their heavily drawn vowels—as if answering a simple question was just sooooo tiresome. But, he had to admit, he wasn’t above appreciating the lad’s ability to take an arrogant bastard down a peg or two with one well-placed reference to Metamorphoses or some such thing.

Thursday smiles at the memory of Morse tangling with Professor Copley-Barnes. Even if at the time, he didn’t.

*Venerable the Bede may have been. But not clairvoyant.*

Then, his smile fades. Seven months since anyone had seen or heard from the lad. He never even went back to his flat. It was Miss Hicks who salvaged his records, a few well-worn books, a photo of a young Morse and a young woman who looked very much like him, on the day the landlord took his effects out to the curb. What could have happened that the lad would leave his entire past behind?

Thursday took the boxes home. In one box, there were a few journals he felt tempted to read. Would they fill in a bit of the puzzle of Morse he could never quite complete? He had even gone so far as to open one once, but was faced with the name written on the inside cover: Endeavour Morse.

While most people flung out their given names like clarion calls, Morse kept his guarded. Whatever was inside a book he would inscribe with that name, Thursday thought, was not his to peruse.

He had called up Morse’s sister in Lincolnshire. She had had a letter from Morse, telling her that he was fine and not to worry. That he was sorry but he would not be able to send any money to Gwen. There was no return address.

It didn’t sit right with Thursday. Jakes could joke that he was free and over twenty-one and that it was none of their never mind. That may well be, Thursday thought. But it didn’t sit right.

“Sir?” Strange queries. And Thursday realizes that he has been standing there a moment too long.

Instinctively, Thursday recognizes that the man in the center of the party, broad shoulders stretching the back of his jacket, must be Belborough. No matter what the group—be it a bunch of
thugs hanging outside the boxing club, or these posh, perfectly maintained people scattered across a perfectly maintained lawn—Thursday had for some time been adept at picking out the man in charge.

Thursday sets off across the lawn, Strange trudging along in his wake. Sure enough, the man he had singled out as Belbourough is the first to turn, raising one dark, supercilious eyebrow.

“May I help you?” he drawls.

Before Thursday can answer, a small, red hydroplane flies across the lake, cutting close to Belborough's dock, where another small group of summer guests sits and watches. The roar of the engine drowns out all other sound for a moment—indeed, all other thought.

“Good God,” Belborough says, managing to sound angry and terribly bored at the same time. “Is he going to do that all day?”

“I think he’s trying to impress Kay,” says a man in a dark jacket and heavy, dark-rimmed glasses, with a broad build much like Belborough’s. “Better look out there, Belborough.”

“Actually,” corrects a dark-haired woman sitting on the picnic blanket, “I think he’s trying to impress Pagan.”

Belborough hrumphs a slight bark of laughter at this. The man in the dark jacket scowls. “Christ,” he says. “That’s all we need.”

Thursday has been patient, drinking in the scene, trying to get the measure of the crowd from this small exchange. But now he’s becoming annoyed. He clears his throat and is reaching for his badge, when Belborough seems to remember him.

“Oh, sorry,” he says, not sounding sorry at all. “May I help you…. officer?” He adds the last word as Thursday pulls out his badge.


Belborough nods.

"We’ve got a young man, found dead in the lake, not far from your place. We’d like to ask you how many people you’ve had up here over the last few weeks or so. Looks like you’ve got quite a crowd here today.”

“Oh,” says Belborough. “What a terrible thing,” sounding slightly more human, whether out of art of sincerity, Thursday’s not sure.

Belborough closes his eyes, rubs the bridge of his nose. “Actually, we had a bit of a dinner party up here Saturday last, about three hundred people.”
Christ, thinks Thursday.

“And no one has said anything about anyone missing? All the guests accounted for?” It would be an easy thing, Thursday thinks—taking note at the speed with which this crowd seems to be kicking back the liquor—for a guest to have fallen into the lake drunk.

Or, if DeBryn is on the right track—and he usually is—it would be equally as easy to kill someone and make it look like that was what had happened.

Just a hapless accident.

“I can have Mrs. Carson, the head housekeeper, make you out a list, I suppose, if that would help.”

“That would be fine,” Thursday says. “In the meantime, we’ll need to question those who are here now—if they’ve seen anything amiss.” He looks around at the group; their faces are impassive, closed—they look prepared to present a united front.

Thursday’s eyes drift down toward the three by the dock, the outliers of the group. One man stands apart, in shirtsleeves, arms folded across his chest, his head turned, looking over the lake. The two others, a man and a woman, sit on the edge of the dock, their feet dangling into the water. They look more natural, are more likely perhaps to speak freely. On the perimeter, as it were—not quite so invested in the group. As the hydroplane passes by again, it cuts up closer to the shore, sending up a spray of water over the two on the dock, who throw their arms up over their heads and laugh in ripples that reach Thursday only as the engine roar fades away into the distance.

“I’d like the chance to talk to you lot today, while memories are fresh.”

“We can all go back up to the house,” says Belborough. “You can use my study.”

“What about the three down there, at the dock?” Thursday says.

“Four,” corrects the dark-haired woman. “Bixby is on the hydroplane. He was at the dinner, too. I’ll go and tell them to come along up to the house.”

“We’ll come along with, if you don’t mind,” says Thursday. “Might as well introduce myself.”

“Of course,” the woman says crisply.

Once they are halfway down to the lake, she turns and offers her hand. “I’m Pippa Carey, by the way,” she says. “And this,” she adds, now only a few feet away from the man in shirtsleeves, is Lord Belborough’s cousin, Lord Anthony Chalbourne.”

“Tony,” the man corrects, offering his hand.
“Tony, this is Inspector Thursday.”

“Good day, Inspector,” he says. “I say, is there anything the matter?”

“Evidently,” Miss Carey says, “a man has been found dead near here, drowned in the lake.”

“Good Lord,” Chalbourne gasps.

“We’d like to ask you a few questions,” Thursday explains. “Lord Belborough has offered the use of his study.”

“Of course, of course,” Chalbourne says. He turns to call to the two on the dock. “Kay! Pagan!” he shouts, but at that moment, the hydroplane darts past again, again playfully sending up a cascade of water, and the two don’t hear.

Tony heads down to the dock, Pippa, Thursday and Strange following. Thursday begins to wonder why someone might be called “Pagan.” With this set, who knew?

The two on the dock are still watching—a woman with blonde hair twisted into an artful updo, and a slender man in a light blue jumper with a mass of wavy blonde hair long enough to brush his collar. He runs a hand through it, pulling the sides up and over the back of his head and out of his face. There is something familiar about the gesture, but Thursday can’t place it.

As Thursday draws nearer, the man turns.

Thursday stops in his tracks.

There, set deep in a face that’s thinner than he remembers, and unfamiliarly sun-touched, are the two unmistakable, large, searching eyes of his onetime bagman. He’s held for a moment in their startlingly blue depths, where he sees his own shock mirrored back at him.

For a moment, neither of them speak. Then, as easily as if he were sauntering out of his office door, Thursday says, “Morse.”

Morse’s eyes widen a bit and seem to waver back and forth at an unclockable speed. There’s something different there, something new that Thursday can’t quite name. Then the eyes settle.

“Sir,” he says.

“Oh,” says the blonde woman at his side. “Do you know…”

“Yes,” says Morse.
The woman looks slightly angry for a moment. “He’s not….”

“No,” Morse says.

Thursday is tempted to ask the lad for a word, to take him aside toward the trees.

*Where were you? Why didn’t you leave a clue behind as to what had become of you?*

*I understand why you would want to cut yourself off, but…..*

*Did you mean to from me, too?*

But there’s something in Morse’s face that makes Thursday hesitate. Instead, he reverts to official mode, tells the two about the body, and the need to question everyone up at the house. The blonde woman, Kay, she is called, stands up and waves to the man on the hydroplane to come to shore, but Morse remains on the dock, shoulders slumped now, a slight crease in his brow.

“When was the body found?”

“This morning.”

“But there were hundreds of people up here just five or six days ago.”

“So Lord Belborough said. He’s getting the head housekeeper to compile a list.”

Morse nods, as if this meets with his approval. “It’ll be a bit like interviewing all those people at British Imperial, but there’s nothing else for it I suppose.”

Thursday snorts a bit at this. It’s not as if he’ll be doing the grunt work. It’s a bit incongruous to see the lad, formulating plans and asking questions as if he’s on the case; especially since Thursday has never seen him look less like a DC. Hair longish and unruly, in a sky-blue half-zip jumper, white shirt and matching sky-blue tie, he looks more like an errant poet on holiday than a copper. Strange looks uncertain, as if Morse, whom he once felt free to chide about his sergeant’s, is now in some totally separate category of being, one whom he’s not sure how to approach.

As for Thursday, he feels a small and surprising surge of anger: all this while, he envisioned the lad half-starved in some bedsit, felt a worried twist in his stomach each time a suicide or drunk was found in the river, and all these months, he’d been lolly-gagging up here with some posh set.

“Did the victim have anything at all on his person?” he asks. Just like that. Just like he hadn’t
disappeared for seven long months.

“Or, perhaps if you had a photo?”

“The only photo we have is post-mortem, and it’s not pretty. Nor very enlightening.”

Once, he would have told him about the lack of ID, of DeBryn’s suspicion that there were signs of a struggle.

But now his bagman is on the other side of the table.

If Morse thinks it’s at all awkward that the two of them have run into each other like this after all this time, he doesn’t say anything. But then, even under the most ordinary of circumstances, he always was an awkward sod.

Up at the house, Thursday and Strange make themselves at home in Belborough’s fine study. It’s the sort of study set up for show—it doesn’t seem as if much actual work gets accomplished in it, other than that of delegating work to different managers and land agents. One by one, Thursday questions them—Belbourgh, the other large chap, whom Thursday learns is called Henry Winter, Tony Chalbourne, Kay, Pippa Carey, Joss Bixby. He moves down the list of names, down the list of questions: Anyone have a row at the party? Leave in anger? Leave intoxicated? When did you leave? Anyone vouch for that? How did you get home? But only a small part of his mind is focused on the process—the rest of his mind is circling around and around the question of Morse.

Finally, right when Thursday fears that Morse had done a runner, disappeared again off into the unknown, he slinks into the office, sits gingerly in the chair before them.

It feels ridiculous to ask this, but Thursday decides to keep this formal, to follow procedure.

“Name?”

Morse blinks a bit in surprise at this. Thursday has never fully understood it, but he knows full well the lad’s name is a sore point.

Certainly, the name is ridiculous, but Thursday always felt, despite that, that there was something about it that suited him—something striving and seeking, full of struggle, it’s true—how often is the word cast in negative terms?—a difficult endeavour, a hopeless endeavour?—but full of hope, too, for something better. A fruitless struggle the name may suggest, maybe, but a heroic one all the same.

He knew Morse felt otherwise. And now that Thursday’s opening gambit has been to dredge up that sensitive point, he feels almost as if he’s been deliberately cruel.

Morse hides his surprise quickly. His face falls into the contours of a mask. He’s all business.
“Endeavour Morse,” he says.

“Blimey, matey, where have you been? I almost didn’t recognize you.”

Morse takes no note of Strange. He looks squarely at Thursday, acting as if he’s just another potential witness.

As if turnabout is fair play.

Thursday winces a bit at Strange’s outburst. He wasn’t planning on being this direct, but he wondered when Strange would find his tongue. Still, Strange and Morse did seem to have something resembling a friendship—maybe his more natural manner will help smooth all of this over.

Then, Morse turns and looks at Strange as though he’s considering an answer. But, typical of Morse, one doesn’t come easily or readily, and Strange swoops in again.

“How was it?” he asks quietly.

Morse looks confused for a moment, then startled. “‘It?’ You mean prison ‘It?’”

Strange nods.

“How do you think?”

“Safest place you could have been.”

Morse looks as if he’s been slapped. He jumps up from his chair.

“What do you know about it?”

“Morse…” Thursday begins.

“Look, I didn’t see anything untoward the other night…. Sure, they were drunk, everyone is always drunk here, aren’t they? I stayed here until about three in the morning… Or actually closer to half-past. I walked home. I don’t know why anyone staying here would have cause to murder anyone else, if murder is what you think this is. I’m not exactly privy to all of their little intrigues whatever
they may be. I’m really of no use to you. Is that all?”

“Morse … “

“Do you have any other questions for me or not?”

Thursday sighs. He had nothing but questions. But the lad was clearly a spring ready to snap.

“No,” he says.

And with that, Morse spins on his heel and all but runs for the door.

Thursday looks down at the page before him. He had not even the time to take any notes. The page in the notebook has only the familiar name at the top—the rest of the page nothing but a blank.

Thursday sighs.

That sounds about right.
Chapter 2

Going through the list provided by the Belboroughs’ housekeeper is painful—resulting in endless hours on the telephone and knocking on doors—but when one of the guests proves to be nowhere to be found, it leads to a break in the case.

Edmund Corcoran. Known by his friends and family as “Bunny.” Affable. Worked as a bank manager. Son of a once-wealthy financier who put on a good show, but who was up to his eyeballs in debt. One of those back-slapping sorts whom some find charming, others exasperating, is the conclusion Thursday draws from his employees.

Seemed to live beyond his means, just like his old man, Corcoran’s assistant says. But a good sort. Not a malicious bone in his body. He said he’d be back Monday, but when he didn’t turn up, no one worried. He had gone to stay with some old university friends. It wasn't unusual for him to disappear, stay with them for weeks at a time.

Thursday snorts a bit at this. How immensely well he must manage the bank.

If Thursday would like to know more, the assistant manager says, he should speak with Corcoran’s finance, Marion Hill.

Marion, it transpires, is unconcerned that no one has seen Corcoran. He’s up visiting his friends, she says. It’s not unusual for him to stay up there longer than he originally planned.

No, she didn’t accompany him up to the Belboroughs’. They are an odd little group—they all studied together under Julian Morrow, who allowed only a few into his tutorials—that’s how they all met.

Marion doesn’t much enjoy their company—all their Greek aphorisms and private jokes go over her head, she says, and, moreover, don’t seem all that funny. She doesn’t find Henry, Bruce, Tony and Pippa particularly friendly, that much Thursday gleans from their conversation, and between her and one called Susan, evidentially, there once occurred something about which it was too frightful even to speak.

Kay and Pagan are nice enough, but even they make any attempts at conversation unnecessarily difficult. Kay’s just always so keen to conceal her working-class-girl-from-Birmingham past that she never lets down her mask. And Pagan, well, nothing he says makes a great deal of sense.

“Once, I simply asked him what his real name was, and he got all flustered, went off on some tangent about Wittgenstein and the arbitrariness of language, for heaven’s sake,” she said. “The sad part is—later I realized that the poor thing had been trying to make some sort of joke.”

She had given up on the whole lot of them.

But, no, it wasn’t unusual, once they got together, for Bunny to spend weeks at a time with them.

“Well, the thing is, Miss,” Thursday says carefully, “I was just up at the Belboroughs’, and I spoke to everyone there. Mr. Corcoran was not there at the time, nor was there any mention of him.”

Would she mind calling to make sure he is accounted for?”
She goes into the other room. When she emerges, she looks pale and stunned.

“Bruce says he left last Tuesday,” she says.

Yes, she says faintly, she can come and identify the body. Yes, she had a key to his flat. Yes, he was welcome to search it.

Thursday heads over to Corcoran’s flat, a large space on the top floor of building in a tony part of town. From the flat, it’s hard to get a grasp on the personality of the man—no books other than a few bestsellers—those ones that everyone “ought” to read, expensive clothes made to impress more than to express, furniture that looks like it had been handpicked by a tasteful woman who worked in the shop…. Everything just so, without revealing a great deal about the person who lived there. All the glasses matched.

It’s only on a table by the window in the bedroom that he finds anything personal—a tweed-covered scrapbook. Thursday flips it open and feels a swooping sense of déjà vu. There is the cast of garden party from a few days ago, right there in black and white, but with certain subtle differences.

In the photo, Belborough is leaner, his dark hair thicker, but his face is full of that same self-assurance—twenty and already certain of his destiny. There’s Kay, her hair longer, her smile more natural, less stilted. Pippa Carey, looking just the same, only in out-of-date clothing. The three sit on a picnic blanket, legs stretched before them.

Thursday looks over to the next page, and his stomach gives another swoop—there is an undergrad Morse, his face slightly fuller, his eyes wide. God, he looks young. Beside him, a young woman with straight blonde hair, wearing an expression identical to Belborough’s.

Thursday begins to flip through the pages—on each one the same group of friends is repeated, sprawled out on picnic blankets, sitting under trees, dressed in tuxes and gowns at formal soirees. On one page, Morse sits at a table between Henry Winter and Belborough—while the other two cradle tumblers of what looks to be Scotch, Morse holds a bottle of ginger beer. Thursday huffs a laugh.

Chalbourne behind the wheel of a sports car with Corcoran, hamming it up for the camera. Pippa and the blonde girl posing in formal gowns on a flight of marble stairs. Morse stretched out on the floor beside a record player, eyes staring up at the unknown photographer in surprise. Corcoran, Kay, Morse and the blonde sitting on the railing of the porch of a country house, laughing.

Odd, that Corcoran should have been looking at this—it looked to be about 10 years old. One would think it would have been relegated to a box in a closet by now. Odd that he should be among these same people right before his murder.

Thursday has a feeling that the case is leading him right where he began.

*********

At the Belboroughs’, a secretary informs Thursday that Bruce and Kay are out for the evening. He leads Thursday back to the study, and, after consulting an appointment book, assures Thursday that
he will clear Belborough’s schedule for ten o’clock the following morning.

“That would do nicely.” Thursday says. “Oh, and one more question: we didn’t get a contact number for one of the Belbororoughs’ guests the other day,” he pauses for effect’s sake, even though he knows the name all too well. “Endeavour Morse.”

“Oh,” the man says. “Mr. Morse. That’s most likely because he doesn’t have a telephone number.”

“Pardon?”

“He’s living in the lake house over at Lord Chalbourne’s summer place, right next to Bixby’s, Mr. Joss Bixby’s.”

Well, thinks Thursday, what do you know about that?

Thursday arrives at Bixby’s just as the servants are finishing stringing the trees with fairly lights. He walks up the broad steps, and, finding the wide doors thrown open, walks right in and takes a look around. Inside, men in liveries are setting out laden silver trays on a long table. A group of musicians is beginning to warm up, sending soft strains of a cello wafting in the air.

Thursday has seldom seen such opulence—the crystal chandelier above is the size of an automobile, there’s room after room done up in rich reds and greens and blues, and heavy arrays of flowers that look more like artful confectionaries than anything that had ever grown up out of the earth.

He muses about what his Win would think of it all and laughs to himself. She’d think it was a bit too much—how does anyone keep all of that clean, she would say, singularly unimpressed.

One man in a livery spots Thursday and raises an inquiring eyebrow. Thursday pulls out his badge, introduces himself, and asks to speak to Bixby. The man leads him to a study, where Bixby is behind a desk, wrapping up a phone call.

“That sounds wonderful, old man.”

Bixby is a bit of an enigma in all of this. He seemed to cut quite the figure at the garden party the other day, but he’s missing from the photos in Corcoran’s album. If he’s fallen in with the group later, he might have an outsider’s more objective opinion of the dynamics of this set.

He also has a quality that Thursday learned to pick up on very early on in his career.

An eagerness to please.

Bixby hangs up the phone, rises, extends his hand.

“Detective Inspector Thursday,” he says.

“Mr. Bixby,” Thursday intones.

Next to the desk, on a stand, is a painting, displayed in a place of pride. Thursday looks it over. Can’t hurt to start off with a bit of small talk.

“That’s some painting, there.”

To Thursday’s surprise, Bixby looks a bit crestfallen. “So I thought, too. But it seems I’ve been a
bit taken in, old man. I’ve been told recently in no uncertain terms that it’s a fake. Rather directly, I’m afraid.”

Thursday hums sympathetically. Three guesses as to who might have been the one to have told him so, he thinks.

“Ah, well,” Bixby muses, “appearances can be deceiving I suppose.” Then he gestures to Thursday to take a seat opposite the desk.

“To what do I owe this visit?” he asks.

“We have an ID on the body, found the other day out in the lake. Edmund Corcoran. Did you know him?”

Bixby sighs, bows his head, runs a hand through his waves of dark hair.

“That’s too bad. I didn’t know him well. I met him only a few months ago, at a party I gave. My neighbors, across the lake, the Belboroughs, had about five or six friends staying with them at the time, all people they had been friends with while they were up. He’s been to a few of my parties since then, and I’ve seen him a few times at the Belboroughs’.”

“But you didn’t know him before? You weren’t up with them?”

“No, no, old man,” he says. “I’m a Harvard man myself.”

“What did you make of him? Corcoran?”

“Well, it’s difficult, you know, when one spends time with a group like that—a group that has such a history together. Of course, there’s bound to be all sorts of references I missed. I can’t quite figure them out actually. But then, that’s probably how many groups of school friends are, aren’t they? Just friends out of habit, out of a sense of shared history, even though there’s really not a lot of love lost between them.”

“Why do you say that?” Thursday asks.

Bixby seems to realize he’s said more than he intended.

“Well, Henry Winter and Belborough seemed quite impatient with him sometimes, with Bunny. I couldn’t blame them entirely—he seemed a bit abrasive at times. But yet, then they were all full of the most fantastic stories—of trips to Italy, Greece, Spain. They must have been quite close once to have traveled together so frequently.

The girls—Pippa and Kay, that is—seemed to accept him for what he was and even seemed quite fond of him in their own way. Evidently, though, the girl who sounds like she was the ringleader of the group, Susan—they all called her Caesar—funny how these types are so fond of nicknames, isn’t it?—used to row with him frightfully. The girls laughed quite a lot, remembering some of their battles. I was quite in the dark as to what it was all about, actually.”

Thursday hadn’t dreamed the man would be this chatty—he thought at first that it was just the byproduct of the charm that seemed to come to his type so naturally. Now he begins to suspect that perhaps he’s also slightly drunk.

Or is this a two-way street they are travelling?

Just as Thursday is trying to get a handle on the workings of this set, so perhaps is Bixby.
Is he being so forthcoming in the hopes of receiving some information in return?

Thursday shakes away the thought. “But this—Susan—she hasn’t been up at Belborough’s lately, has she?” he asks.

“No,” Bixby says. “I think she’s given the place a wide berth of late. You know, because of Pagan.”

“Why is that?”

“I don’t know exactly what happened, but evidently he’s been through a bit of a rough patch of late. I suppose they all thought he didn’t need to drudge up more bad memories.”

“And why would that be?”

“Well, because they were engaged, old man. Sounds like there was lots of strum und drang. They were together for a year, then engaged for a year, and then she dropped him, just like that. He stopped showing up for tutorials, and then disappeared completely, evidently. They had heard rumors that he had joined the army, and then they lost all trace of him again.

“Then he turned up—out of the blue—back in Oxford as a policeman of all things.” Bixby laughs a bit at this thought, though all the while, he’s eyeing Thursday carefully.

Thursday circles back to his earlier theory—this is a two-way street.

Bixby stops laughing when he realizes Thursday isn’t. He frowns slightly as if he’s mulling something over.

“So as you can see, Inspector,” he says, “It’s quite impossible to know what to believe. As I said, I would like to be of more help, but the group is a bit of a puzzle to me. It’s true there is some sense of tension there, but it’s more the type of tension you might find at any family Christmas gathering, really. Just old jibes and annoyances. But anything that I would say would lead to murder? No, not at all, just the opposite. It’s rare, really, to see such old friends sticking by one another, despite their differences. I haven’t kept in touch with anyone from my days at Harvard.”

Thursday considers this.

“If that’s all, Inspector, I’m having a bit of a party tonight, and my guests will start arriving soon. It’s a poor host who neglects his guests.”

Thursday nods. “I’ll leave you to them, then,” he says, standing and preparing to leave.

“Oh, and Inspector?” Bixby asks.

“Yes?”

“You didn’t seem to find that last bit as incongruous as I might have thought.”

Thursday frowns.

“What I mean is, Pagan wasn’t actually a policeman, was he?”

“Yes,” Thursday says, deciding he won’t use the past tense—“he is.”

“Oh,” says Bixby, looking oddly startled. He takes a sip of his drink and looks at the painting by his desk. “Well,” he muses. “I suppose appearances can be deceiving.”
Thursday crashes through the woods, along the edges of the lake. Two years he’s known the lad—and during that time he’s faced danger after danger with him side by side. He’s trusted the lad with his life. And all this time, he never bothered to bring up the fact that he was engaged? For a whole year? Left so devastated by the break that he dropped out of Oxford?

Certainly, Thursday knew that Morse was an unfathomably private person, but you would think he would have seen fit to bring up something like that at least once.

Wouldn’t you?

And Pagan. It’s absolutely ridiculous. Every time he hears the name he feels a twinge of annoyance. There’s something decadent about the name that doesn’t suit the austere young man he has come to know so well. Did he honestly ever think that was a better name to go by than Endeavour?

Well, this was a talk that had been long overdue. Belborough’s secretary had said he was staying at a lake house. Ought to be easy enough to find. Just follow the circumference of the lake and he’s bound to find it.

The moon begins to rise through the trees, casting light on Thursday’s path. He travels along, stepping over roots and rocks, until he turns a bend. There, back in the trees, is a simple wooden house, looking Morse-untidy, with firewood stacked carelessly out front and a green lawn chair left deserted under a tree with a book left beside it on the ground. Thursday picks up the book as he crosses the lawn—no sign of rain—but picking up after the lad seems as natural as picking up after Joan or Sam.

He thought he would feel uneasy—talking to Morse after all of this time—but his steps are steady as he heads up to the door. He knocks once and the door swings open.

“Morse?” Thursday calls.

There is no answer.

Thursday takes a step inside.

“Morse?”

The place is a tip. Clothes strewn over a chair, a jumper left on the floor. Books everywhere, but no … and this makes Thursday stop in his tracks, for fear that he’s just entered a stranger’s house—no records. In fact, there’s no record player to be seen.

“Morse?” he says once more. But by now it’s clear the place is deserted. And suddenly Thursday realizes: Bixby’s party.

He thinks of walking back to Bixby’s, to see if he can rouse him out there, but somehow he doesn’t have the heart to do it. He wants to talk to Morse—the most honest copper he’s ever known—idealistic with an unwavering commitment to what’s right. He has no desire to see his onetime bagman in the guise of Pagan, dressed in a tux and hobnobbing with a glittering, jaded crowd of people who don’t give a damn about anything. What he ought to do at this hour is to just go home. But Thursday doesn’t want to do that, either.

So instead, he goes over to the small galley kitchen that separates a sitting area from the sleeping area. He doesn’t expect to find a bounty of food, but he hopes there might be at least a loaf of
bread, or a bit of cheese. Instead, there’s nothing in the cabinet but bottles of Scotch—a bizarre assortment of cheap rot-gut stuff and surprisingly expensive labels. Thursday’s heart sinks. He should have looked harder for the lad. He should have ….

Thursday hesitates before reaching for the Scotch. Well, better than nothing, he thinks, and he pours himself a glass. Then he settles in the sitting room’s one comfortable chair. He’s waited seven months. He can wait a few more hours.

*******

Thursday wakes, confused, in a chair in a shabby room. The first thing he notices is that his neck is horribly stiff. The second is that it seems lighter outside than is should be. The third is that the flimsy wooden front door is sliding open with a creak.

Morse crosses the threshold and jumps, startled to see the shadow of a person sitting in his chair. Thursday feels just as stunned, even more so than he did on the day he first saw him, out of the blue, sitting on the dock.

Morse looks an absolute wreck.

He’s unsteady on his feet, for one thing, his eyes a bleary fire-blue. His shirt is untucked and sloppy, as if it’s been buttoned the wrong way, and his jacket, if he had one, is long gone. His hair, longer than Thursday has ever seen him wear it, is curling as if it has a life of its own and—Christ—it’s tangled with bits of leaves and even a twig or two. Suddenly, Pagan doesn’t seem the most ridiculous name for him.

Morse moves fluidly from alarm to acceptance of Thursday’s presence, as if it’s the most natural thing in the world for his DI to be sitting in his small cottage in the wee hours of the morning.

“How are you?” he slurs.

“How are you?” Thursday asks pointedly.

“’Mmmm fine,” he says. Then he has the gall to look annoyed. “Howdy you find me?”

“Belborough’s secretary said you were staying at a lake house. It’s my lung that got a hole in it, not my brain.”

Morse winces at this. Thursday had forgotten how squeamish the lad could be.

“How long you’ve been holed up here?” Thursday asks, changing the subject.

But Morse says nothing. He just stands there, swaying on his feet. Then he goes over to the galley kitchen cabinet, and pours himself a glass of Scotch.

Hell, Thursday winces, the lad must be a glass of Scotch himself at this point.

Morse drains the glass and turns and takes a few steps to the single bed in the corner. He considers it for a moment. Then he collapses on it.

“Morse?” Thursday asks.

“Morse?”
Unbelievable. He’s waited for Morse for hours, for months really. Just to speak to him for two minutes and then watch him pass out cold.

Leave it to Morse to find any way possible to avoid any attempts at personal communication.

Thursday picks up his glass left on the side table, drains it, and sets it on the counter. Then he walks over to Morse, takes the glass that’s still in his hand, and sets it on the counter next to it. He starts for the door but then doubles back.

Thursday pulls Morse’s shoes off and then moves him around, so that his legs aren’t hanging off the side of the bed. He takes a blanket scrunched at the foot of the bed and places it over him.

“Sleep tight,” he sighs. Then he heads out the door.

******

It’s a bit past five in the morning when Thursday gets home. He falls asleep immediately but wakes after only an hour, seized by the awful thought that Morse might pack up and leave, disappear, but this time even more completely. He decides to make the lake house his first stop that morning. The lad might very well still be asleep, but that’s better, Thursday thinks, then waiting too long and letting the him give him slip again.

By eight, he’s on the lake house’s front porch, rapping smartly at the wooden door. There’s no answer, and for a moment, Thursday’s heart races; his fears have been realized. He raps again, shaking the wooden frame of the door.

“Would you please stop that banging!” comes an annoyed voice from inside. A moment later, Morse is tearing the door open, his face twisted up in a scowl. “I’m perfectly capable of… “

But what he is perfectly capable of, he doesn’t say. Instead, he looks at Thursday and freezes.

“Sir,” he says.

“Morning, Morse,” says Thursday. He waits patiently on the steps until Morse opens the door further, beckoning him inside.

“Sorry,” he says. “I thought you were … How did you find me?”

“We went over this last night.”

Morse looks confused. It’s not often Thursday’s seen his bagman at a loss.

“Did we?” he asks, stumbling back inside.

Morse goes into the galley kitchen. “Can I get you anything? I don’t have much in.”

Thursday snorts at this. He’s already seen for himself that he doesn’t have anything in.

“A cup of tea?” Morse suggests.

“Please,” says Thursday, settling himself back into the same red-gold armchair in which he spent much of the night before.

Morse busies himself, peering in different mugs, looking, evidently, for one that seems like it might be the cleanest. Then he’s opening drawers, until finally he finds an ancient box of tea bags that look as if its been left by a previous occupant.
“I’m at a bit of a disadvantage, I’m afraid,” he says. “I’m not quite sure what we spoke about last night, you see.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Well, that’s no surprise, you looked three sheets to the wind. Christ, Morse, you’re a sight.”

In the white morning light streaming through the cottage’s big front windows, it’s clear that Morse is a mess, his hair sticking out wildly in all directions, like some underwater plant.

Morse self-consciously raises a hand to his hair and combs through it, pushing it away from his face. His hand catches on something, and Morse pulls it out to study it—one curling green leaf. He tosses it aside without a thought, much to Thursday’s dismay. Shouldn’t the lad find it the least bit alarming that he had evidently been on the ground somewhere at some point in the night?

The kettle whistles. Once he has the two cups on a tray, Morse settles himself in the chair, and looks at Thursday expectantly.

“How are you?” Morse asks, his voice low.

“Well enough. Wondering where the devil you’ve been. Did you see the findings?” Thursday asks.

Morse lets out a bitter laugh. “You mean the whitewash!”

“What did you expect?”

His eyes snap up. “Better!”

Morse scowls for a moment, then sits back, as if he’s through with the subject and hopes Thursday didn’t drag himself all the way up to the lake house for this. But Thursday persists. “We broke them. The worst are gone. The rest are scattered to the winds. And I’m lacking one bagman.”

Morse laughs again. “After all this time? Ask Jakes.”

“The situation is not vacant. Jakes spoke for you. And Bright. It’s over.”

Morse stands up. “Not for me. I’m finished with it. You live in the shadows long enough, you forget the sunlight. I’m finished with it!”

He bangs over to the kitchen, rips open the cabinet and pours himself a Scotch.

Thursday rubs the bridge of his nose.

He wonders how to tell Morse to go easy on the Scotch for Christ’s sake.

And he wonders how to tell Morse that he’s not finished with it. That the shadows he’s tried to run from have just caught up with him.
Chapter 3

“Bunny?” says Morse, sinking back into his chair. “I can’t believe it.”

He looks stunned, even paler, if possible, than he had before. But the surprise of it all seems to unlock something in Morse, presents him with a puzzle that takes him outside himself. Thursday can practically hear the wheels turning in his brain. It’s the most Morse-like Thursday has seen him yet. For a moment, it seems like nothing has changed. Like Blenheim Vale never happened.

“Any thoughts?”

“Well,” Morse considers, “He could be restless, never liked to sit still for long. He always sort of fancied a walk. When we were up, he’d go off on his own, every Sunday afternoon, like clockwork. Are they sure it’s murder? It could have been an accident. Last time I saw him, he was terribly drunk.”

Morse cards his hand through his hair, finds another bit of leaf, flicks it away. “Those things start out well enough, but by three or four, it’s like being caught in a ring of Dante’s Inferno. People passing out, getting sick all over the place. Absolutely hellish.”

And yet you stayed there quite a while last night, Thursday thinks.

“Bixby said he seemed to sense some tension between Corcoran, Belborough, and Winter.”

Morse looks surprised at this. “What? They’re good friends. Best friends, I would say.”

“Bixby also said that Corcoran could be a bit abrasive at times.”

“Well,” concedes Morse. “There is that. That’s just the way Bunny is. I mean,” he stops a moment and frowns. “I mean,” he adds softly, “was. His sense of humor. Take me, for example—I never had, well, obviously I don’t have near the money the others do. Or, that is, none, to be precise. So he’d love to say things like, ‘nice pen, Pagan, is that a Montblanc?’ When quite obviously it was some half-broken thing I’d found on the floor somewhere. That might be what Bixby meant. If he thought it was your weak spot, he’d zing you with it if he could.”

“But he was good for Bruce and Henry—they are so serious, and Bunny, he was, well, not so serious. I don’t know how he managed to get through university at all, really. But then,” he adds, taking another long draught of Scotch. “I’m not one to talk.”

“Bixby also said that set had been telling old stories, how he used to row with a girl named Susan,” Thursday says.

Morse’s face goes dead at the name. “She, she thought we shouldn’t let him get away with some of his shenanigans, that’s all. She had a bit of a temper.”

“If he went after you about being middle class, what did he go after this Susan for?”
“Well,” Morse says. “He was a bit afraid of her at first, so he didn’t dare. But then, something happened, I don’t know, and he started, I don’t know, picking at her quite a lot. That’s when they began to quarrel.”

“And what did he pick at her about?”

“I guess it that would have been me.”

Thursday raises his eyebrows.

“We were, we were engaged, Susan and I. Bunny found it amusing. Her father was an earl, you see. And I… well. He made a million little jokes about it. What would they say in the society section? It drove her mad.”

“Sounds like a piece of work.”

“It does sound that way—when I say that all at once. But it’s hard to explain. He didn’t mean anything by it. Sure, his jokes could sometimes sting a bit. But then, you’d see him out and about, and he’d call out to you with such earnestness, that you would forgive him anything.”

“Besides, that was all years and years ago, and hardly a motive for murder. If I were you,” Morse adds, “I’d look a little more into what he’s been doing for money. He did always like to live above his means.”

Morse stands up and raises his glass. “Would you like one?”

“Bit early in the day.”

But Morse doesn’t take the hint. He rises and goes back over to the counter.

“Is that what Dr. DeBryn thinks this is?” Morse says softly. “Murder?”

“I can’t disclose that, I’m afraid.”

Morse shakes his head, as if to clear it. “Of course,” he says primly, as he fills his glass.

“It’s just that you said,” Morse says, “… the postmortem photo wasn’t…. So I wondered…. “

Thursday sighs. Bugger it, he thinks. Bagman or no bagman, if he can’t trust Morse, whom can he trust? Besides, the lad never put his papers in, so technically….

“Dislocated shoulder. As if his arms were pinned. Definite sign of some sort of violent struggle,” Thursday says.

Morse goes from white to slightly green at this. He sways for a moment on his feet, and Thursday wishes he had waited for him to be sitting down before he painted that image. For a moment, Morse does nothing. Just stares down at his glass. When he does speak, his voice comes out as a mere croak. “God,” he says. And then, “But why?”

“That’s what I was hoping you could help me with, lad.”

Morse shakes his head. “I just…. I just couldn’t say.”

“Well, when did you see him last?

He bows his head again.
“At Bruce and Kay’s. At Kay’s party.”

“Did you see him leave?”

“No.”

“Did you walk all the way back here after? Did you hear anything, out in the woods?”

“I... I didn’t... Why are you asking me all these questions?”

“I’m just trying to set up some sort of timeline here,” Thursday says.

“Well set it up with Jakes,” Morse snaps. “I don’t recall indicating that I was on shift.”

Thursday says nothing.

“Sorry,” Morse says, “Look, I’m not exactly privy to their business dealings, but the only thing I can think of is that possibly he got mixed up in something over his head, hoping for some quick profit or some such thing. He did have expensive tastes. But other than that, I can’t imagine,” Morse shrugs. “Everybody loved Bunny.”

He pauses and frowns. “Except when they didn’t.”

******

Thursday drives himself around the lake and over to the Belboroughs’, arriving just before ten.

When Thursday tells them that the body found in the lake has been identified as that of Edmund Corcoran, Lady Belborough looks tearful, Lord Belborough shakes his head.

Poor old Bunny, he says, with a trace of nostalgia. He was probably properly soused, and just stumbled into the lake. He was almost always properly soused if someone else was paying. It must have been an accident, surely.

What a fellow, Thursday thinks. Taking the news of the death of an old school friend as if it were a tragedy ranking just slightly above a disappointing golf score.

Lady Belborough, though, agrees with her husband. “It simply must have been an accident. Who would do that to Bunny?”

He was the class clown of the group, she says, never took anything seriously, never was involved in any serious matters at all, really. Loved shooting and rowing. Didn’t have any enemies as far as she ever knew.

“If you do think there is any indication of foul play, I’d look into Bunny’s financial dealings,” Lord Belborough says. He could be extravagant, he says, capable of spending immense sums as if it were nothing at all.

Thursday thanks them for their time. Just like Morse, the Belboroughs have pointed him towards the question of Corcoran’s finances.

And it’s a natural place to look. An upper-middle class banker with high-class tastes and
expectations. He could have easily gotten involved in something over his head, looking to make a quick profit.

But Thursday can’t stop thinking about the men and women he’s met in this set. He can’t stop thinking about what he’s learned of them, and of the photos he’s seen of them in Corcoran’s album.

There are Belborough and Winter, powerful men, broad shouldered, wealthy and confident.

In the photographs, they look straight into the camera’s lens as they prepare to kick back fifths of Scotch.

There’s Kay, alight with a frosty blonde beauty. Pippa, tall with dramatically, dark bobbed hair, in photo after photo swinging golf clubs and jumping behind the wheels of expensive automobiles.

Tony, slighter and more unassuming than Belborough and Winter, but well-put together, smiling with the assurance that comes with having a net-worth worth more than the other two put together.

There’s Susan, the one in the photos who hadn’t been at Belborough’s, the center of every other photo, looking out at the camera as bold as a tigress.

Even Morse, whom Thursday knew to be simply a lad from Lincolnshire, cut quite the figure in the photos—clear blue eyes steady, all sharp cheekbones and sunlit curls, holding himself apart from the others as if they were some strange animals he had been sent to study—an attitude Thursday knew to stem more from awkwardness, but could also be—and most likely was—construed as an unassailable aloofness. And he could, Thursday was sure, certainly hold his own intellectually with this set—with all his highbrow tastes and esoteric interests.

They were all extremes, every one. How did a man like Corcoran, by all accounts known not to be as wealthy as he claimed to be, nor as intelligent as he claimed to be—someone whose jokes fell flat like those of an awkward uncle, someone who looked and by all accounts was so ordinary—fall in with this exclusive set?

He can’t stop thinking that in that question lies his answer.

**********

Thursday heads back to the nick; Jakes is out, but Strange is at his desk. He nods his head toward the door.

Strange gets behind the wheel of the Jag, while Thursday settles in the passenger seat.

“Where are we headed?”

“Donnigston Hall,” says Thursday, “About 30 miles north.”

Within the hour, they are pulling up in front of yet another house that’s larger than the apartment block he and Win first lived in in London. A solid mass of brick, covered in ivy, sweeping broad steps, wide doors painted white.

The man who opens the door directs him to another study—It’s the third study of its sort he’s been over the past few days. If Belborough’s study had been designed to be tasteful and understated, and Bixby’s designed to overwhelm and impress, then the key to Winter’s is absolute order.

There are books and papers arranged in neat piles, leather folders stacked on a small table. There is a calendar on the desk blotter, each date filled in a uniform block-letter hand.
As he and Strange wait, he hears a click of a woman’s shoes in the hall. Through the doorway, he sees her; it’s the blonde woman in the photographs, the one who looked so confident next to a bewildered-looking Morse.

“Hello,” she says, introducing herself with a nod. “I’m Susan Winter. I believe you are here to speak to my husband and I about Bunny Edmund Corcoran?”

“Yes,” Thursday says, struggling to contain his shock. So she married Henry Winter, then.

“He’ll be here in just a minute; he’s just on the other line in the library. East Coast. Please,” she says, “Why don’t you sit down?”

Strange and Thursday turn to two large chairs near the window and sit down.

“May I offer you something to drink?” she asks.

“No thank you,” Thursday says.

“No,” Strange echoes, “thank you.”

Mrs. Winter’s cool façade wavers the slightest of fractions—she seems to shift her weight a little as if she’s unsure of her next question.

“So, Oxford City Police, then? That’s what Thomas told me.”

“That’s right.”

“Hmmm. There was quite a lot about you in the papers a few months ago. I must say, it was all quite extraordinary,” she says. “A bit difficult to follow. More of an opera plot than anything that happens in life.”

Thursday is wondering how he should reply—wondering whether her opera metaphor might be a reference to Morse—when Winter comes in, the same fellow he had seen that day at the lake—as broad-shouldered as Belborough, but with darker hair, almost black, and an expressionless face.

Thursday shows his badge, reintroduces himself and Strange.

“Yes, yes,” Winter says. “I understand you are here about Bunny Corcoran. I heard—Bruce told me. It’s just terrible. He was my best friend at school. We went to Rome together one summer when we were up. I can’t believe he’s gone.”

“It’s been said that he liked to live beyond his means a bit.”

Winter huffed a laugh at this. “I can’t say that’s not true. I blamed his parents. They had an old name, but no money. They taught their children to think money is the most important thing in the world, sent them to the most expensive schools they could get them into, and then left them without a penny. That’s how Bruce met Kay actually.”

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“How’s that?” Thursday asks.

“Bunny would pull a terrible trick—invite people to dinner and then forget his wallet, assuming the other person could produce vast sums of money at a moment’s notice. He invited Kay out one evening, ordered the most extravagant things on the menu, and then suggested she just “put it on her card.” Which of course, she had none. He had to call Bruce up to bail him out.”

Thursday thinks the fellow sounds unbearable, but Winter and Susan just chuckle fondly, as if they
are reminiscing about a favorite eccentric uncle, just as Morse had done.

“And as for suicide…”

“God no,” says Henry. “Bunny was never that introspective.”

“How about any business dealings he might have been involved in?”

“It’s a possibility, I suppose. It’s most likely a tragic accident. That set did always have a tendency to drink—and since they’ve been running about with this Bixby fellow—it seems that every other day has been a veritable bacchanal.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Thursday notices Susan wince.

“When’s the last time you saw him?”

“At Kay’s party. He had said he was going to head home on Sunday. That he had work Monday. Everyone was a bit, well, a bit hungover the next day. We had all assumed he had taken a cab back home.”

“And you, Mrs. Winter?”

“I haven’t seen him for years,” Susan said. “It’s Henry who keeps up with everyone. I’ve rather drifted out of touch with my school friends over the years.”

Winter looks at his watch. “I’m afraid I must be off. Unless you have any other questions for me, Inspector?”

“No that’s all for now, thank you,” Thursday says, reaching for his hat.

Strange follows suit.

“I’ll see the Inspector and Sergeant out, darling,” Mrs. Winter says.

Once they are alone, out in the hall, Mrs. Winter turns to him. “I believe you know another school friend of ours.”

“Detective Constable Morse, you mean?” Thursday asks.

She seems taken aback that he’s been that direct. “Yes,” she says, “Detective Constable Morse,” she repeats, the name sounding heavy and foreign on her tongue. She, doubtless, never called him that. He wonders if she was the one to have given him his ill-fitting nickname.

“What have you people done with him?”

“How is that?”

“It’s ridiculous that anyone could believe he could have strangled someone with a scarf,” she says, her voice switching in an instant from cool and polite to harsh and shrill. “My God. I hit a rabbit in the road once and he practically went to pieces. Then he’s off to prison, prison, then suddenly it turns out this Deare fellow is conveniently ruled mad, everything’s closed up, and there’s not one more scrap news in the papers. The next thing I know is Kay is telling me she and Tony are scraping what’s left of him off the prison steps. I want to know what happened.”

“I’m afraid that case has been closed.”
“Closed, that’s right. Sealed for 50 years. You people are all the same. Playing your little games. He was terrible at that, wasn’t he? I know him. Seems harmless enough, doesn’t he? All big blue eyes and arias and indefinable melancholy. But he can be a cold, cold, unyielding little bugger. If you don’t live up to live up to his standards, his expectations, God help you. He doesn’t know that sometimes, you’ve got to just play the game. So what happened? He wouldn’t say what he was supposed to say? Or said what he wasn’t supposed to say? That’s it, isn’t it?

“I’m afraid we aren’t at liberty to say…”

“Of course, you aren’t.” Susan’s mouth tightens. “Kay says all he does is drink till he passes out and runs around with this Bixby fellow. It’s not like him at all. My God, when I heard Henry on the phone talking about someone drowned in the lake, I thought he,” she puts her hand to her forehead. “God, what am I saying? Of course, I’m sorry about poor Bunny. I… “

She takes a deep shuddering breath.

“I’m sorry. I’ve been upset.”

“Of course,” Thursday said.

When she looks up, Thursday expects to find her tearful. But instead she looks more angry than anything else.

“Have you seen him?” she asks. “My former fiancé?”

“Yes.”

“How is he?”

Not really knowing the answer to that, Thursday says, “Well enough I suppose.”

“Well,” she says, her voice growing steadier. “You can tell him from me that he can go to hell.”

Strange and Thursday are quiet on their way down the walkway. Strange heads over to the driver’s seat when Thursday stops him.

“Tell you what,” he says, “Why don’t you let me drive, drop you home. I’ve got another call I’d like to make tonight.”

“Sir,” Strange says, and passes him the keys.

Thursday can practically hear Strange thinking in the seat next to him. Thank God Jakes was out earlier. If he were here, he would be having a field day with this.

But Strange says nothing for the next twenty miles. When he does speak, all he says is, “I’d say Morse is lucky to be well out of it.”

Thursday hums in agreement.

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Thursday comes home to the scent of shepherd’s pie in the oven and to the sounds of a busy household. Sam is teasing Joan about a phone call she received earlier in the evening, and Win is busy in the kitchen, opening drawers and pulling out glassware.
“Time to set the table, please!”

Joan and Sam leave off, cross the hall, and begin pulling out plates.

Thursday gives Win a quick peck on the cheek. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to eat and run tonight, love. I’ve got a quick errand to run.”

“At this hour, Fred?”

“I just want to drop something off,” he says.

He climbs the stairs and pulls down the ladder to the attic. Stacked just inside the access way is a record player and three boxes marked “Morse.” He takes the record player, but only two of the boxes. If this doesn’t go well, he’ll leave himself one more card to play, one more excuse to try again.

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When he pulls up to the lake house, he finds Morse outside chopping wood in the fading light. He eyes the approaching car warily.

“Oh,” he says simply when he sees Thursday. “I wasn’t sure who it was.”

Nice to see you too, Thursday thinks. But as long as the lad isn’t chasing him off, he’ll take what he can get.

“What do you want?” Morse says, putting down the axe and dusting his hands off on his trousers.

“I’ve brought you something.”

“What?” he asks, approaching the car.

Thursday goes to the back of the car and pulls out the record player and Morse’s box of records.

“What did you bring me this rubbish for?” he asks. “I thought I left all this at my flat.”

“Don’t you want them?”

“No,” Morse says, but he’s already lifted them out of Thursday’s hands and is taking them into the house. Thursday grabs the second box and follows.

Inside, Morse is setting up the record player and complaining about it at the same time.

“I thought the landlord would just throw all this rubbish out. I don’t want any of this.”

He says this as he’s plugging in the player.

At first Thursday is bemused, but then he finds it all a bit disturbing. There’s something off, something discordant about watching a person say one thing while all the time he’s doing another.

“Did you take this?”

“It wasn’t me,’ Thursday says. “It was Monica.”

He pauses. “Oh.”

He flips through the records and pulls one out of the sleeve. “How did you get them, then?”
“She gave them to me.”

Those five words seem to speak volumes—tell the end of a story Morse seemed to have forgotten he had even started.

“Oh,” he says again.

He pops an album onto the turntable and sets the needle going. “I wish she just left it. I don’t want this anymore.”

The music starts and he closes his eyes, swaying a little as he stands. Thursday waits for him to open his eyes, to say something, but instead he simply stands there, as if he’s lost to all else.

Suddenly, Thursday doesn’t know why he hasn’t thought of it before—he’s seen Morse drinking enough, that’s for certain—but might he be on some sort of drugs as well?

He thinks of the case that popped up last week—a student at St. John’s, dead of Chinese heroin. While his mother was at a flower-arranging class with Mrs. Bright, the baby boy she once held in her arms was dying on the window seat of his flat.

He looks at Morse and wonders if he’s headed down the same road. His face is blank, but as the music swells, his mouth slowly drifts into a smile. Then, in an instant, the spell is broken: Morse opens his eyes, snatches the record from turntable, and, in one deft movement, cracks it against the side of the desk. At first, nothing happens: the vinyl is pliable, but then he raises the record and smashes it again and again, until it finally breaks.

He freezes and stares at the broken piece left remaining in his hand. He looks at it dumbfounded, as if he can’t believe what he’s done. It’s probably the closest thing to sacrilege he’s ever committed. He considers the piece left in his hand for a moment, and then raises and slams the remaining half again and again, sending pieces flying.

“Why did you bring me this?” he shouts.

Thursday is so surprised he doesn’t know what to say. The honest answer is that he can’t imagine Morse without his music. It’s like a dog without a bark, the night sky without stars.

“I would have thought you’d have wanted them, lad,” he says quietly.

“Well I don’t!”

“Guess you’ve made that clear.”

Morse freezes again for a moment, then, to Thursday’s horror, he begins to laugh. Thursday isn’t sure he’s ever heard Morse laugh like that—there’s something terrible and mocking in it. It doesn’t suit. Then he turns and his expression changes.

“Why do you keep trying to talk to me? I don’t know why you just don’t spit in my face and get it over with.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Why? Why?” he says, his voice taking on an edge of hysteria. “Because I nearly got you killed, that’s why. Because my stupidity almost made Mrs. Thursday a widow.”

And there it is. All the self-loathing and should-haves, could-haves, all the regrets that create the
tangle that is Morse. Thursday doesn’t know why he didn’t see this coming.

For now, Thursday understands: While Thursday has, each day, been putting another day between himself and that night at Blenheim Vale, allowing it to slowly recede in the rear-view mirror, Morse has been playing this reel over and over.

“There I am,” he says, “reciting Houseman of all things while an armed madman races up the steps.” He lets out another mirthless laugh. “Turns out Jakes was right all along. Everything he said about me was spot on.”

Thursday’s answer is surprisingly sharp. Up until now, he has been wary of his approach to the lad, but this, this train of thought he wants derailed, without the tiniest shred of hesitancy.

“I knew walking in to Blenheim Vale that I might not walk out. Something bad like that? Sometimes, you have to put all you are against all they got. You had your chance to run. But you didn’t. You stood your ground. You were the only one with me at the end, no one else.”

Morse snorts at this. “For all the good I did you,” he says.

“That’s not your responsibility. You’re a DC. I’m your guv’nor. It was my responsibility to look out for you, not the other way ‘round.” Thursday pauses for a moment and adds, “You were the only one to stand by me at the end. I won’t forget it. Don’t you think—no matter what happens—that I’ll ever forget it.”

Morse swallows and looks up, and for a moment, all is as it was.

“Do you understand?” Thursday says.

Morse only hums.

“That’s no answer.”

“It’s not that I don’t understand,” Morse snaps. Then he adds, more quietly, “I just happen not to agree with you.”

Well, of course he doesn’t, Thursday thinks. That would be too easy. And if he’s learned one thing by now, everything concerning Morse has to be one difficult, long endeavour.

At least he’s been honest with him, though. Surely that must be the beginning of something, mustn’t it?

They stand in silence, while dust spirals and floats in the bright yellow beam of a floor lamp in the corner. For a wild moment, the light-filled specks remind Thursday of Morse—thoughts drifting and floating and twisting without ever seeming to settle, without ever finding a place to land.

Slowly Morse turns and puts on a record. This time he lets it play.

Thursday is tempted to press his luck: he wants to say, “come back, lad.” But he knows ahead of time what the answer will be, and he’s not ready to hear it.

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The next morning at the nick, Jakes is back from investigating a hit and run out in Jericho. He seems bristling with news that such a routine inquiry doesn’t warrant.

“London called while you were out yesterday. The Met. They’re sending a DI out here to speak to us.”

“A DI?” Thursday queries, surprised.

“That’s what the man said,” Jakes says.

“Must be a big case. Wonder what they want to come ‘round here for?”

By three o’clock, DI Higgins shows up with a briefcase and a grim expression. Bright introduces him to Thursday, Jakes and Strange, and then Higgins cuts right to the chase.

“We picked up a fellow the other day, caught with his hand in the till, so to speak. Embezzlement. Petty sums, but it’s been going on a long time. He’s pleading guilty—he’s got no choice, the evidence is pretty incontrovertible—but he’s keen to get his sentence reduced by turning queen’s evidence. Evidently, he feels wronged by his boss, a bigger fish we’ve been trying to snag for some time. Harry Rose. Has his finger in about a half a dozen pots.

“Our informant tells us Rose has been working with someone, someone who owns several legitimate businesses, to launder some money he’s made off his drug trade. Our informant doesn’t have a name, but he’s certain that Rose plans to meet up with him at some big soirée up in London. All sorts of big wheels will be gathering there, evidently, and in the midst of all the wheeling and dealing, Rose and his colleague hope to wrap up their little piece of business. Our informant, unfortunately, knows the where, when and how, but not the who. That’s where you come in.”

Higgins reaches for the briefcase he’s brought and pops it open, pulling out several black and white photos of men in business suits—standing and talking on stairs, sitting at hotel tables, walking briskly from cars, never knowing that unseen photographers had taken their snaps. He reels off the names, one by one—it’s the usual suspects Thursday remembers form his days at the Smoke, as well as some unfamiliar names, and then a few Oxford businessmen as well—Belborough, for one. Thursday is thinking of where Higgins might be going with this when Jakes interjects.

“Well, this is a job for the Met, surely. Where do we come in?” Jakes says.

Thursday winces at the interruption. Jakes can be an overconfident bugger.

“Just getting to that, Sergeant. We can put a man on the outside. But we are thinking you might have a man on the inside.”

“How’s that?” Thursday asks.

“Well, there’s a wide cast of players planning on attending this little shindig—old money, new money. And we are thinking you might be able to get a little inside information from someone who has a foot in both worlds.”

Thursday gets a glimmer as to where this is going, and he doesn’t like it at all. “What makes you think the Cowley CID of all places might be so well-connected?” he asks.

“One of our big wheels is a bit of an upstart. He started with a small fortune, and, through charm and luck, he’s rolled it into a spectacularly larger fortune. Higgins tosses down another photo and Thursday immediately recognizes the lively dark eyes and suave smile. “Joss Bixby,” Higgins
continues. “Over the past year or so, he’s been expanding his range.”

“Now this is all rumour and insinuation, but word has it, that, lately, he’s fallen under the thrall of some bender he’s picked up running with Belborough’s set. Won’t make a decision without him.”

Higgins snorts and adds, “Goes by the name of ‘Pagan,’ if you can believe that. But you,” he says, tossing down the final photo, “you might remember him better as Detective Constable Endeavour Morse.”

In the photo, Morse is at some to-do, dressed in a suit he can’t possibly afford, distinctly glassy-eyed, his wild curling hair tucked behind his ears.

It is Morse and it isn’t. Thursday glances at it for just a second before looking up at Jakes, who’s staring down at the picture as if he’s had the wind completely knocked out of him.

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Thursday has a problem.

At the moment, he would love nothing better than to put a fist right through DI Higgins' teeth. How dare the man speak so dismissively of Morse? Morse is ten times the copper that smug bastard will ever be, that’s certain.

And he has another problem. He can’t possibly go to the soiree. He’s old hat, he’d be recognized immediately.

Strange. Morse would most likely at least speak to him, their last interview not withstanding. But Strange at a London soiree? He’s down-to-earth, his earnestness and good intentions written in every feature of his face.

Jakes. With his arrogance and style, he could blend right in to a place like that. Walk up casually to Morse at the bar, stop to ask him for a light. But what would happen at that point? They’d likely be at it like two cats in the alleyway in three seconds flat.

Who he’d like to send is Trewlove. She has both the poise to pull off such an undercover job and the good sense not to back Morse into a corner. But sending a beautiful, unaccompanied young woman off into a gala like that? She might find her hands full, not have the time to get done what needs to get done.

Strange and Trewlove together as a young couple? Now there’s a thought.

Thursday is mulling over his options when there is a knock on his door. It’s Jakes.

“Sir,” he says.

“Sergeant,” Thursday says.

“I thought I might have a word. About this undercover in London.”

Thursday nods to the chair opposite his desk and Jakes sits down.

“I’d like to be the one to go.”

Thursday snorts. “You sure you’ll be able to resist the temptation to give Morse a hard time, are
“Sir,” says Jakes, sounding hurt and offended at once. He looks down, grips his knees. “I would never put a case in jeopardy over a personal matter. I would have hoped I'd have proven that by now.”

Thursday nods. He’s right. That wasn’t fair to Jakes. He’s just feeling wary about the whole thing. If Morse feels pushed too far, or senses it’s Thursday behind all this, he might disappear again.

“And besides Morse is all right, really. I think we were just getting to understand each other in the end. Or at least, he understood me.”

Thursday is a bit stunned. When did all this happen?

So Jakes wants to take on the assignment not to prove himself to the Met, but as a chance to make peace with Morse. Will wonders never cease.

“The assignment is yours, Sergeant,” Thursday says.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not really an expert on how the police operate, so I'm not sure if the undercover storyline is terribly realistic, but, well..... Ummmm....
Chapter 4

In a perfect world, Thursday would have given Morse a word of warning. Will he see it as a betrayal when he’s suddenly accosted by an undercover Jakes? But when Thursday goes up to the lake house early the next morning, the place is deserted. He wonders if the lad is up at Bixby’s and heads over.

A butler tells him that Bixby had just left for London an hour ago and wasn’t expected back until late that night or even tomorrow morning. When Thursday asks about Morse, the fellow looks distinctly uncomfortable—But, yes, Mr. Morse has gone up to London too.

Just before eight o’clock that evening, Thursday picks up Jakes, who’s dressed in an elegant evening suit, his dark hair slicked back. Thursday finds he can’t bear to be cut out of the assignment completely, so the compromise is that he will act as Jakes’ driver.

It’s odd, having Jakes sit in the back. He can sense his sergeant is nervous—he is not to the manor born, after all, and in the old days it would have been Morse sent to a posh soiree like this.

At nine thirty, Jakes disappears through the wide doors of the large brick hotel.

By eleven, Thursday is restless—sitting in the car for so long is causing his legs to cramp. Can’t hurt to take a walk along the sidewalk; under the cover of darkness, he’ll hardly be noticed.

The moon is high in the night sky, brighter than all the lights of London. Above, on a terrace, there are the strains of music and conversation and the occasional peal of laughter. Thursday stops at a bench that sits under a terrace jutting out over the walkway, overlooking the square below. He sits, stretching his legs out before him.

He listens to an array of conversations that come and go from above—two women gossiping about a third friend’s affair, a young man telling a young woman she’s beautiful, two men gossiping about a third friend’s affair—Good God, these people have a lot of time on their hands.

He stands, paces down the sidewalk, stretches his legs, and returns to the bench—Then, his heart skips a beat as he realizes the voices of the two men on the terrace above have been replaced by two voices he knows so well—one quick and sharp, the other low and mournful, with just a trace of the north.

“So, what’s this mean, then? You’ll finally condescend to speak to me?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I only came out here to get away from that terrible music for a while.”

“This may come as a surprise to you Morse, but that’s what’s in style.”

Morse hums disapprovingly. “It’s awful stuff.”

“Well then, don’t listen to it. It’s just there to provide background noise. You know. Atmosphere. No one is listening to it.”

“Well, I’m listening to it.”
Thursday buries his face in his hands. He can practically feel his hair turning gray as they speak.

“What do you want, anyway?” Morse says. “Why have you been following me about?”

“I’m here for a case,” Jakes replies, his voice lower now, more conciliatory. “The Met thought you might be able to point us in the right direction. But, also, I just wanted to talk to you. That’s why I asked for the assignment.”

Morse snorts. “Why?”

“You never said anything.”

“About what?”

Jakes huffs a bitter laugh. “You know about what. About what happened. That night you found me in the pub.”

“Oh.” Morse’s voice is softer now, its strident note gone. “I wouldn’t.”

“I would have, if I were you.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” says Morse.

Thursday has not the slightest idea what they are talking about, but it’s obviously something personal. He wishes, now, he had not chosen to sit here. Now he feels as if he’s breaking both of their trusts. He wants to get up, move away, but they are both at the very edge of the terrace rail—if he walks off now, it’s likely that at least one of them will see him, leaving them both rattled.

If they need to speak their piece, Thursday thinks, it’s best he sit tight, let them speak it.

“I should have been there. At Blenheim Vale. I let you down. And the old man, too.”

For a moment, there is silence.

“It wouldn’t have made a difference,” says Morse, finally. “It was all a setup from the start.”

“It would have made a difference to me.”

“If you had known what would happen,” Morse says, “I’m sure you would have come.”

“I’m not,” says Jakes.

“Well,” says Morse. “I am.”

Jakes says nothing.

“There’s no point in beating yourself up, Jakes. You do what you can. You can’t look back.”

Jakes bristles at Morse giving him advice. “Oh, you can’t, can you? So what have you been doing all this time then? Where the hell have you been?”

“That’s none of your concern,” Morse says, the strident tone back in full swing.

“Then save your lecture for someone else.”

“Didn’t you say you wanted to talk to me about a case?”

“Yes,” Jakes says. He pauses, as if he’s trying to clear his head. “Yes. Evidently, there’s someone
here tonight, Harry Rose, a real wheeler dealer—gambling, drugs, the whole nine yards. Word is, he’s trying to make contact with someone here tonight, someone who can give him a legitimate front to launder some of his dirty money.”

“And what am I supposed to know about that?” Morse drawls.

“Well, you know these people—can you gives us any leads at all, any ideas as to whom I should keep an eye on?”

“No,” says Morse.

“Why not?” says Jakes. “Come on man, this is you. You’ve got to have some ideas as to how to narrow it down, how to work it out.”

“No, I don’t. Look at me—do you honestly believe that these people discuss their business dealings with me?”

So you haven’t the slightest inclination to help us on this?”

No,” Morse says softly.

“It’s no joke, you know. Some Chinese heroin has been making the rounds at Oxford. Left a boy dead. He was nineteen. It’s a likely possibility it trickled down through Rose. You haven’t got any wish at all to help us put a man like that away?”

There’s a long silence.

“I’m sorry, I just don’t know anything about that. I’m hardly admitted into their inner confidences you know.” There’s another pause. “But I can tell you who it isn’t.”

“Who?”

“Joss Bixby.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because Rose came to him already—he asked Bixby to invite some of his associates up to his house—said he had a great investment opportunity and was looking for partners. Quite a few people came up; they all went into the drawing room and hashed it out for two hours at least. When he left, I told Bixby not to have anything to do with him.”

“And so just like that, he turned the offer down.”

“Yes.”

“Why did you tell him that? What were they saying?”

“Nothing that didn’t sound perfectly legal and above board on the surface. From what I overheard. I was across the hall, in the library, reading—I wasn’t listening to every word. It was just a feeling I had, that’s all. When you’ve interviewed enough suspects, you know, you do develop a bit of a sense about people. He just gave me a bad feeling, Rose, that’s all.”

“Just intuition, then?”

“I suppose.”
Jakes huffs an unimpressed laugh at this. He doesn’t understand, but Thursday does. That’s always been Morse’s strength, his intuition. And Jakes’ weakness. Jakes has never learned to trust himself. So he makes up for it in precision, in attention to detail and protocol, in all the things Morse brushes off as secondary concerns.

Funny. They could be a great team, Thursday realizes. If they could only stop bickering like two boys in the schoolyard for more than thirty seconds at a stretch.

“What about the others? Bixby’s friends?” Jakes asks.

“I don’t know anything much about them, really. Nothing at all, actually.”

Jakes takes an exaggerated drag on his cigarette, so loud Thursday can hear it from below, lets out his breath in a huge burst. “Well, that’s really helpful. Narrows it down from forty to thirty-nine, I’d say.”

“That’s all I can do for you. Sorry.”

There’s another long pause.

“I don’t think you are sorry at all. I think you are being deliberately unhelpful.” Jakes takes another drag. “You know, I really thought you would have come back by now.”

“Why?” Morse says, a degree of wariness creeping into his voice. “Why should I go back?”

“Well,” snorts Jakes, “if not for any of your usual noble save-the-world reasons, I should have thought you would have needed a job? What are you doing for money? I know you never eat a damned thing, but you drink like a fish. You smell like a goddamned walking bottle of Scotch.”

Morse says nothing.

“That’s a pretty expensive suit you’re wearing, isn’t it? Bought it with money you saved when you were working as a DC, did you?”

There’s a long pause. Then Morse’s voice again, low and cold. “You bastard. Why don’t you just go to hell and leave me alone.”

Thursday walks back to his car, troubled. Of course, Jakes can be exasperating—but Morse knows that already. His behavior didn’t seem to warrant such abrupt change in Morse’s voice. Thursday is trying to work out what has him feeling so unsettled, when the words come back to him through a haze of pain and confusion.

You bastard! You bastard!

Thursday closes his eyes. Dear God, how he wishes that night had gone differently. How did it go so wrong? How did all of it go so wrong?

He sits behind the driver’s wheel, stares into the darkness. It’s already one in the morning when Jakes returns, evidently haven given up on the assignment.

He slides into the back seat and says, “That pretentious little arse.”

There’s little doubt as to whom Jakes is referring.

“So, I go in, right? And you never saw such a scene. All huge chandeliers and waiters carrying trays of hors d’oeuvres and champagne—expensive looking labels, too. They’ve got card tables
and a band and a dance floor all ringed with huge floral arrangements. Hundreds of people, all dressed to the nines. An effing roulette wheel. Christ, what a scene.”

“So, I finally spot Morse, mooning around by the bar, and, of course, he completely takes off. Then he’s out on the dance floor with some blonde in tiara of all things. Then he disappears again. I found him again at a card table, and again he slipped off in the crowd. I thought if I just stuck around the bar I’d run a decent chance of him catching him, but he’s a no show. But guess who does suddenly want to talk to me?”

“Yes?”

“Bixby. Wants to know if there’s any particular reason why I’m following Pagan. Like I’m moving in on his bird or something. Jesus. It was like a nightmare.”

“So, finally, I don’t know why, I don’t know if he felt embarrassed about Bixby or what, but finally he condescends to speak with me. And what does he say? “You aren’t just going to go away, are you?” And I said, “No, no I’m bloody well not.” So then he takes me out on the terrace —oh, and on the way he tells me all the things wrong with my cover, how the cut of my suit is ‘all wrong.’”

“Then, when we were outside, I don’t know, we were actually having a decent conversation. Then he gets all stroppy and storms off and that was that.”

“I tried, too, keeping an eye on our old friend Rose, but he was really working the room, that one. He had every big wheel in the corner at one point or another—the old money set, the new money set, it was all the same to him.”

“One thing Morse did say—is that it wouldn’t be Bixby. How does he know that, I asked? Oh, ‘because I told him not to have anything to do with him.’ So, evidently one of Britain’s wealthiest high rollers is letting an unemployed former DC make binding financial decisions for him. That’s Morse all over for you. Inscrutable bugger. So that narrows it down by one. Thanks for the help. Little bastard. And who can make out what’s going on with Morse and this Bixby anyhow?”

The abrupt change of subject throws Thursday. The signs have been subtle, but he thinks he can make out what is going on all too well, and would assume that Jakes could, too. In the past, after all, Jakes has been quite willing to make insinuations of just that sort regarding Morse.

Thursday’s response is cautious, in case he has misunderstood.

“How do you mean?”

“Bixby is rolling in the dough, has charm dropping off him like water—he had the eyes of half the birds in the place trailing him around all night—could probably chose any one of them. And who is he trailing around after? I’ll tell you who. A ten and a half- stone former DC with all the allure of an angry stray cat.”

Jakes is silent for a moment, then adds, “Morse treats him like absolute rubbish, too, make no mistake about that. When I spotted him over at the card table, Bixby came over with a plate and suggested he eat a little something—probably in the hopes that it might soak up some of that booze—and Morse got all stroppy about it. ‘For God’s sake, I told you and told you to leave me alone about that,’” he snaps, and just Waltzes off. That’s Morse all over for you.”

Jakes pauses for a moment and muses, “Who knows? Maybe it’s all always just come too easily to Bixby. Maybe he fancies a challenge. Well, if it’s a difficult pain-in-the-arse he wants, he could
Thursday raises an eyebrow at this. Jakes certainly seems to have given the matter an inordinate amount of thought.

Jakes falls silent again, the adrenaline finally winding out of his system.

“I made a hash of this one,” Jakes says.

“Did your best, sounds like.”

“Try telling that to Bright. Or to those blokes at the Met.”

Jakes is right; neither case is going anywhere. No leads on who might be helping Rose keep his dirty business under wraps, and no leads on who might have thrown Corcoran into the drink.

Dislocated shoulder. As if someone pinned his arms and held his face in the water. No trouble with women, no enemies, no money troubles—in fact, just the opposite, from the expensive suits in his closet and the expensive liquor in the bar of his tony flat, he seemed to have plenty of money to spend.

He liked to live above his means.

That’s what they’ve all said—every one. Morse, his employees at the bank, Bruce, all of them.

Corcoran was a bank president after all, so it’s not surprising he should own some expensive suits, live in a spacious flat, take extravagant trips. But is his lifestyle a little too extravagant?

He’s had Strange going through the records at the bank with a fine-toothed comb—there’s no missing funds, no indication someone’s been “borrowing” any of the bank’s money to play the market for an easy profit, nothing suspicious at all.

That could leave one thing.

Blackmail.

Could the Corcoran and the Rose cases be related? Could Corcoran have known someone who was working with Rose? Could he have been blackmailing that person? Could that person have decided it would be easier to simply move him out of the way?

But that didn’t quite fit. The Met made it sound as if this business with Rose was a new development. Corcoran seems to have accumulated quite a lot of little luxuries over time.

Then it hits Thursday. There’s someone else in that set who seems to have unexpected access to vast sums. Someone who has been wearing thousand-pound suits and drinking hundred-pound Scotch—someone who isn’t a bank president, but a DC who for seven months has been completely unemployed. Someone who seems to wobble on the edges of both sets—both Belborough’s Oxford circle and Bixby’s new money crowd. If he were anyone else on the planet, he would have sent Thursday’s alarm bells ringing.

Morse.

Thursday finds it hard to believe that his former bagman, who once connected two seemingly separate crimes from a note left on a bedside table, who once tracked a madman across Oxford with only a few anagrams and a handful of opera references, can spend days and nights in the midst
of both of these sets and suddenly have no ideas about anything.

He’s always been able to work seemingly disparate pieces of evidence and put them together to make the picture whole. Just like making sense of one of those French paintings, one of those that’s made up of hundreds of dots of different colors—up close, they’re just dots, take a few steps back, and you see the picture. So why can’t he seem to make out the picture now?

Unless that is, he’s one of the dots in the painting. Can’t step back to see the whole then, can you?

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The lake house is deserted—even though, strangely, there’s a powder blue Jag 420 parked out front. On a hunch, Thursday crosses over through the trees to the edge of Bixby’s property. Behind the brick house, on a garden swing facing the lake, a man is sitting sideways, legs stretched out across the seat, his hair a tangle of red-gold waves. A dark-haired man is approaching the seat, and calling something to the first. Morse and Bixby.

Thursday walks towards them—he can’t hear from hear what Bixby is saying, but whatever it is, it looks as if Morse is unimpressed—he doesn’t even do him the courtesy of looking up from his book.

He’s a few hundred feet from them now— he’s just about to call out, announce his presence, when Bixby says, “Come on Pagan, just give it a go once.”

Morse just shakes his head. Bixby turns and heads down to the lake where a red hydroplane is docked. Thursday keeps moving across the thick grass until he’s within earshot.

“I was hoping to find you.”

Morse turns around, and across his face flashes a shadow of bored contempt. Thursday has seen that look before, but it’s never been directed at him.

Of course. The soiree.

Thursday walks around to the front of the canopied swing. “My knee has been driving me mad. Mind if I sit down?”

Morse, without looking up from his book, moves his feet in, clearing one end of the seat, with as little good grace as possible.

Thursday sits down. Meanwhile, Bixby has noticed the new arrival and is crossing back up the lawn.

“Everything all right, Inspector?” he asks. “Would you like a word?”

“No.”

Morse, without looking up from his book, moves his feet in, clearing one end of the seat, with as little good grace as possible.

Thursday sits down. Meanwhile, Bixby has noticed the new arrival and is crossing back up the lawn.

“Everything all right, Inspector?” he asks. “Would you like a word?”

“Actually, I quite fancied a word with Morse.”

“Ah,” says Bixby. His open, friendly face turns to Morse, as if asking how he feels about the idea. Morse, eyes still riveted to his book, gives him the vaguest of shrugs.

“Ah,” Bixby says. “I’ll leave you to it, then.” He nods to Thursday. “Inspector.”

There’s something in the solicitous current of the exchange that brings all the signs together. Thursday thought when he allowed himself to realize the situation fully, he’d harbor ill-will toward Bixby, wonder if he was somehow taking advantage Morse, moving in on a weak moment.
Any port in a storm.

Instead, he finds he almost feels sorry for Bixby. Jakes is right: Morse certainly doesn’t seem to go out of his way to be particularly personable. But, then, when did he ever, really?

“Went ‘round yours first. Looks like you’ve got visitors. There’s a blue Jag parked out front, did you know?”

“That’s mine,” Morse says.

“Yours? Where’d you get that?”

Morse shrugs.

Well.

Suddenly, bizarrely, he wishes he could speak to them both—He wants to ask Morse exactly what it is he’s doing here. Does he care for the man at all? Or is the car, the Scotch, the suits simply payment due? It’s hard for Thursday to imagine a Morse grown so hard and cold that he feels no compunction about playing a game like that, stringing someone along for what? The money? Not that Morse has ever cared about that. As a safety net?

Perhaps that could be it.

He wants to ask Bixby…. but, no, he’s Morse’s DI, for God’s sake, not his father.

A sudden image bursts into Thursday’s mind of himself sitting at a table with Bixby, talking over pints of ale.

So, tell me son, what are your intentions toward my bagman?

Oh, for God’s sake.

Down by the lake, Bixby has started the engine of the hydroplane and taken off in a blast of horsepower.

“Look, about the other night…”

“So does London’s finest still expect a cop killer to solve their big juicy case for them?”

Thursday sighs. “That was the Met’s idea. I tried to come ‘round, let you in on what was happening. But you had already gone. Jakes came to me and asked for the assignment. He really seemed to want the chance to talk with you. I didn’t think you’d mind. I’m sorry if you were caught off guard, lad. I suppose you think the whole idea was pretty daft.”

“Well,” says Morse, considering, “maybe it wasn’t.”

Thursday waits to see if Morse might offer more.

“I told Jakes that these people don’t see me as anyone worth confiding in—and that’s true. But the reverse is true as well,” Morse says finally.

“How do you mean?”

“They don’t see me as anyone worth keeping things from either.”
Thursday is mulling this over when Morse adds, “I’m just a sad basket case you know. Harmless. Off in the corner, mooning around with my records, or staring out the window. None of them care what I think about anything. I might hear things now and then.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t see the allure of that thing at all,” Morse says, waspishly. “Seems a stupid sort of way to get yourself killed.”

It takes Thursday a moment to catch up, to realize he’s switched gears and that he’s talking about the hydroplane.

Thursday considers Morse, whose eyes are still riveted to his book. It’s not even in English, for crying out loud. Thursday scans the letters on the front. Must be Greek.

Thursday looks back toward the lake, where Bixby is gunning the engine—even from this distance, it’s impossible to miss the man’s broad white smile.

“So some people enjoy the risk. Makes you feel more alive.”

“I don’t. Death is already there around every corner. Stupid to go out and look for it.”

“Some people might feel they are cheating death.”

Morse hums noncommittally.

“We had a don, when we were up, Julian Morrow,” he says at last. “He said that death is the mother of beauty. That beauty, true beauty, is never just soft or conciliatory. It’s alarming. That whatever we call beautiful, we quiver before it. They all seemed to agree with him, the others—that beauty is terror.”

“And what did you think?”

“I thought that none of them had ever seen death, that’s what I thought. That none of them knew how it can take a long, long time to happen. It’s got nothing to do with beauty at all. It just an emptiness.”

Thursday is almost afraid to breathe, lest he halt the flow of Morse’s words. The lad can only be referring to his mother. Something he’s never once alluded to so directly.

Morse looks out over the lake, and begins to speak, almost as if he’s chanting to himself.

*Thus he died, and all the life struggled out of him;
and as he died, he spattered me with the dark red
and violent-driven rain of bitter-savored blood
to make me glad, as gardens stand among the showers
of God in glory at the birthtime of the buds*

“They would go on about it.” Morse says, remembering. “About that it was all in the meter, that it’s the iambic trimeter that makes some of the most brutal passages of poetry the most beautiful. But I didn’t find it beautiful, all that blood and gore and death.”

“What is it then? Beauty?”

Morse blinks, surprised at the question. “I don’t know,” he says. “But not that.”
For a while they both sit. Down at the lake, the hydroplane jets past, leaving a roar and a high jet of water in its wake.

Then Morse says, “Actually, I do know one thing that is.”

“What’s that?”

Morse is still looking out over the lake. “That in a house in Oxford there’s a lady, with bright eyes and beautiful soft hair. And every morning, she wakes up, and she makes her husband a sandwich—a different one for every day of the week. And maybe some mornings she’s running late to do something else, or her friend pops by to see if she wants to go shopping with her. But she’ll say, “Just give me ten minutes, Anne, there’s something I want to do first.” And she’ll go ahead and make it. And before he leaves, she tucks it into his pocket. And it’s there, like a square of love wrapped in wax paper, always . . . “

He smiles and repeats the words Thursday had once said so long ago, “just like the fixed motion of the stars.”

Thursday is silent for a long while. He’s humbled by this. He tries to remember just how lucky he is, that no matter what he sees or hears during the course of his day, he’s always had a hat stand to leave it at, a home that’s a refuge.

Finally, he says, “Well, personally, I agree with you lad. I’ve seen enough death in the war to last me a lifetime. And then, of course, we’ve seen plenty on the job.”

Morse looks over to Thursday, then his eyes then cut away.

“Sorry,” he says.

“For what?”

Morse shrugs. Then he says, “But yet you went back. After everything.”

“Well,” says Thursday. “There are people who need protecting. That’s something that never changes.”

“And while you so are worried about protecting the people, who do you think is going to protect you from them?” Morse asks.

Thursday sighs. “I wish you’d talk to me lad. I wish you’d tell me what happened.”

Morse’s voice is low and fierce. “What happened? What happened? Come on, Sir, you can’t be that naïve.”

“Morse…”

“What happened?” Morse repeats, his voice dripping with contempt. “To the inmates, I’m a college boy and a cop all in one. To the guards, I’m a cop killer. Who the hell is ever all of those things at once? I couldn’t have dreamed up a better formula to make myself a target if I tried.”

And suddenly it all comes back to Thursday, the flash of pain, Morse’s shouts, the ride to the hospital, the sense of overwhelming confusion, wondering where Morse had gone, the drug-induced haze, Win’s tearful face swimming above him. All the while Morse was locked up in his own private hell, Thursday was lying there, useless, dead to the world.
He knows he should stay strong, be the wall against which Morse can throw his rage, but suddenly, there’s a pain in his chest. It’s not just an ache of sorrow, but something sharper, metallic. Suddenly, Thursday feels more exhausted than he ever has before. There are people who need protecting. Morse is right. Who is he kidding? He’s an old man, past his prime, with a bullet in his lung, unable to protect even his nearest and dearest.

He rubs his hands over his face—he’s been through North Africa, and Italy, seen the worst of humanity in the war, and in the war of the streets of London. Through it all, he’s never felt as exhausted as he does now.

The pang in his chest sharpens, and suddenly his body is wracked with a coughing that he cannot stop. And then it’s gone—Morse, the lake, the sun, the hydroplane—the world recedes until all there is the pain, the bullet he can’t dislodge, the wrongs he’ll never be able to fix. Never.

When the haze clears, the first thing he notices is a warm hand gripping his shoulder. Morse is beside him, eyes wide. “Sir?” he asks. “Are you all right?”

Thursday takes a few steadying breaths and the world comes to life again. He rubs his hand over his face once more. “I’m just so sorry, lad.” he says. “More sorry than I can ever say. I knew what it was. I wish to God I had just told you to go home that night. I wish to God you had just left.”

“Sir…”

“I’ve seen some corrupt coppers in my time. You have, too. But I never, never thought they would take it that far. Just when you think you’ve seen the worst humanity has to offer, it shows you something even worse. That whole Blenheim Vale lot—a sicker bunch of bastards I’ve never imagined. How they all found one another I’ll never know. But I wish to God I had just sent you home.”

After a pause Morse says, “You did tell me. You told me I could have left. It was my choice to stay.”

“You were my bagman.” Thursday says. “It was my job to look after you.”

It’s that, that final use of the past tense, that leads Thursday to crumple further.

“I didn’t need looking after,” Morse says.

Thursday snorts. “Don’t you?”

“No.”

They sit in silence.

“Are you sure?” Thursday says. “You know if you needed anything, you could ask me, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Morse says.

And Thursday finds that that is all he can ask for.

Then Morse says, “Jakes did believe me, didn’t he? He’s still not under any suspicion, is he? Bixby?”

“It’s not down to us. We’re just on auxiliary. It’s the Met’s case. But, no, it’s not exactly anything
Jakes could put down in a report, is it?"

“So he still might be, then,” Morse says.

“Yes, I suppose they might still be keeping an eye on him,” Thursday says.

Morse looks troubled. “When I first saw you were here, I thought, you know, perhaps you were here to question Bixby……or maybe to ask something about Bunny.”

“No. We don’t seem to be making much headway there. I was just looking for an excuse to talk to you, I suppose.”

Morse gives one of his noncommittal hums—the crutch he’s always leaned on in lieu of any real communication. But this time, it makes Thursday smile. It’s so much more like the Morse he knows.

“No leads on that case? Bunny?”

“No. I wanted to have a chat with your pal Tony, but he’s gone until Thursday I understand. He’s coming back, evidently, for the funeral.”

Morse hums again.

“You don’t think that’s a worth a go?”

“Not really. If there was something going on with them, he wouldn’t know. He always sort of floated above the rest of us. You’d be better off looking through the records at Bunny’s bank than wasting time with Tony.”

“Strange has gone through the records. Nothing of note.”

“Hmmmmmm”

“And you don’t think Corcoran could have had anything to do with this Rose business?”

“Bunny?” Morse asks, surprised. “I wouldn’t have thought so.”

They sit in silence again, this one more companionable than the first. Suddenly, it feels like the most natural thing in the world to see what Win has packed for him, and he pulls out a sandwich, wrapped in wax paper. He holds it up to Morse, leaving the question in the air.

But Morse only smiles and says, “I have absolutely no idea what day it is, Sir.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Got to rub it in to us working stiffs, is that it?”

Morse huffs a laugh.

“Well, we’ll just have to work in reverse, won’t we?” he says.

He unwraps the sandwich. “Luncheon meat,” Thursday announces.
“It’s Tuesday,” says Morse.

Thursday looks up, surprised at the familiar tight-lipped smile spreading across Morse’s face.

“That it is,” Thursday says. He holds the sandwich out to Morse, but Morse recoils.

“I wouldn’t want to take your lunch, Sir.”

“I’m not offering you the whole thing,” Thursday says with a laugh. “You can have half.”

Morse hesitates. “All right,” he says.

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Thursday morning, Thursday wakes up with a cough worse than ever before. It’s a struggle to get ready between coughing jags, and he’s running behind. He heard the bell some time ago, and he knows Jakes is waiting downstairs.

He can hear strains of conversation coming up the stairs, Win’s lilting voice, Jakes’ polite replies, much more curt and direct, and “Thank you, Mrs. Thursday,” than Morse’s hemming and hawing, and “Oh, I couldn’t possibly Mrs. Thursday.”

Finally, he makes it down the stairs.

“All right, Sergeant?”

“All right, Sir.”

They head down the walk to the waiting Jag. Thursday opens the door and find a packet of papers on the passenger seat. He flips through the folder. Financial records. Tucked inside, on a blue piece of paper torn from a notebook, is a note written in Greek. Signed with a squiggly looking Greek E.

Unbelievable.

For once he’s forced to agree with Jakes.

Morse can certainly be a pretentious arse.

*******

Thursday makes it a point to stop by DeBryn’s before he sets off on inquiries to ask about the note. DeBryn takes one look at it and smiles.

“Something to read with your ham and tomato,” he says, looking up at him owlishly over his glasses. “Signed with an epsilon. An E.”

Thursday snorts. “I worked the last letter out for myself, if you would believe it.”

Why did the lad bother with that? As if he knows anyone else who would send him a note in Greek.

The question is: What is Morse playing at? The papers, copies of financial records of Titan Industries, owned by a George McKinnon, are filled with suspicious deposits and discrepancies. Where Morse got hold of this, Thursday has no idea—but, obtained without a warrant, it’s completely inadmissible. Utterly useless. He should know that.
It does let them know who to keep an eye on. And who, Thursday supposes, not to.

Ah.

Thursday recalls the troubled note in Morse’s voice when he asked about Bixby. So that was the point?

The question is: who is it Morse protecting? His safety net, or the man he loves?

If it were the latter, Thursday realizes, a bit to his surprise, he’d feel a lot more hope for the lad.

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By that afternoon, he’s headed out to Chalbourne’s place.

“He’s always sort of floated above the rest of us,” Morse said.

Thursday thinks again of those French paintings, the ones made up of hundreds of small blots of color.

Maybe, just maybe, that’s just the perspective Thursday needs.
Chapter 5

Tony Chalbourne’s place is quite the pile—it makes Belborough’s sprawling house look like a quaint little place in the country.

“I can’t say how glad I am that you’re here, Inspector,” Chalbourne says, as he ushers Thursday in through the wide doors. “I’ve been looking for that card you gave me everywhere.”

“That so?” Thursday says.

That’s certainly interesting. No one has been particularly pleased to see him so far. Not even Morse, Thursday thinks, remembering the evening he found him chopping wood in front of the lake house and his glum welcome.

“Oh, I didn’t know who it was.”

Chalbourne leads Thursday back to his study, and right away it’s clear why the man couldn’t find his card. The place is an absolute tip. Piles of papers stacked all over the desk. More papers stacked on chairs. Morse’s little hovel is a bastion of peace and order by comparison.

“I just came back today—some bit of business in Paris—and I’ve been going through my post. I just found the most distressing thing. It’s a letter. From Bunny.”

“What’s that? How can that be?”

“It must have been sent before he died. I haven’t gone through any of this in weeks,” he says.

“Here,” he says, handing Thursday a piece of folded stationary and an opened envelope.

Thursday unfolds the letter and begins to read. The handwriting is atrocious, the spelling and grammar worse. If Morse were here, Thursday thinks, he’d be throwing a fit.

Tony old Man,

You are the Only one who can help me. The only one who has any control over them. They are Monsters and deep down you must know that. They Killed a man that night. The night of the Bacchanal. When you left without me. When Henry was angry about the steak and kidney pie. There was blood everywhere all over their chitons and all over the floor. I woke up in the night and Found them cleaning up.

I have always known and I have always Kept their Secret but now I think they Want to kill me. You have to Help me. You have to tell them Not to do this. you are the only one they Might listen too

Bunny
“Is it possible he might have been on some sort of drugs?” Thursday asks. The letter sounds as if it was written by a madman.

Chalbourne shakes his head, smiles fondly. “No, Bunny just always wrote like that,” he says.

“Do you know what he might be referring to? A bacchanal, a steak and kidney pie? It sounds ….

“I do,” Chalbourne says. “And I don’t.”

Chalbourne sits down and sighs. “You should sit down, Inspector,” he says, gesturing to the one chair opposite the desk that’s clear of piles of paper.

Thursday complies.

“We did. … That is, when we were up, we did try hold a bacchanal—we tried several times, actually. We were all classics students, of course, we were all familiar with the theory. We thought, why not try one in practice?”

“A bacchanal,” Thursday says rather than asks.

“You can see the allure—to lose oneself completely. To see a reality beyond the everyday world. To experience true beauty. To let the gods devour you and spit you out, reborn.”

Thursday recalls Morse’s words on the swing.

Whatever we call beautiful, we quiver before it.

Beauty is terror.

“Understand, at first, it seemed harmless. An academic exercise, as it were. The first time, we simply got good and drunk. Of course, that did nothing. We just made chitons, built a bonfire and sat around it, drinking ourselves sick. Except Pagan, of course. He just sat on the grass with a bottle of Orange Tango. Henry was angry about that, later.”

“Chitons?”

Chalbourne winces, looking embarrassed. “Greek tunics. We made them out of bed sheets, out at my aunt’s country place. That’s where we would go to hold them, the bacchanals. My aunt never stayed there—she preferred London, so it was empty. We had the run of the place. And there was nothing but fields and trees for miles around.”

Thursday nods for Chalbourne to continue. Chalbourne takes out a cigarette and lights it with a flick of the wrist and a flash of a silver lighter.

“We tried burning herbs, chanting old verses. Henry and Susan in particular became more and more obsessed with idea. That’s what Bunny must have been talking about in the letter.”

“Henry wanted us all to fast for three days, to prepare for our next bacchanal. But on the afternoon of the third day, he caught Bunny in a pub, packing away a steak and kidney pie. They had a row about it. I had forgotten all about that, until I read the letter. But only a few people would know that detail.”

“At any rate,” Chalbourne continues, “Late that night, when we were out at my aunt’s, and everyone was asleep, Henry and Susan went about and woke us all up, said we were leaving.
without Bunny. That Bunny was the one ruining our chances. He was so prosaic, you see, so earthbound. He didn’t believe in what we were doing. He was the one holding us back.”

“So. We went out into a field. We lit a bonfire. We threw some sort of branches on it that Henry had brought—I don’t know what they were, actually. They gave off a sharp, sweet-smelling smoke. I started to…Well,” and here Chalbourne looks distinctly uncomfortable.

“I started to feel odd. I looked at the others, and somehow they seemed like strangers to me. I don’t know. For some reason, I just felt sick to death of the whole thing. Just fed up with it. So I went back up to the house. Henry shot me the worst look of contempt, but really, what did I care? Let them play their game.”

“The next morning,” Chalbourne begins, then stops. “Keep in mind, at the time, it didn’t seem important. But now, since I’ve read Bunny’s letter, I’ve remembered things.”

“Like what?” Thursday asks.

“For one, when I woke up in the morning, the downstairs floors had been washed. Susan told me later that they had tracked in a lot of mud the night before, and wanted to save the maid a bit of work. The house was empty, mind, we just used it as a place to get away. There was only the old caretaker and one elderly housemaid, his wife. But still, it did strike me as odd, for them to be that considerate.”

There was blood everywhere.

I found them out on the porch, and they looked a wreck—it was Bruce, Susan and Henry. I said, “What happened to you?” And that’s when they told me that it had worked.”

“It had worked?”

“The bacchanal. They said it had worked. Vines grew up from the ground. The river turned white. The sun chased the moon across the sky. They saw Dionysus.”

Thursday raises an eyebrow.

Chalbourne shrugs. “That’s what they said.”

“And where were the others?” Thursday asks. “Pippa and Kay and Morse?”

Chalbourne shakes his head. “I don’t remember. They could have still been asleep, maybe? They weren’t out on the porch with the others, at any rate.”

“And then?”

“And then they never mentioned it again. But, now, when I think about it, there were some things that seemed odd later.”

“Such as?” Thursday prompts.

“Well, the floors for one thing. And after, we . . . we had always been a bit of a claustrophobic group . . . That all shifted, after. I just didn’t see it before. I thought we were all just growing up, growing apart. Kay and Bruce became more closed off from the rest, but they had just gotten engaged, so that wasn’t too surprising.”

“But Bunny, Bunny did seem different, somehow. More abrasive than he had been. More easily
upset. He made a big to-do about wanting to go to Italy for Christmas. They went, Henry and Bunny—Henry paid for the whole thing, which wasn’t that unusual. They were old friends, since Eton, and by then I think Henry was used to financing Bunny’s habits and tastes . . . But one thing Henry said, when they came back—it does give me pause now.”

“And what’s that?” Thursday asks.

“Well, by the Christmas holidays is seemed clear that Pagan and Susan were splitting up. Originally, Pagan was going to go to Susan’s over the holiday, but then suddenly he wasn’t.

Yet, Susan still seemed interested in what he was going to do. ‘Where will you stay?’ she kept asking him ‘Will you go to Lincolnshire?’ and Pagan was just, ‘Of course, of course, I’ll just go home, it’s fine.’”

Chalbourne stops and makes a disbelieving face. ‘Of course, he had no intention at any point of going back to his father’s—instead, he found some room above an unheated warehouse. It was Henry who found him, when he and Bunny came back from Italy. He had to take him to hospital. Double pneumonia.”

Well, that does sound like Morse, to be that stubborn but . . .

“But what’s that got to do with Corocoran?” Thursday asks.

Chalbourne takes a drag on his cigarette, lets the smoke out, contemplating.

“Well, it was what Henry said after. He said, ‘Pagan has been absolutely ridiculous. I think he might have died in that warehouse rather than wire one of us for a couple of hundred pounds. That’s nothing. I’ll have spent three times that on Bunny by the end of next week.’”

“Well now,” says Thursday.

“At the time,” Chalbourne continues, “I just thought, well, that’s Bunny for you. But now, reading this, I can’t help but wonder: was there a reason they felt that they needed to keep Bunny happy? Was it not just a habit? Did they feel compelled to do so?”

“It’s just that, looking back . . . you see . . . it wasn’t as if everyone’s personality changed—nothing so dramatic as that. It was more as if certain qualities became magnified. Bunny’s jokes got a bit sharper, Susan started drinking quite a bit more. And then Pagan simply disappeared, left most of his things behind. And then it was suddenly Susan and Henry again.

“I don’t know,” Chalbourne says. “It all happened bit by bit. But now, I can’t help but wonder: What if there’s some truth to Bunny’s letter? What if something did happen that night? To have changed everything?”

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Once again, Thursday finds himself heading back to the lake house. There are others, he knows, he could speak to first, but he trusts Morse—it would serve him better to hear the story from him before filtering through the others’ accounts.

As Thursday turns off the main road, he realizes with a pang how familiar this path has become. While each visit has seemed strictly necessary, he can’t help but wonder at himself: he’s certainly managed to find countless pretexts for seeing Morse.
A week ago, he would have said that each visit was necessary for the case, or, if he felt like being more honest, that he felt the lad needed him. But now he understands—it’s because he needs Morse.

He’s always left work at the hat stand; he’s never wanted to trouble Win or the kids with the worries of his day. And while she’s had her friends from the garden club and mother’s circle, he’s had only two things in this life: his work and his family.

For years, working with Lott, Thursday had become accustomed to operating alone, knowing full well he couldn’t trust his own bagman let alone anyone else in his nick. Having Morse as his bagman brought back the echo of days he had long forgotten—of the lads in North Africa for whom he would have given his life—and who he knew would give their lives for him just as quickly in return.

Somewhere along the way, the prickly DC, who could raise his blood pressure in an instant, had become more than a colleague, but a trusted confidant. A son with whom he could talk about all the things he didn’t want to put upon Sam.

Had it really been so long, Thursday thinks, since he had a friend?

Thursday goes up to the door and knocks. The door creaks open, revealing a stream of yellow light.

“Morse?”

Thursday knocks again, and then opens the door a bit wider. Morse is not at home, and what’s more, he hasn’t bothered to lock the door. The place is as big of a tip as ever.

Morse’s record player is still set up, though. And it looks like no more albums have suffered the fate of the Puccini. Well, that’s good anyway.

There is a strange new addition to the room—a small antique writing desk with a typewriter. Thursday remembers well the wars Morse waged with the one down at the nick—the one that he used to write—or as Bright would have it, “type”—Bright’s reports. He’s surprised that he would have one at his place.

Thursday steps back outside and closes the door. It’s a beautiful summer evening, the air soft and cool. Not a bad night for a walk through the woods and over to Bixby’s—he’s come out all this way; it can’t hurt to check if the lad is there before he goes.

The doors of Bixby’s house are thrown wide and servants are scrambling—setting up tables and bringing out trays. A bartender is opening crates of multicolored bottles and putting them underneath the counter.

“Excuse me,” he asks a young woman battling with an arrangement of flowers half as tall as herself, “Is Mr. Morse here, do you know?”

“Outside with Mr. Bixby, isn’t he?” she says, hurrying over to another vase.

Thursday goes out a side door and down a sweeping set of stairs into the garden, where fairy lights are already burning against the purpling sky, then through a grove of trees strung with more lights. Below, Bixby and Morse are sitting on the dock, looking out over the water.

He can’t hear from here what they are saying, but as he grows closer, he sees Bixby pull a large gold coin out of his pocket. With an elaborate flourish, he makes the coin disappear and then pulls
it out from behind Morse’s ear.

It’s a corny trick—the staple of every jocular uncle—and, again, Thursday is surprised to realize that he feels almost sorry for Bixby as he waits for Morse’s face to fall into that too-familiar expression of withering contempt.

But whatever Bixby is saying must have sold it, because, instead, Morse smiles. Bixby leans forward, cups a hand around Morse’s nape, and then pulls him forward in a kiss.

And. Well.

For a brief moment, Thursday is stunned. He makes his steps louder, clears his throat dramatically, waits for them to jump apart. He does, after all, have a murder investigation to run here.

But the two seem not to hear a thing. Morse takes Bixby’s shoulders in his hands and leans back, lowering himself to lie on the boards of the dock and pulling Bixby down on top of him.

Well.

Actually, Thursday thinks, abruptly turning back the way he came . . . he really ought to have the letter checked for prints first.

*******

On his way home, Thursday feels annoyed. What is Morse playing at now? He, Thursday, could have been a business associate, a servant, he could have been anyone … Rumors and insinuations are one thing, they can’t be proved in court, but there is such a thing as deliberate carelessness. Is this all just one more reckless stunt, one more way to let the world know, that he, for one, couldn’t care less?

Possibly.

********

In the morning, back at the nick, he stops at Jakes’ desk on his way to his office.

“I need this checked for prints,” he says, giving him the letter. “And tell records I want any information on any unsolved murders stemming from the summer of 1957. Especially any out by Faringdon.”

“Sir,” Jakes says.

It’s then that Mr. Bright calls them into his office. Much to Thursday’s annoyance, he and DS Jakes are sent out to investigate a car theft out by Marston. You would think a murder inquiry would take precedence, but evidently the owner of the car in question plays bridge with Mr. Bright’s wife.

When they return, both the letter and the report from forensics are waiting on his desk. Thursday scans the report. No prints on the letter save his own, Chalbourne’s and Corcoran’s.

So. It’s authentic, then.

********

By the time Thursday gets over the lake house, it’s well past noon. Possibly Morse is out by now, but there’s just a good of a chance he might be in. Doesn’t seem like he has much of a set schedule
these days, after all.

Thursday knocks on the door. The door creaks a bit, and from inside, he hears a sudden burst of activity. Actually, it sounds frenetic enough to be caused by more than one person.

“Give me just a minute,” Morse calls from inside.

Thursday rolls his eyes.

Oh for . . .

Isn’t Bixby supposed to running an international conglomerate of some sort, for God’s sake?

In a minute, Morse wrenches the door open, looking distinctly disheveled. Once again, his hair has taken on the look of an underwater plant, sun-bleached waves spiraling off in all directions, as if each has a life of its own.

Morse looks surprised and a bit wary. Thursday isn’t sure whom Morse might have thought it was out on the steps, but it certainly wasn’t him, that much is clear.

Thursday gets right to the point.

“Went out to see your pal Chalbourne. He’s had a letter from Corcoran.”

Morse smiles in relief, opens the door wider and beckons Thursday inside.

“It turns out Bunny’s all right,” Morse is saying as Thursday steps inside.

Bixby is there, sitting at a small table with a cup of tea, looking well-put together and impeccably dressed, his dark hair neatly combed. Even in Morse’s untidy little shack, the man looks just as smooth as glass. Morse takes a place next to him, his hair flying wildly about as he lights down into an old armchair. They certainly are a study in contrasts, that’s certain.

Morse gestures for Thursday to take a chair opposite.

“Poor Marion, she must have just been distraught when she made the identification. Where has Bunny been all this time, then?” Morse asks.

Thursday sees right away that Morse has the wrong idea. He begins to explain when Morse cuts him off, looking concerned.

“Has Tony told Marion? Somehow, we always seem to forget about her. I don’t think she’s ever liked us very much.”

“No, no, lad,” Thursday says. “It’s not that. It looks like it was sent before he died, maybe lost in the post a bit, or in the shuffle of Chalbourne’s study. Chalbourne says he hadn’t been through his personal letters for quite some weeks.”

“Oh,” Morse says.

“Sorry lad, I didn’t mean to . . . .”

“No, no, it’s . . . it’s fine.”

“I was hoping you could take a look at the letter,” Thursday says.
“Should I go?” Bixby asks.

“No,” Morse repeats. “It’s fine.”

Thursday hands Morse the letter. Morse hesitates for a moment, then takes it and begins to read.

“Do you know what to make of it?” Thursday asks.

But Morse has gone pale. He looks almost as if he might fall over. Bixby instinctively moves closer, tilts his head to read the letter.

“This can’t be right…” Morse says, more to himself than to Thursday.

“Do you not think it’s from Corcoran?” Thursday asks.

“Yes, I mean, it does look like his writing, I mean, he always . . .” he shrugs helplessly.

“Is there any validity to what he’s saying?” Thursday asks.

Morse shakes his head. “I don’t understand. Why would he say this?”

“I’m not sure, lad,” Thursday says. “That’s what I was hoping to ask you.”

“I… I can’t imagine. I don’t know why he would say something like this. “Monsters?” “Killed a man?” Is this meant to be some kind of joke? Why would he . . .”

“Do you know what day he might be talking about?” Thursday asks, trying to bring Morse back to the facts, cut and dried.

Morse stills at the question. “Yes.”

“So it’s true, about the bacchanal? Chalbourne said he didn’t know much about that night. Said he had left early,” Thursday says.

Morse swallows. “Yes, that’s true. He did.”

“Then what happened that night, exactly? Can you just tell me what happened?”

“Well, it was something we’d been trying all summer, really, to have a bacchanal. We were all classics students; we’d all read about them. It was mostly Susan and Henry’s idea. Bruce and Pippa were keen on it, too. Kay, Tony and I, not so much.”

“Why is that?”

Morse shrugs. “I don’t know. That is, I can understand how they might have found the idea alluring—to lose yourself, to see realms beyond. Their lives had all been so tightly structured—it seemed an escape to them, I suppose.”

“But I . . . I didn’t much like the idea… of being out of control. For me, well, my whole life had been sort of out of control, really, since my mother…. I mean, that is…. Everything was always at the mercy of Gwen’s temper, my father’s moods . . .”

Morse shrugs again, as if he doesn’t know what else to say about the whole affair.

“So what happened, the night Corcoran is talking about?” Thursday asks.
“Henry did get angry at Bunny. He saw him having a steak and kidney pie when we were supposed to be fasting. That’s true. There aren’t a lot of people who would know that, I shouldn’t think. We ended up leaving that night without him. So… I don’t know…. We lit the fire. Tony didn’t stay long after; he went back to the house. Susan had some sort of branches, she threw them on the fire. Or maybe it was Henry. The branches made odd, pungent columns of smoke. We stood for a long time. Just stood there around the fire. Henry recited an old prayer, then he started reciting it faster and faster.

“I dunno,” Morse adds softly, looking down. “Maybe it turns out Henry was right about me—that I was a bit of a Quaker after all. A bacchanal, it’s sort of a mirror image of a meeting. At the meeting house, it was all peace and silence and stillness and waiting for the inner light. The bacchanal felt like it was just the opposite—fire and noise and waiting for some long-forgotten divinity to come forth and seize you. I just started to feel sort of miserable, standing there. Afraid a little even, I suppose.”

“And then Kay suddenly turned and half-ran back up to the house. And then I thought I wanted to leave, too. But then I noticed there were vines. Growing around my ankles.”

“You what?” Thursday asks.

“There were vines. Or I imagined there were. So I couldn’t move. And I, I sort of panicked. But then I ripped them off. The vines. And I ran. I just started running. It was all just sort of awful.”

“How was it awful?”

“I don’t know,” Morse says, his voice beginning to shake. “I heard things. Saw things. The moon looked like it was racing across the sky. I just. I don’t know. I just wanted to get away from all of them. So I just ran.”

“And then what?”

“I don’t know. I guess I was confused. I went the wrong way. Next morning, I woke up in a field somewhere. It must have already been at least half ten. The sun was quite high up. I started walking, and I realized that I wasn’t far from the main road. It was a nightmare: I was about six miles from Tony’s aunt’s house, by then, dressed in a ridiculous bedsheet. And I just felt… well… sort of sick.

“From finding the road at least, I could get my bearings, so I started heading back to the house. On the way, I . . . I heard crying in the woods. I went through the trees and I found …. it was Pippa. She was just sitting there, still in her chiton, sitting by a stream, crying.

“So, I went up to her and I told her not to worry, that I knew how to find the way back . . . and she. . . .” Morse stops, looking troubled.

“She what?” Thursday asks.

“She didn’t want to go back. She said we should go the opposite way, back to the road…. and try to get a ride back to Oxford.”

“Did she say why?”

“No.”

Bixby flashes Thursday a look. Maybe he ought to think of hiring Bixby on as his bagman, he’s certainly quicker on the uptake about these people than poor Morse. How can the lad be so obtuse?
Certainly he must realize how this all sounds.

“And what did you say?” Thursday asks carefully.

“I told her we couldn’t, that we’d have to go back to the house. We could hardly hitchhike all the way back to Oxford dressed in a couple of ripped up bedsheets. And besides, Susan would. . . they’d probably be wondering where we went.”

“Christ, Morse, how did you ever get mixed up with that lot?”

Morse doesn’t answer.

“So you don’t really know what happened then, either, with the others?” Thursday asks.

“No. I suppose not really. I know they didn’t kill anyone though.”

“How do you know?”

Morse gives a mirthless laugh. “I just know! It’s impossible! What would they have used? What weapon did they have? Nothing. They can’t have done that. They just can’t. Susan’s a slight thing and Henry is so myopic he can scarcely see. And Bruce, sure, he can throw a punch, I guess, but he’s more of a blowhard than anything else. Bunny must. . . . Bunny must have just been angry or something. I can’t imagine why he would have written something like this…. I thought…. I thought . . . .”

Morse trails off, and stares for a moment off into the distance, “When I was up,” he says, in a voice not far beyond a whisper, “I got sick one winter and had to go to hospital. Bunny came to visit me. I was just stuck there, reading some horrible journals that were more full of footnotes than text. Henry had brought them.”

“That’s the sort of thing Henry liked to read,” Morse adds, by way of explanation, as if that was somehow an important point.

“I thought my head might split,” Morse continues. “And Bunny said, ‘What we need to do is smuggle your record player up here.’ I told him, well, that wouldn’t be allowed. He said, ‘Just wait, all I’ll have to do is flirt a bit with one of these pretty little nurses—work the old Corcoran charm.’”

“Well,” Morse says. “That didn’t work. I ended up falling asleep while he was trying to chat up some nurse about it. But when I woke up, there were a bunch of librettos from my albums on the bedside table. With a note in that God-awful handwriting. ‘Cheer up, Siegfried, old man,’ it said. He called me that sometimes. Rather than Pagan. He used to live down the hall from me first year, so he’d hear…”

Bixby and Thursday nod in understanding.

“It wasn’t the same as having my records, but reading the librettos, I could sort of hear them in my head and. . . . and that was after the bacchanal. . . . So even then. . . . what? Did he think I was a murderer? I . . . I just don’t understand. Why would he write this?”

His voice breaks on the last few words, and he turns his head and runs his sleeve over his face.

When he looks up, he goes utterly still, like a deer ready to plunge into the woods.

“You think it’s true, don’t you?” he asks, his eyes wide. “You think we killed someone and that he
... that he knew. And that Bunny was blackmailing us and then we killed Bunny ... and oh, my God ...”

At this, Morse lets the letter drop and buries his face in his hands. Suddenly, he’s openly sobbing, his shoulders shaking. “Oh, my God,” he repeats, rocking slightly in his chair as he sobs. “Oh, my God.”

Bixby looks on helplessly. “Endeavour,” he says, placing a tentative hand on his shoulder.

But Morse flinches away. “Don’t!” he shouts.

Bixby pulls back, while Morse continues to sob. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Bixby says, quietly. “You’re all right, Morse.”

But at this, Morse sobs even harder.

Thursday feels like hell. Morse has always been an intensely private person. Sitting and watching the lad fall apart like this leaves him feeling like he might be sick.

If he had known how the lad would react to that letter, he never would have come.

He’s never fully seen him as part of this set, he supposes. He never once imagined Morse as part of the “they” Corcoran spoke of in the letter. Morse belongs back at the nick, poring over photographs and clicking his pen. Not with this lot.

But it’s clear, that at some point at least, Morse has felt otherwise.

Thursday sighs. “I never said that, Morse. I don’t think you’ve killed anyone. It’s you I trust. That’s why I’m asking you about it.”

Morse looks up, his eyes brimming still with tears. “Well, if not me, who then?” he snaps. “Susan? Kay? Henry who can hardly see three feet in front of his face?”

Thursday says nothing. Bixby looks almost afraid to move. For a few minutes they simply wait, as Morse’s breath hitches and eases.

Finally, Morse calms, his face contorting back to that impassive expression Thursday knows so well. Then, he starts to scowl. Thursday can practically hear the wheels start turning.

At first Thursday feels relieved: anything has to be better than Morse’s tears. But the somewhat too-quick change in his demeanor is a bit alarming, too. There’s been something off about Morse from the moment he found him on that dock. It’s sort of like playing one of his records at the wrong speed. The tune is familiar, but the pitch is jarring, just all wrong.

There have been times that Thursday would have liked nothing better than to go down to that damn prison and demand to see Morse’s records. To see if he can find out what exactly did happen there.

Of course, there’d be no point to that. Whatever happened, there sure as hell wouldn’t be a record of the incident. Thursday’s not that naïve.

Morse takes a last slow, shuddering breath. When he speaks, his voice is much lower, steadier.

“Besides, he says, “this was all ten years ago. It doesn’t make any sense. If Bunny had been blackmailing them for ten years, why wouldn’t they have killed him then? Why wait until ten years later? It doesn’t make sense.”
Bixby raises his eyebrows. Thursday catches the change of expression and turns to him.

“Any thoughts?” Thursday asks shrewdly, addressing Bixby.

“Well,” Bixby says, considering. “There was that row we had, remember? When Bunny lost that quarter of a million pounds?”

“Quarter of a million!” bursts out Thursday, incredulously. “Kept that quiet.”

“But that was nothing,” Morse protests.

“A quarter of a million, nothing?” Thursday asks.

“He did lose a quarter of a million at cards,” Morse says. “To Bixby. But it’s ridiculous. He hasn’t that kind of money. I told him to forget it. Not to worry about it.”

Morse turns to Bixby, his face furrowed in concern. “You did tell him to forget about it, didn’t you?”

“I did,” Bixby says.

“There, you see,” Morse says, turning back to Thursday. “That’s that.”

But next to him, Bixby still looks troubled. His dark eyes look into Thursday’s with a degree of worldliness Morse’s lack. As if he’s considering a possibility that Morse isn’t.

And Thursday thinks he knows just what that possibility might be.

Corcoran liked to play with the high rollers even though he didn’t have the money to back it up. He had an earl’s tastes on a banker’s son’s allowance.

But as little as he had, he had more than Morse, right?

_Nice pen, Pagan, is that a Mont Blanc?_

How might he have felt about having a quarter of a million-pound debt relieved on the whim of the scholarship boy, the cabbie’s son?

Mightn’t it have hurt his pride a bit, just a little? Mightn’t he have thought it a matter of honor—or at least a matter of saving face—to make good on his debt, regardless?

“Look here, Henry,” Thursday can imagine him saying, “I’ve got myself into a spot of trouble. How about a loan?”

After ten years, maybe Corcoran finally overplayed his hand.

Thursday looks at Morse and Bixby, sitting side by side. Morse’s brows are raised and blue eyes wide; his face is still flushed and tear-stained, but he’s got that set, satisfied look he has when he’s reasoned his way to the logical end of a thread.

But next to him, Bixby looks as if he has his doubts.

We both know that Morse would find it disloyal to believe a friend to be capable of that sort of pettiness, his expression seems to say. But we also both know that’s just what might have happened.
Morse wipes his face across his sleeve again and picks up the letter. “What I think,” Morse says, “is that you ought to have this checked for prints. I don’t think Bunny wrote that at all. This has got to be some sort of hateful joke.”

“Well then,” Thursday says, folding the letter back inside his jacket. “I’ll send it off as soon as I get back to the nick. All right then?”

Morse nods.

What Morse doesn’t know can’t hurt him, Thursday thinks.

Or can it?

*********

Back at the nick, Thursday asks, “Anything back from records? About anything from ’57?”

“Not yet,” Jakes says.

Thursday slams a folder down on the desk. “Well tell them to get their fingers out. I want anything they’ve got, on my desk, by first thing in the morning.”

“Sir,” Jakes says.

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“Morse called for you,” Joan says when he comes in through the front door.

“How’s that?” Thursday asks.

“Yeah, he called about an hour ago. First he didn’t say who he was, but I knew that voice sounded familiar, so I asked him. He didn’t leave a number. He said he’d call later.”

“Thank you, love,” Thursday says. Joan nods smartly and goes into the kitchen to help Sam set the table.

Around nine-thirty, the phone rings. Thursday picks it up. “Thursday,” he says.

“Sir? It’s Morse.”

“Morse. Joan said you had called.”

“Yes, ummmmm, yes sorry.” he says. “I wanted to talk to you when you weren’t at the nick, so you can answer me freely.”

“Of course. What is it?”

“Bixby is going to France for six months, maybe even a year. Before he goes, he’s having a tremendous party—one that’s going to make the others look like little get-togethers. Anyway, while I was over there, Harry Rose called. He and George McKinnon want to come up, pitch their deal to Bixby one more time. I told him they are the most low-life sorts of criminals, and he ought just to turn them out of the house. He says he has no intention of going along with them on this, but that it can’t hurt to be polite and hear them out at least. He says he hasn’t gotten where he is today by ‘burning bridges’.”
Morse snorts at this and Thursday understands why. Morse has managed to elevate burning bridges to an art form.

“So what are you thinking?”

“I think you should get an evening suit and come up here tomorrow and you will hear some very interesting things. I will introduce you as one of Bruce’s associates. I told Kay all about it; I’m at her place now.”

“Lady Belborough? Why are you getting her mixed up in this?”

“I’m not, she already is.”

“How so?”

“How so? How so?,” Morse says, growing impatient, “What does it matter ‘How so?’” Because we hate Rose, that’s how so.”

Again, Thursday is left with that disjointed feeling of a swerve in the road, of a surprise flat note in the symphony. All the hemming and hawing, his awkwardness about having called Thursday at home, was all so Morse, and now this...

Because we hate Rose, that’s how so.

Thursday isn’t sure he has ever heard Morse say he hates anyone—in the past, he's always held himself apart, as if he were viewing the world through a thick glass—casting his judgement on all and sundry, yes, but in the most fair and impartial of manners.

He hears the murmur of a female voice in the background. Then Morse’s voice again, sounding a bit distant this time, as if he’s talking away from the receiver.

“Well you should be surprised,” he says to whoever is in the background. Presumably, it’s Kay.

“Why do you hate him?” Thursday asks. “I know he’s a piece of work, but…

“Never mind, I just do. You were the one who sent Jakes after me with some noble speech about bringing him to justice, now I’m all but handing him over… are you going to come or not?”

Technically, this isn’t true—it was the Met’s idea to send someone from Cowley, and any words Jakes used to try to persuade Morse were strictly his own.

“Don’t you think I might be recognized? I interviewed a fair few of these crowd about the Corcoran case.”

“Please. It’s largely a different crowd, and even so, even if some of them have met you, these people are so vainglorious they forget your face ten minutes after talking to you. If you come here in an evening suit introduced by me or Kay, no one is going to notice you. Just don’t wear one of those awful ones from the nick like the one Jakes wore. Go to my house first—Kay is going to take one of Bruce’s—we’ll have it there for you—it ought to fit.”

“Bruce Belborough isn’t going to notice me? After I’ve been up at his house? And on top of it all I’ll be wearing his suit?”

“Bruce, Bruce, who cares about Bruce? He’s lost three hundred thousand pounds to Bixby already—he’ll be glued to the tables trying to show him up. It’s Rose and McKinnon you’re after, and
neither of them have seen you before.”

“Surely I should let someone from the Met….”

“No!” Morse says, in a shout as steadfast as iron. “If you don’t want to help, then fine. But don’t expect me to talk to anyone else. I don’t owe them one damn thing. Do you hear? I don’t owe anyone a damn thing.”

“Morse…” Thursday begins….

But he’s interrupted by the resounding slam of the receiver.

Oh for….

Thursday can’t remember ever having heard of such an awful plan.

************

In the morning, he and Jakes are off again, making inquiries about another blasted car theft. When he gets back to the nick, there’s a DC from records waiting for him with a file.

“Sir,” he says. “We’ve found a case, unsolved, from August 1957—some of the documents relating to the case had been sealed—it took some doing to get the records.”

“Sealed? Why?”

“I’m not sure, Sir. It seems, well, as it went unsolved… it seems as if perhaps the DI at the time was wary of starting a panic. Or of newspapers getting hold of the details, and sort of embellishing it up, as it were. I couldn’t say for sure, Sir.”

Well, of course he couldn’t. The boy looks like he’s just barely shaving; he would have been a schoolboy back in ’57.

“So what have we got there then?”

The DC hands the file over. “It’s a bit grisly, I’m afraid, Sir.”

“How so?”

“It seems a man . . . Richard Williams, his name was, a farmer. Well, he was mauled.”

“Mauled?” Thursday exclaims.

Thursday’s eyes begin to scan the reports.

“So it seems, Sir. The pathologist said it looked as if . . . as if he’s been set upon in some sort of frenzy. . . as if someone . . . or even several people . . . ripped the man limb from limb.”

Thursday nods and continues to read. After a few more sentences, he’s no longer seeing the words. All he can manage to think is, “Christ, Morse. What the hell?”

Suddenly, he has an image of a younger Morse getting off the bus at Oxford, suitcase in one hand, record player in the other. Flushed with happiness at finding himself free from his father and
stepmother’s joyless house. Off to Oxford, he was, an ivy tower, where he would sit about with his new friends reciting poems under the moon and discussing the finer points of Aquinas.

Only to be immediately adopted by one of the most disturbing little groups of sociopaths Thursday has yet to encounter.

The lad really did seem to have the worst possible luck.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I first began this when I started re-reading The Secret History--but I had forgotten just how over-the-top that book gets by the end--so this is a bit of an odd fusion!

I was thinking a prequel to this could be an Endeavour /Mean Girls mix-up :0)

"On Wednesdays we have bacchanalian frenzies... " Ummm.....
Thursday slams into the Cowley CID in a manner that leaves the younger officers looking for cover. For the rest of the morning, they remain subdued as they type their reports and silently slide files across one another’s desks.

A week and a half of playing silly buggers with this crowd, Thursday thinks, and he still has nothing to go on.

In fact, instead of one murder investigation on his hands, it’s likely he has two: Bunny Corcoran and a farmer killed ten years ago, Richard Williams.

Thursday stands before a board pinned with photos and newspaper clippings. He’s got a group of eccentric former undergraduates, a dodgy night ten years ago, a posthumously written letter, a man found dead in the lake, an unsolved murder case from the summer of ’57—and absolutely no hard evidence to link any of it together.

The blood-stained floors were washed ten years ago, their chitons, or whatever the hell they were, most likely burned in the dead of night.

There are no records of money ever having been transferred from the Belboroughs’ or the Winters’ accounts to Corcoran. It seemed that Henry and Bruce had always given Bunny gifts, paid for his trips, bought him dinners. That at one point, they didn’t mind helping out a friend.

Until, perhaps, they couldn’t say no.

But that’s all mere conjecture.

Thursday’s got two potential witnesses thus far: one behind the stone walls of a manor house, oblivious to whatever might have happened, one lying out in a field, even more oblivious to what might have happened.

What Thursday really needs at this point is no less than a confession.

Or at least a witness who might be able to shed a little light on the matter.

Pippa Carey. Thursday isn’t sure what to make of Morse’s story. Did she witness the attack?

Surely, something must have prompted the girl to believe that she and Morse would be better off taking their chances on wandering out to the main road half-naked and climbing into the car of the first stranger to happen by, rather than return to their friends.

Thursday tells Jakes to get the keys to the Jag, that they’ll be heading out. There’s a few inquiries they need to make.

On the way to the country estate where Pippa Carey lives with her parents, Jakes is quiet, as if he knows Thursday has much on his mind. And he’s right: there is something that’s troubling him, but it’s something beyond the matter of the case.
It wasn’t an outright lie, allowing Morse to believe he hadn’t yet had the letter checked for fingerprints. But it wasn’t honesty either.

Never before has he ever lied to Morse. He’s always been honest with the lad—even when that meant revealing the darker part of himself, the part still twisted up with memories of what he had witnessed in the war and in the Smoke.

There had been a time when he had hoped the lad might open up a bit in return, learn to trust him. No man is an island, after all.

But he had always imagined, always hoped, that this gentle unfolding would come at Morse’s own pace—that he, Thursday, would earn the right to hear those admissions and scraps of memory, uttered quietly by the fire, over a pint down at the pub.

*It was my father. Who taught me how to shoot.*

He had never dreamed of a Morse like this—one who broke records and lived exclusively off of Scotch. Who passed out on the ground and then got up like nothing had happened. Sobbing one moment and furrowing his brow the next, deliberately choosing not to see what was right in front of him.

A volatile Morse was the world turned upside down. It was unthinkable.

Of course, it’s possible that that volatility was always there, just below the surface of a thin shell that was just waiting to be cracked.

*Unless they confessed. Did they? Did they confess?*

Thursday shakes the thought away. To hell with demanding Morse’s file—what he ought to do is to go out to that prison and raze the place to the ground brick by brick. He had cause, damn them to hell. He had cause.

*******

At the Carey’s, Thursday and Jakes are ushered into a sitting room; it’s painted a moss green and filled with chairs and sofas upholstered in plush cream velvet, the legs and armrests of which are carved with vines.

Pippa’s mother, a woman who looks very much like her but twenty-odd years older, tells them that Pippa is not at home; she’s gone up to Edinburgh.

“Does this have anything to do with our Bunny?” she asks.

In Thursday’s experience, parents are often the poorest sources of information in cases like this. Especially posh parents, like the Careys, whose offspring spent most of their lives at boarding schools. But they’re here. It’s worth a shot. It’s just possible that Pippa may have confided some fear, some hint of apprehension, in her mother.

But sure enough, Mrs. Carey seems to know Pippa’s school friends in only the broadest of outlines; her descriptions of them are watercolor brushstrokes without the details filled in.

Henry, serious and studious. Susan, her best friend since Pippa met her at boarding school at the age of twelve. Kay is sweet, Tony a charmer. She had hoped for a match there, but it seems it was a no go. The only one she ever had qualms about was Siegfried—she refused to call the poor boy Pagan—he scarcely ever spoke; it was impossible to know what he was thinking, wasn’t it?
And Bunny of course, dear Bunny, he always had everyone in absolute stitches. They were all simply devastated when they heard the news. Catherine, his mother, has not been holding up well, poor thing.

When Thursday asks about their university days, if she’s ever heard them make mention of holding a bacchanal, she sounds horrified.

“A bacchanal? They never mentioned a word about such a thing. And I should hope not. Heavens, that sounds absolutely debauched.”

Pippa won’t be back home for a few days, her mother tells Thursday; she’s taking the train down to Kay’s—it seems they are all planning on going to a party held by some fellow named Bixby.

Thursday gathers up his hat, nods to Jakes, and thanks her for her time.

******

Once they ascend the broad, sweeping steps of Donningston Hall, a butler who answers the door tells them that Mr. Winter had left early that morning for the Belborough’s—he’s planning on attending a party one of their neighbors is hosting, a Mr. Joss Bixby.

Mrs. Winter, it transpires, is also out. None of the servants seem to know when exactly she left or when she’s due back.

Damn.

“No, wait,” says one of the maids. She overheard Mrs. Winter on the phone—she’s gone to London. But she’s fairly certain that she is planning on attending Bixby’s party later that evening as well.

So, Thursday thinks, a nice little reunion, it seems.

How convenient.

******

Back at the nick, Jakes finds a folder on his desk.

“I’ve got it,” says Jakes. “Sir, I’ve gotten the warrant for the George McKinnon case. I sent up a second report, based on those papers Morse left in the car. And if we can get to those records, we ought to have the goods on Rose, too.”

“Sergeant,” Thursday says. “You are an absolute lifesaver. Let me take you out for a pint.”

Jakes looks pleased, but bemused.

“It was just finagling a bit of paperwork, Sir.”

“It was more than that, Sergeant,” Thursday says. “Believe me.”

Thank God, Thursday thinks. Now he has an ironclad reason to not go along with Morse’s ridiculous plan. There is one part of that scheme, though, that he does intend to follow.

He certainly plans to attend that party.
But he won’t be going in some ludicrous, ill-fitting evening suit, posing as some associate of Belborough’s.

He’ll be going as himself.

**********

“Inspector?” calls a voice from the crowd in the great hall. It’s Lady Belborough, dressed in a tiara and a white evening gown.

“Lady Belborough” Thursday says, as she comes to stand at his side.

“You should call me Kay,” she says, “Especially, since we’re, what? Going undercover together?”

“That’s all off. My sergeant has gotten a warrant to seize McKinnon’s papers. Ought to do for Rose, too, once we’ve had a look-see.”

“Oh,” she says. “I don’t know whether to be disappointed or relieved. I thought that Pagan’s plan sounded sort of daft. But then, when I thought about it, it seemed like good fun, having the chance to pay that man out.”

“What was that about? Morse sounded as cross as two sticks on the phone.”

Kay makes a face. “He didn’t tell you anything about it?”

“No.”

“Oh,” she says. “He’d probably be embarrassed if I said, then.”

Thursday isn’t sure what to make of that.

She looks at him, considering. “He talked about you a lot, Pagan. The guards told him you were dead. You know, when he was in prison.”

Thursday feels like he’s been kicked in the stomach.

“Did he ever . . . did he ever say anything to you about that or . . . you know . . . it?” she asks.

“No,” Thursday says. “Not really. And I never knew that.”

She nods, more to herself than to Thursday, as if he’s confirmed something.

“So why are you here?” she asks. “Hope he doesn’t go off the rails when he sees what you’re wearing.”

“I was just talking the other day with your husbands’ cousin, Tony Chalbourne. He was telling me about some game you all had, back when you were at Oxford. Trying to hold a . . .,” Thursday pauses, letting the word seem offhand, “a bacchanal, was it?”

“Oh dear,” Kay says. “Why would he bring that up for?”

“You weren’t keen on the idea, then?”

“No. God that was stupid.”

“Why do you say that?”
“I shouldn’t think I would need to explain that,” she said. “Not to someone like you. I’m from a working class family from Birmingham. My dad worked on an assembly line. I’m not like the others. I had to work my arse off to get into Oxford. I didn’t have a huge bank account somewhere to float me along if I got sent down, or ended up with a poor third. Nor did I have Pagan’s hyper-connected brain. I had to study. I didn’t have time for silly games like that.”

“But you did go with them, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did. At first. And at first, it was just all in fun. Drinking around a bonfire. Reading Greek poetry. But then, some of the others became positively obsessed with the whole idea. The fasting. The chitons. It took up more and more of their time—I had to study for examinations; I didn’t have the time to pore over obscure, archaic texts looking for some clue as to what we were missing. It became like a cult. You had to follow their rules or you were out. At the last one I went to, I just got up and left. Later I told Bruce that was it. I wasn’t having any more of that. Actually, I think that might have been the last time they tried it. They never spoke about it again to me, at any rate.”

“Oh, why did you leave?”

“It was just, I don’t know…” she stops, looking confused. “Is this important?”

“It might be.”

“Well,” says, and as she speaks, she leads Thursday away from the crowd in the great hall and into a large room with a ceiling that extends to the second floor. The room is filled with small tables and chairs arranged around a dance floor bathed in swirling colored lights. On a stage, a band is just beginning to warm up. It looks more like a London nightclub than a room in somebody’s home.

“It was just . . . ,” Kay continues, “I just felt fed up with the whole thing. Or with them, rather. Tony had gone up to the house, and all of the sudden, I thought, why shouldn’t I, if I wanted? I was sick of feeling bullied by Henry and Susan. And even Bruce at that point. I just left. I ran back up to the house and left.”

“In the morning, in the morning, God they looked wrecked. Bruce and Henry and Susan were all on the front porch. I asked, ‘Where are Pippa and Pagan?’ And do you know what they said? ‘We don’t know.’ Can you imagine?”

“I said, ‘You mean to tell me, that they’ve been out there wandering around all night? Shouldn’t we go and look for them?’”

“And Henry said, ‘No. I’m sure they’ll be along any moment.’ I thought they must have gone mad! Pippa and Pagan must have been gone for hours!”

“I told them, ‘Well, let’s go look for them, for God’s sake.’ Bruce came along with me in the end. But not Henry or Susan. I didn’t understand Susan at all—Pippa was her best friend from girlhood, and Pagan was her fiancé at the time. You’d think she might have been a little concerned.

But Thursday thinks he might understand Susan—it’s simple arithmetic. There are five out in the field at the fire, three come back covered in blood, two disappear. Might Henry, Susan and Bruce have been afraid to look for the others? Afraid of what they might find?

And then he realizes with a jolt: Morse has played his part in this as well. If he and Pippa had gone to the road, as Pippa had wanted, it is possible that they might have found themselves in greater trouble—but it’s more likely they might have found help. Wouldn’t most people be inclined to call
the police if they were to find two disoriented nineteen-year-olds who looked like they’d been wandering around outside all night in a couple of bedsheets?

This entire debacle might have been resolved ten years ago, had it not been for Morse sheltering the others, heading right back to Tony’s aunt’s as if seeing vines grow or the moon race or whatever the hell it was, as if losing hours of your life, as if the behavior of the others, was all perfectly normal.

How can someone so sharp be so obtuse?

But then, did Morse really believe Teddy Samuels spontaneously developed a nose bleed during the five minutes he was out at the car, “fetching Thursday’s pipe tobacco?”

Thursday is far from the bookish sort Morse is, but he does know the meaning of a tragic flaw. If the others suffered from an excess of vanity; Morse suffered from an excess of loyalty.

Such a combination can prove disastrous.

By now the band has started up, the dance floor is packed, people are weaving in and out through the crowd carrying colorful drinks, swaying as they stand to the pulse of multicolored lights. Kay’s attention has turned to the stage, her arms crossed, watching. It’s the sort of thing that that Thursday thought Morse would have despised.

At that moment, Thursday has the feeling that’s he’s being watched. He looks up, and, standing behind the railing of the second floor, Bixby and Morse are surveying the party, half-turned and poised like a pair of princes overlooking their kingdom.

In a way, they’re like two bookends: Morse is just an inch or so shorter than Bixby, and they’re both dressed in perfectly-tailored evening suits.

And in a way, they are polar opposites—Bixby, with his broad white smile and impeccably combed dark hair is the perfect counter to Morse, his wide mouth cast in a grim line framed by two parentheses, his bright hair tucked wildly behind his ears.

And while Bixby’s dark eyes shine with the expectation of finding his guests perfectly charming, Morse’s cool blue gaze looks resigned to finding them all bitterly disappointing.

And that’s especially true at this moment. Morse is looking at Thursday with a face full of thunder. He can practically hear the words in his head.

What’s that your wearing?

Thursday tries to look as stern as possible as he holds his gaze.

Bugger that, Morse. I’ve something else in mind.

Morse tilts his head, as if he’s heard Thursday’s answer. Then he turns to say something to Bixby. Bixby nods and Morse turns away, waking past the crowds on the landing to come to the top of the stairs.

Thursday watches as he descends. He’s just approaching Thursday and Kay, just beginning to ask “What are you . . . ?” when there’s a burst of screaming from the direction of the great hall.

And then a gun shot.
Morse and Thursday exchange glances. At the sound, the past seven months fall away, and they are DI Thursday and DC Morse, in lock step as they head in the direction of the sound.

In the hall, the crowd is pressing up against the edges of the walls, moving like one mass away from the woman standing in front of the door. By the time Thursday is able to make sense of what is happening, the guests have formed a half-circle with the woman in the epicenter—she’s a blonde in a blue evening dress and she’s holding a gun.

“Susan!” Morse calls, struggling through the crowd towards her. Thursday makes a bid to grab his shoulder, but he struggles free. Thursday follows in his wake.

“Susan!” he calls again, breaking through the crowd.

She turns the gun on him. “Get in the car Devvy. We’re leaving.”

“Wait. What?” Morse says. He ought to look more concerned, considering he has a gun pointed at him. But instead he looks merely bewildered.

“I said, come on. We’re leaving now.”

It’s just then that Henry, followed by Pippa, makes his way through the crowd on the other side of the Hall. In another moment, Bruce, Kay and Tony are there as well.

“For God’s sake,” Henry says. “Put that gun down, Susan.”

Susan turns the gun on Henry. “You bastard!” she shouts. “You ruined my life!”

“Susan,” Pippa pleads, “Let’s just sit down. Let’s forget about this.”

“You’re obviously drunk, darling. Give me the gun,” Henry says.

“No! I’m not listening to you anymore. The stupidest thing I ever did in my life was to listen to you,” Susan says.

It’s then that Susan notices Morse slowly moving forward across the floor. She swings the barrel of the gun back towards him.

“You had better just do what I say, Devvy. I’m sick to death of you.”

“What do you imagine I’ve done?” Morse says incredulously.

“You know what you’ve done. You know just what you’ve done. You disappeared. You left all your things behind, even all of your God-awful records. To hell with you, Susan, right? I don’t need you. I don’t need anything. Then the Army. Then the police. But you can’t go anywhere, can you? No, you come right back here. So I can read about you chasing lunatic serial killers on rooftops and getting sent to prison for murder and who knows what else. And now, I don’t even know what you think you’re doing. Do you? Do you have any idea?”

“What do you mean?” Morse asks, caution in his voice.

“You wouldn’t ever take one god-damned penny from me, but you’ll run all over the place with some slick bastard no one’s ever heard of like some sort of bought thing. It’s all just been one long suicide, hasn’t it Devvy? Just to make me pay and pay and pay.”

Then Bixby, lightly touching a shoulder here, moving sideways between two people there, has made his way through the crowd and has also reached the edge of the circle, coming to stand
beside Morse. Ever the consummate host, he steps forward, his gestures conciliatory.

It’s almost, Thursday thinks in disbelief, as if he believes a few words and a smile can salvage even this party disaster. The man is either incredibly brave or completely daft.

“I don’t think we’ve met, my dear. Why don’t you come along with Pippa and me and we’ll get you something to drink, yes?”

“You’d better get away from him, or I’ll blow your head right off, do you understand?” Susan says. In her rage, she fires the gun. It blows a small hole in the oak wood floor.

The crowd goes completely silent at this. Then suddenly, someone starts clapping, slowly, as if they’re rating a performance.


Then he starts laughing. Susan swings the gun back to him. Henry looks nonplussed.

“What an ego,” he scoffs. “It’s absolutely incredible. That’s right, my dear. Pagan has lived his whole life just trying to figure out what would annoy you the most. Did you get all of that, Pagan? I suppose you were just supposed to have thrown yourself in the Thames the moment she gave you the ring back. Saved her a lot of headaches.”

“Don’t you laugh at me, don’t you dare laugh at me! I’ll kill you!”

“If you kill me darling, now that will be the stupidest thing you’ve ever done,” Henry says.

While Susan’s focus has been tuned on Henry and Morse, Thursday has managed to circle around the hall, edging along the wall until he is almost behind her.

“You’re getting a lot warmer with that last bit, though. You never gave a damn what he’s been doing all these years. That’s just what you’ve told yourself. What you’re really angry about is that he’s not following your script. You always understood that if he knew the truth about you, his loyalty wouldn’t extend quite that far. Not as far as mine has to you. Isn’t that right, Pagan?’

Morse looks too stunned to speak. Thursday isn’t sure what pieces he’s putting together, but from the blown look of his eyes, he’s getting to the same conclusion Thursday’s made days ago.

“Pagan?”

Morse, just slightly, shakes his head. Whether in disbelief or in agreement with Henry, Thursday isn’t sure.

Christ, Morse, Thursday thinks. A little social lie now and then is not the end of the world. The woman does have a gun.

“But that still didn’t mean you were setting him loose, not entirely, am I right my dear?” Henry says. “He was supposed to pine away for you in a squalid little garret somewhere, isn’t that so? Not be whisked away to some chateau in France.”

Thursday is poised to leap forward, to grab the gun from Susan’s hand, when she flings herself at Henry. “You bastard!” she cries. “You think you’re God, don’t you? You pull all the strings like we’re puppets!”

For a moment, they struggle, as Susan strikes out at Henry.
“You make it all sound like we’re just characters in your story,” she shouts, hitting at him with both fists, both with her free hand and with the hand that’s wrapped around the handle of the gun. “Some goddamn nineteenth-century novel.”

As she flies at him again, Henry reaches forward, and with a quick twist, takes the gun from her hand. He cocks it and aims it.

Pippa is staring in wide-eyed horror as if she’s unable to move.

“Henry!” Tony shouts. “What are you doing?”

“Fine! Go ahead and kill me then,” Susan cries.

And then, in a flash, Morse jumps up from behind Henry and grabs for the gun. But why Morse ever sought fit to dismiss the man’s strength, Thursday doesn’t know. Myopic the man may be, with a predilection more for books than physical activity, but he is nevertheless a good six inches taller and almost twice as broad in the shoulders than Morse is. Henry swings his arm around with Morse still clinging to it. For a moment, Morse’s feet completely leave the ground. In one brisk movement, he pulls Morse in front of him, pulls the gun out of his grasp and puts it to his temple.

“Don’t you dare!” Susan shrieks. “Don’t you dare!”

“Henry, stop this at once!” Tony says.

“I simply want your attention, Susan. You think I’d kill Pagan? What’s he ever done to me?”

“I don’t know,” says Susan, her voice seething with a terrible contempt. “What did that poor man ever do to you? What did Bunny ever do to you?”

“Don’t lie. Not now at the end. You know that was a regrettable accident. As for Bunny, you know perfectly well what he did to me. What he did to all of us.”

“Take him on a tour of Italy, just to hear him complain about foreigners and gypsies the entire, grueling, endless trip. You return home, thinking you’ve placated him, but no, there he is, coming into tutorial humming ‘The Farmer in the Dell.’ Take him to France even though he doesn’t know a word of French—except enough, of course, to order the most expensive items on every menu. And then over a selection of desserts, he declares, ‘Did you know the guillotine is still in use here? For capital crimes.’ You know what Bunny did to me. He tormented us for ten years.”

“There were so many nights I prayed that he would just go to the police. Release us all from this hell. Didn’t you? Was I alone in feeling that way? I prayed he’d get drunk, make some midnight confession to Pippa, Tony, Pagan, Marion, some employee at the bank, some barkeep in a pub, anyone—just to be free of it.”

“When Pagan showed up again as a policeman, I thought this is it. He won’t be able to resist now. It’ll all be over.”

“Poor Pagan,” he says to Morse, as if suddenly remembering that he has Morse locked in front of him, a gun to his head, “now you understand why he found it so frightfully amusing when you became a police detective—you won’t take it so personally, now, will you?”

“Will you?”
Morse shakes his head slightly again.

“Henry,” says Tony, “put the gun down right now. Whatever this is, it’s over, do you hear me?

“Yes, Tony. It’s over. You know, Susan, it’s funny you should bring up nineteenth-century novels. Consider me Raskolnikov. You, there, Inspector Thursday,” he calls.

Thursday is taken a bit by surprise. He’s been surveying the scene, running through all his possible moves. Henry’s sudden address is like being spoken to by a piece on your chessboard during the middle of a game.

“Consider yourself my Porfiry Petrovich. Consider this my full confession.”

“What are you saying?” Bruce says.

He turns and says something to Bruce in Latin. Bruce looks stricken.

Henry turns back and says, as if he’s addressing the crowd, “Accept the things to which fate binds you, and love the people with whom fate brings you together, but do so with all you heart.”

“Henry!” Tony shouts, as if he’s understood something.

But Henry is watching only Susan.

“Susan. Come here.”

She eyes him warily.

“Do you think I’d hurt you?”

She approaches him slowly, stops at the opposite side from where Morse is locked in place. Henry kisses her on the forehead, whispers something in her ear. She takes a step back, her brow furrowed in confusion.

Henry moves the gun from Morse’s temple and raises it to his own.

“Henry, no!” Tony and Susan shout.

He pulls the trigger and fires.

**********

Pagan falls to the floor, feels something warm splatter over the side of his face. His ears are ringing, his whole head is ringing. Around him, people are shouting, but he can’t hear properly.

For a moment, he fancies he’s back at the bacchanal. But the flecks of red before him on the darkening floor are blood—not sparks flying up into the night sky. Pippa is sobbing. It was real, it was real, all these years, you’ve made me feel I went mad. That I was mad! You’ve gaslighted me!

Gaslight. There are bright lights and they pop and fade and pop and fade. And there’s Tony—level-headed, dependable, the one they all looked to, he’ll know what to do. But no. He’s standing there, looking horror-struck. Seeing him thus leaves Pagan feeling lost—it’s like being on an aeroplane and the having the pilot come out to into the passengers’ compartment.

Is there anyone left who is flying the plane?

Pagan tries to move his legs, but he can’t. It’s the vines. He kicks his legs, but, no, it’s not the
vines. It’s Henry lying across them. How can he get free? Get off, Henry. And Susan is telling him, “Don’t, Don’t!” as he struggles and kicks and then she’s holding Henry’s head and –God what’s happened to him?—and she’s sobbing “I love you, I love you.”

Of course, Pagan realizes, she’s always loved Henry. Why won’t Henry answer her?

Pippa is crying still and where is Bunny? If Bunny were here, he’d say something preposterous. Something to set the girls giggling, a contagious sound in the starlight that would make him laugh, too.

You are too goddamn tall for any of these sheets, Henry, he’d say. You’re chitron is showing way too much leg. And Kay laughed and Henry snorted, annoyed.

But now Susan is sobbing to Henry, “I love you” and Pagan watches and understands that she was right that day she stopped him on the bridge. The day she said, “You’ll never understand me. Henry is the only one who will ever understand me.”

At the time, it seemed like the end of the world, but no. Because Susan has always loved Henry and he, Pagan, loves someone else, he thinks. But he can’t remember. He knows only that when they kiss, he tilts his head 15 degrees north instead of 15 degrees south.

North. Like the North Star.

And there he is. And he looks so serious and he never looks serious. He’s saying something but Pagan can’t hear the words. His ears are still ringing. He wants to say something to reassure the man, but he can’t. He opens his mouth, but no words come out.

And everything is going silent and it’s black at the edges, like the night sky bursting into bloom. And he wants to tell the man, everything will be alright.

He’ll just lay down in this field for a while, and, in the morning, he’ll find the road and he’ll check the position of sun and he’ll start trudging his way home. It may take a while, but Pagan is sure he can find it if he keeps heading in the right direction.

Chapter End Notes

Next up--an epilogue from Thursday and an extended epilogue from Bixby with all of the Bixby/Morse backstory . . .
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Chapter 7 is composed of two epilogues-- a short one from Thursday and a longer one from Bixby....

Thanks for reading!

The whole business gets hashed out all over the newspapers, of course. For a while, it seems it’s all any one can bloody talk about. After all, the story has all the elements of one of Morse’s operas—love and murder, loyalty and betrayal.

Of course, on the stage, that’s all one thing. Living in the midst of it is all together something else.

Susan and Bruce hire high-profile lawyers, and in the end, both murders are pinned solely on Henry Winter.

Which is, it seems, exactly how he wanted it to be.

******

Thursday knocks on the door of the lake house, and, yet again, the door swings a bit open. Doesn’t Morse ever lock his door? Since when has the lad become so averse to a goddamn lock?

Oh.

“Morse?” he calls, opening the door a bit wider. But the lake house is deserted.

Thursday can’t say that he’s surprised.

He walks up into the small sitting room of the house. The place is empty of any sign that Morse ever lived there. There’s only a swirl of dust, caught in the morning light of the window, settling quietly on bare tables and chairs.

At least he’s taken his things with him this time, Thursday thinks.

******

A week before Christmas, Thursday comes home and is greeted by the smell of a simmering roast and the sound of Joan and Win’s delighted squeals. A crate has arrived from France, and the two women are having the time of their lives, unpacking scarves and soaps and bottles of wine and pots of mustard packed in thick straw. There’s a wool beret that Joan instantly claims as her own. A painted carriage clock. And a Christmas card that’s signed simply, “Happy Christmas. E.”

Thursday huffs a laugh. Wouldn’t want the lad to get too tripped up over sentiment.

******

It’s summer when Thursday passes by a bookshop on his way to a pub and is halted in his tracks by
a familiar name calling out to him.

On a shelf in the window is a book with a black and white photo of a forest and the words “Aftercomers Cannot Guess the Beauty Been” printed in green across the front. At the bottom of the cover is the name “Endeavour Morse.”

Thursday goes inside the shop and over to the shelf where the books are displayed. Next to him, a girl in a black minidress and heavy eyeliner is poring over the picture on the back cover—one of Morse looking artfully unkempt, his unruly hair tucked behind his ears.

It’s only because he knows him so well, Thursday thinks, that he can read the discomfort in his expression, his unhappiness at being photographed thus. But as the young girl in black wanders with the book to the register, Thursday thinks Morse’s publishers might just know what they’re doing.

After all, there is truth in those words, some of the first he ever spoke to Morse.

Young girls like poetry books.

******

Thursday leaves the office for a long lunch, but where he’s really headed is Lonsdale College. He saw an article in *The Oxford Mail*, announcing that Endeavour Morse, winner of the 1969 national award for poetry, is set to give a reading there and to receive an honorary degree.

There’s a bit of a crowd in the auditorium; chatting cliques of academics, bookish-looking middle-aged women, young girls in black with heavy eyeliner and undergrads of both sexes doing their best to pose as poets.

Morse, when he comes on stage, is subdued in comparison. His hair is slightly tamed and he’s wearing a blue suit. He looks extremely unhappy at being thrust into the limelight thus, his wide mobile mouth turned down in his habitual frown, his brow furrowed. When he looks out into the audience, Thursday tries to meet his eyes, to give him an encouraging nod.

Just then, Morse glances out into the crowd at him and straightens his posture a bit, looks slightly more confident, slightly more gracious.

Well, that’s more like it, Morse, Thursday thinks, nodding again. But then he realizes that Morse’s gaze is focused slightly higher, over Thursday’s head.

Thursday turns and looks up, and there, perched in a seat in the top row, is Bixby, dressed in an inconspicuous dark suit, his usual peacock’s flair turned down, as if he wants to give Morse his day in the sun.

Well, too right, Thursday thinks, approvingly

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Win is making a fuss and loving every moment of it.

It’s not every day that a copper’s wife has a national-award winning poet and a multimillionaire to tea.

At the table, Morse is his old stodgy self. “Thank you, Mrs. Thursday,” is about all he seems up to
saying in the midst of the crowded dining room table. Bixby is regaling Win and Joan with tales of France and then tells a funny story about how Morse’s photo came to be taken for his book’s back cover, how he’s often recognized now because of it.

“He didn’t want to do it, but I told him, let your publishers do their jobs—you might know how to write a book, but they know how to sell them.”

“It’s not about selling books.” Morse insists.

“No, of course not,” Bixby says, half-rolling his eyes. “Doubtless there’s some ring of Dante’s Inferno specifically designed for artists who are willing to sell out their souls to the highest bidder.”

It’s clear that Bixby’s being sarcastic, but Morse half-nods, as if this is perfectly true.

“Well, let me tell you this then,” Bixby says. “There’s also a ring that’s set aside for pedants and artists who think they’re too pure for this world.”

“Oh?” Morse asks, distantly curious. “And what’s one made to do there?”

“There, they are forced to read all of the rough drafts they’ve crumpled and thrown in the bin. And, especially—especially—all the painfully pretentious verses they wrote between the ages of thirteen and sixteen.”

Morse gives a shudder at this, as if this would indeed be a terrible fate, causing Joan to laugh out loud at his expression.

At the door, Win gives Morse a farewell hug. Morse turns to shake Thursday’s hand, but Thursday steps back.

“Handshakes are for good-byes, Morse,” he says reprovingly.

Then he simply nods and smiles.

“Mind how you go.”

Morse smiles back. “Sir,” he says. And then he follows Bixby out the door.

************************************************************

Bixby wakes to the morning sun streaming through the window. Endeavour’s head is resting across his chest, his tangle of red-gold waves caught in the fresh new light.

It’s funny now to see him thus, his eyes gently closed, breathing with the slow, deep cadences of sleep. When Bixby met him, his very first impression of him was one of wariness, of two wide blue eyes that were ever on guard, of too-quick movements ever poised for flight.

He scarcely seemed to speak. At parties, he would stick always by the side of one of the members of his set.

Once, Bixby, keen of fulfilling the role of the good host, had approached him and asked, “Do you have everything you need?”
In retrospect, it was an odd bit of phrasing, a question that could have cut any number of ways. Was it a politeness? An offer? Bixby himself wasn’t even sure.

But Pagan just stared at him blankly, his eyes large and blue and luminous in the moving, colored lights that swirled in circles through the room.

He looked over at the band as if he hoped by doing so he might turn the whole lot of them to ashes. Then he turned back to Bixby, put his hand to ear, and said, “I can’t hear you.”

Then he walked away.

Well, Bixby thought. That was interesting.

Bixby had always had a keen eye for beauty and a love of a good challenge.

Pagan, it seemed, was the perfect embodiment of both.

******

In the mornings after a party, Bixby routinely held a brunch for those who had stayed overnight—either by plan or by necessity, too drunk to make their ways home, or even, in some cases, to get up off of the floor.

It was on one of those mornings that Bixby stumbled upon them: Pagan, Bunny, and Kay in a small grouping at the end of the long dining room table.

Bixby went over to the end of the buffet behind Pagan, taking a bit longer to prepare his coffee than was strictly necessary, in hopes of overhearing scraps of their conversation, in hopes of hearing Pagan speak.

“Do me a favor, will you, Siegfried?” Bunny said.

Siegfried? thought Bixby. Could this be his real name? He didn’t look like a Siegfried.

“Of course,” Pagan said.

“I’ve decided to put the old degree to work, get on the academic side of things,” Bunny said.

“Oh?” Pagan asked.

“Yes. I’ve written an article on the Swiss banking system, thought I’d submit it to the Financial Times. Wondered if you’d give it a read for me, just to check the spelling.”

Kay huffed a laugh at this, but Pagan said, “Alright.”

After a moment’s silence, Pagan said, “This is a fine article, Bunny, but…”

“But what?”

“But a quarter of the way through, you’ve got a quote about usury from The Merchant of Venice, and then, well, from then on you discuss only the play. Don’t you suppose you ought to mention Swiss banking a bit more?”

“Swiss banking?” Bunny asked. “I don’t want to go on and on about that.”

Kay laughed. Pagan sighed, sounding almost pained.
“Ummmm, I’m sorry, Bunny,” he said, mournfully. “I think this just might be over my head.”

Bixby smiled, bemused. He certainly sounded a different creature than the one who had addressed him so imperiously the night before. His voice was low and hesitant, almost shy, with a soft trace of the north.

Just then, a group of girls from London had just come down the stairs and began regaling Bixby with the details of their night.

“You must have another party soon,” one of them said, laying a warm and inviting hand on his shoulder.

“I certainly intend to,” Bixby said.

********

A few days later, Bixby held another party, one more lavish than any he’d had before. All night long, as he mingled with the crowds, he overheard the guests buzzing about the extravagance of it all in wonder—he had the whole place lit like a Chinese lantern. What would they think, Bixby thought, if they knew he held the whole thing just in hopes of hearing Pagan’s voice at brunch?

For Pagan’s group could be counted on for one thing: they all of them drank quite heavily throughout the night. From what he had heard, they were quite the little clique of intellectuals back when they were “up,” but they certainly didn’t seem to be above knocking back vast quantities of liquor and collapsing somewhere in the house. Bixby could depend on them to still be somewhere about in the morning.

Especially Pagan, who was somewhat notorious for passing out where he stood on a fairly routine basis.

And sure enough, Bixby was not disappointed.

******

“Have you heard that they’ve found some new moons orbiting Saturn?” Pagan asked.

Bixby, lingering by the buffet table, stopped and listened.

“No,” said Bruce, not looking up from his newspaper. He looked woefully hungover and seemed keen not to encourage Pagan’s attempt at conversation.

“I wonder what they’ve been doing all this time?” Pagan mused.

“Orbiting Saturn, presumably,” Bruce said.

“Well. There’s that, I suppose. But isn’t it odd to think that they’ve been there, all this while, for countless millennia, and no sentient being has seen them or known of their existence? They’ve just been there for age after age, in a completely silent and unknown world, just tracing and retracing their same path. In a way, I wonder if you can say they existed at all.”

Well, of course they existed,” Pippa said.

“Yes, yes I know they existed in that sense. But they didn’t have any reality in anyone’s mind,” Pagan said.

“Are you going to eat that, Pagan?” Bunny asked.
“No.”

Bixby had no idea what Pagan was talking about. But he wished he did.

The question was: how to find a way to talk to him? And then, while chatting with an art dealer from Amsterdam, the idea came to him. He would buy a painting. Not just any painting. The most expensive painting he could get his hands on.

Pagan would of course be impressed. They’d fall at once into a conversation about art and existence and the moons of Saturn, and Pagan would see that he was more than parties and full pockets and a ready smile.

Because he was.

*Wasn’t he?*

********

Pagan was standing before the painting, his hands clasped behind his back.

“It’s a copy,” he said. “A fake.”

Ah.

Well, he seemed pretty certain about that. But there had to be some way to salvage the situation—he’d make it a game.

“How do you know?” Bixby asked.

“Because the real one hangs in the Rijksmuseum. I’ve seen it.”

“And how do you know that the one in the Rijksmuseum isn’t the copy, and this one the real one?” Bixby asked playfully.

But Bixby could tell right away that Pagan wasn’t having any of it. His eyes grew, if possible, wider. His full, lush mouth twisted in suspicion.

“Uh, I think the curators would have noticed,” he said.

And that was that.

Beautiful the man may be, Bixby thought. But he had absolutely no sense of humor.

******

It was later that same week when Bixby discovered Pagan did have a sense of humor.

He just wasn’t very funny.

During a heat wave, a group of guests went down to the lake in swimming trunks and bikinis. Bixby remained dressed as he usually did during the day, in a perfectly tailored but lightweight summer suit. Expensive clothes were a crutch he relied on, part of the persona he had created—he seldom gave them up in favor of more casual dress unless he had another prop to lean on, such as his sleek and powerful hydroplane.

He sauntered down to the lake, intending to look on from his dock as a benign sovereign, all indulgent smiles for the somewhat adolescent shenanigans of his guests. When he got there he
found Pagan, in shirtsleeves and summer trousers, and Pippa, wearing a sundress over her bikini, sitting out on the dock, so he didn’t feel completely out of place.

Tony and Bunny swam up then and clambered up on the dock. Somehow, they had gotten to talking about how they learned to swim as children and about the swim clubs they belonged to, where, as schoolboys, they swam competitively.

Bixby always felt apprehensive when conversations rounded their way back to the past—he had no names of note to drop, no posh schools or holidays in Switzerland to mention.

But he had learned that the best offence is a good defense. The key was to get people talking about their own memories, and they’d get so caught up in telling their own stories, that they’d completely forget to ask Bixby about his own unremarkable youth.

“Where did you learn to swim?” Bixby asked Pagan. “Did you go to one of the clubs with Bunny or Tony?”

“Me?” Pagan said looking bemused, as if Bixby had gone quite barmy.

“Yes,” Bixby said.

He laughed. “I didn’t go anywhere quite like that growing up, no,” he said. “I got thrown into a lake by my intoxicated father.”

Bixby was stunned by this overwhelming display of honesty. Or was he making a joke? He had assumed all this while that Pagan came from a fairly wealthy background—based on the crowd he ran in and on the fact on that he carried himself like a natural aristocrat.

But—no—Pippa had known him for years, and she seemed to think that this sounded plausible. “Wow,” she said. “Did that work?”

“No,” Pagan said mournfully. “I drowned. I’m still at the bottom of that lake in Lincolnshire. I’m just a spirit now. I wander around, warning other swimmers in the hopes they don’t meet my watery fate.”

Pippa looked unimpressed.

“Of course, it worked,” Pagan said. “I’m still here, aren’t I?”

Pippa took Pagan by his narrow shoulders and unceremoniously pushed him into the water.

Pagan turned in mid-decent, and pulled her in after him.

Bixby sat on the deck, watching as they laughed, the perennial outsider in this group that had known one another since their late teens.

Suddenly, Pagan turned and looked at him. Bixby wasn’t sure what he read in his expression, but, after a moment, he tilted his head, considering him. It was a jarring sensation: Bixby had seldom felt scrutinized thus. His first instinct was to look away, lest Pagan read too much.

But before he could, Pagan caught his eye and smiled. As soon as their eyes met, Bixby could read his intention, and he scrambled to get away. It was a good suit after all.

He tried to get to his feet, but Pagan beat him to the punch—in one quick movement, he grabbed him around the knees and pulled him into the water, too.
When he surfaced, his face was inches from Pagan’s. Bixby’s hand instinctively leapt to his hair to smooth it back out of his face; it was a vanity, he knew, but he’d always been a bit particular about it.

Pagan looked at him and raised his eyebrows, laughing.

It was there: Bixby realized with a swoop that something wordless had changed between them. At that moment, it was no longer the beauty of Pagan’s large eyes that drew him in, but the expression held in their depths.

He understood, then, that Pagan saw beneath the veneer he worked so hard to cultivate. Took so much care to maintain.

Saw beneath it, and, for reasons known only to him, decided to look back anyway.

Bixby felt something stir in his heart akin to gratitude. Or maybe it was the nearest side of love.

*********

He had just drained his glass when he saw Pagan walk out into the garden, and, on a lark, he followed him. He found him out on the dock, where he stood alone, looking up at the stars.

“Penny for them?”

Pagan seemed surprised; his eyes were glassy, and he seemed less than perfectly steady on his feet.

He didn’t answer, but rather gave a lopsided smile and turned to look up again at the sky. It was a beautiful, clear night, the stars scattered with a sharp brilliance against the deep, unreachable blackness.

Starlight suited Pagan, softening the sharpness of his cheekbones, lending a subtle glow to the brightness of his hair. In the odd half-light, he seemed as if he had stepped out from another world. One, Bixby thought with a smile, beyond the moons of Saturn.

Before he knew what he was saying, Bixby mused, “On a night like this, a man might believe that anything is possible.”

Then he winced.

God, he thought. What am I? Seventeen?

Pagan turned, considering him. It couldn’t possibly have been his words—it was a ridiculous line, after all—but perhaps it was the pained expression on his face. Because Pagan’s wide, mobile mouth twitched upwards in a smile, a real smile this time. And then he started laughing. It was a gentle thing, like the lapping of the water against the dock, and his eyes shone with an empathy that went beyond words.

Bixby felt like the wind had been knocked right out of him.

Who could resist a look like that? Bixby smiled, leaned forward and kissed him.

And Pagan kissed him back.

Once they broke apart, they turned, and, by silent agreement, walked into the woods, where the fairy lights were replaced by stars glimmering between the branches. The full summer leaves in the trees and last summer’s leaves on the ground muffled the sounds of music and laughter from the
house. After they had traveled some distance through the woods, Bixby took him by the waist and
leaned him up against a tree, reaching down for another soft kiss.

But then, Pagan responded with an enthusiasm that left him breathless. Pagan’s hands were in his
hair, and then down to his shoulders. He half-collapsed backward into the leaves, dragging Bixby
down on top of him.

As they fell, Bixby’s hands flew out and his eyes flew open. And he was surprised to see Pagan’s
eyes, wide and watchful, looking back at him. From his actions, he would have thought they would
have been closed in abandon.

Their mouths met again, and, absorbed in the warmth and surprising depth of Pagan’s soft kisses,
Bixby’s eyes slid shut. When Bixby pulled away to run a hand through the waves of Pagan’s hair,
and—possibly—see if he might undo a few pearl-covered buttons of his dress shirt, his breath
cought in his throat.
Pagan’s face held the same expression as it had when they had first tumbled to the ground. His
eyes wide, watching his face.

It was a bit disconcerting at first, to be held in that unrelenting blue gaze, but then, well... How
often did he wonder if the one he held in his arms was dreaming of his money, pretending he was
someone else?

Maybe he should be flattered?

He kissed him again. Pagan put his hand to his nape and pulled him forward to deepen the kiss. In
the tumult, Bixby found that Pagan’s dress shirt had become slightly untucked. He ran a warm
hand under it and—there.

Bixby froze.

He could see that Pagan had a fairly slight build, but he wasn’t prepared for this: for the feel of
each rib jutting forward just beneath the skin. He suddenly felt like a cat pinning a fragile bird to
the ground.

He wasn’t sure what expression must have crossed his face, but from the anger on Pagan’s, he
guessed it must have been something approaching pity.

Pagan suddenly pulled back and kneeled him in the gut. Bixby, for the third time in fifteen minutes,
felt the wind knocked out of him. Pagan scrambled up and took a few steps backward as if making
sure he wouldn’t try to follow. Then he turned and ran, disappearing in a flutter through the trees.

Like a bird, Bixby thought wildly.

But then, he was quite drunk.

But there was truth in the thought, nonetheless. And the truth was this: If you sat quietly in the
garden, for long enough, the sparrows and finches would grow accustomed to you, begin to circle
closer and closer. If you held still enough for long enough, you could even get one to take seed
from the palm of your hand.

Bixby was a man who knew how to wait.

Patience and luck—on that alone, Bixby had built an empire. And, now, it might just win him
someone to share it with.

*********
Luck was certainly on his side at his next party. He was playing cards with Bruce and two business associates and he just couldn’t lose. He found himself taking greater and greater risks, trying to throw a hand on purpose, just to make things interesting.

But still he won every time. No challenge at all. Bixby was getting quite bored, and would have left the table—but it was the polite thing to do, keeping in the game, letting the others have the chance to win some back.

Finally, Bruce threw his cards down on the table and cursed under his breath.

Bixby was having none of that nonsense. The man was wealthy enough that he could afford to lose with at least a modicum of grace. “You could have left the table at any time,” Bixby said sagely. “No one was holding a gun to your head.”

Bruce laughed. “I bet you could probably arrange that, too, if you put your mind to it.”

“You lost fair and square, old man,” Bixby said.

“I’ll lose to a straight house,” Bruce shouted, jumping to his feet. “Not to a crooked racket.”

Bixby stood up. “Keep your voice down,” he said.

“Oh,” cried Bruce melodramatically. “You want your money.” He pulled out a cheque book and began to write with a heavy flourish of his pen.

Bixby rolled his eyes. It wasn’t about the money, obviously. They both knew that.

“You know,” Bruce said, shoving the check in Bixby’s pocket. “Nobody else can see you for who you are. But I can.”

“And what’s that, old man?”

“A fraud.”

“Better a fraud than an arrogant bastard,” Bixby retorted.

Bixby had to admit: he didn’t even see it coming. Bruce pulled back and punched him hard across the jaw.

He had barely the time to recover his bearings, when suddenly, there was Pagan, throwing his slight frame in front of him.

“Bruce, please!” he said.

“What are you?” Bruce asked, his tone dripping with sarcasm. “His big pal now?”

Was Pagan mad? Surely Bruce could toss him across the room if he had a mind to. But then, to Bixby’s surprise, Bruce faltered. There was a flicker of something in his eyes, something that looked a bit like . . . fear?

“Don’t forget who your real friends are, Pagan,” Bruce said simply. And walked away.

“Are you alright?” Pagan asked, turning to him. He pressed a thumb gently across his split lip, a touch as soft as feathers, assessing the damage.

“Quite alright, old man,” Bixby said.
Well. That was certainly interesting. Bixby couldn’t say that he’d ever played the role of the damsel in distress before.

But in love, as in business, he’d go with whatever worked.

****

At breakfast, the fight from the night before was forgotten. They had all been a bit drunk, after all. Well, more than a bit drunk. And in the morning, they were all more than a bit hungover.

But Pagan’s leap of faith, jumping to shield him from Bruce, burned warmly in his chest. When he came down to the table, he took a chair by Pagan as if it were the most natural thing in the world. He took a tangerine from a bowl in the center of the table and peeled it apart, handing half to Pagan, keeping his manner as careless as possible. Honestly, the man really ought to eat something.

“Leave me alone,” Pagan said, his voice lower than usual.

“It’s a good one. You should try it.”

“No.”

“He’s only trying to be polite.” Kay said.

“I don’t know why people keep pushing things at me,” Pagan said. “I’m not a child.”

Tony snapped his newspaper shut. “No, you aren’t. So don’t act like one. I don’t know what you want from us, Pagan. We’re only all of us trying to help.”

Pagan stood up slowly from the table. It was only then that Bixby realized he was shaking from head to foot.

“You can’t help me,” he said. “Nobody can help me. I’m the only one that can help me.”

Pagan stormed from the room. But as he left, he cast one backward glance at Bixby. As if he was already sorry for his outburst. Bixby was careful to keep a neutral face. He held out his hand a bit too early, then. Well, that was fine. Confidence was the key. He’d simply go back to the garden bench, hold out the seeds, and wait again.

******

Bixby wasn’t sure whose idea it was to go to the carnival. It seemed like a terrible idea, in retrospect. The lights and the laughter and the forced merriment only highlighted the tension that, of late, crackled through the group like a bolt of electricity.

Bixby felt on pins and needles the whole evening, once again the outsider looking in.

He had even dressed all wrong: he thought his black jacket and sunglasses would give him a sophisticated panache of aloofness, but when he went to collect Pagan, there he was in a dress shirt, a burgundy tie and half-zip burgundy jumper, as dapper and earnest as a schoolboy.

It was only a few weeks ago that the group had all laughed at the lake; now it seemed that something had changed. There were sharp words, jokes Bixby couldn’t catch the meaning of. Every now and then, Bunny would say something in Greek, and Henry’s face would darken.

But it wasn’t as if the troubles among them were entirely regrettable. In a way, they were actually
working towards Bixby’s advantage.

Pagan had taken to avoiding them of late, it seemed. Bixby had offered him the run of his library, and more and more often, Pagan was to be found there, reading in a chair, just across from his study. And it was nice, knowing Pagan was there, buried in his books while Bixby perused contracts and made calls. It made the place almost feel like a home.

Good Lord, Bixby thought. Since when have I become so maudlin?

But from there, it had been an easy jump to asking Pagan the occasional question . . . about what books he might order for the library, about what he thought about some odd bit of business. At first, he asked out of design, but later he found himself consulting him in earnest. For someone who seemed barely functional, he had a surprisingly good sense about people.

All the while, he was careful to keep his manner light, to approach slowly. And with Pagan’s friends quarreling as they had been, Bixby couldn’t help but shine by comparison.

There were times Bixby wished they would straighten up a bit; they were making the game all too easy. He didn’t want to be chosen as the lesser of two evils.

He simply wanted to be chosen.

**********

Bixby followed Pagan and Bunny to the shooting gallery, where Bruce was aiming at targets with a carnival-game rifle. Kay and Henry stood to the side, looking on.

“Five out of six,” called the man running the game. “Not bad.”

Pagan sauntered over and picked up one of the rifles. He lowered it and aimed.

And hit every target.

Bixby wasn’t sure why, but there was something about it—the coldness, the precision, that seemed a bit, well, not Pagan. In fact, it was . . .

Alarming.

But Bunny just laughed, “You know, you really must have been a pretty good policeman,” he said. “But I suppose you were a pretty lousy detective.”

Bixby wasn’t sure what he meant, exactly, but Pagan’s face went wooden.

And Henry’s face darkened. “Leave off, Bunny,” he snapped.

Pagan put the rifle down, and, without another word, he turned and walked away through the crowd. For a moment, Bixby stood, trying to make sense of the whole exchange. Obviously, it was some reference to Pagan’s former life as a police officer. But why would Henry jump to his defense? It seemed they had been romantic rivals at one point. Odd that they were still friends, at all, really. He honestly couldn’t work these people out.

And, as he thought, he lost all trace of Pagan.

But then, there he was, out at the edge of the grounds, his red-gold hair caught in the jarring carnival lights.

By the time Bixby, half-jogging to make up time, caught up with him, Pagan was heading into the
“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I’m going home,” Pagan said, simply.

“You’re not planning on walking all that way, surely?”
Pagan shrugged. “It’s just two miles or so.”

“I’ll walk with you, old man.”

“What about your car?”

“I can have someone fetch it in the morning,” Bixby said.

Pagan snorted at this. It did make him sound a bit like Belborough, he realized, a man of privilege, used to giving orders, bidding others to perform the most minute of tasks. But he couldn’t take the words back now.

They headed into the woods, side by side, their strides perfectly matched.

“I’m not in need of a keeper,” Pagan said.

“I know that,” said Bixby. “I just fancy a bit of a walk.”

“All right,” Pagan said.

They made their way through the trees, twigs and leaves crunching lightly under their feet. Green bounties of leaves overhead rippled in the late summer wind. As if by magic, everything began to fall away. Bixby felt it was if the whole universe had suddenly collapsed inwards, the world reduced to these dark woods. That there was nothing real save himself, and Pagan, and the narrowing distance between them.

“You don’t belong with them anymore than I do, you know,” Bixby said.

Pagan hummed noncommittally.

“But it isn’t magic, is it?” Pagan said. “It’s all just smoke and mirrors.”

A faint breeze stirred up the leaves in a torrent of whispers. Bixby sighed.

“That’s true,” he agreed, finally. “There’s no real magic.”

He paused.

Then he took a breath and added, “Only love.”

It was admirably well-done, if he thought so himself, tossing the word out there as an abstract concept, leaving Pagan free to read into it what he would.
Bixby had taken a few steps forward before he realized that Pagan had stopped in his tracks. As Bixby turned back, Pagan’s mouth met his, in a kiss as soft and warm as the velvet night.

After that, it ceased to be disconcerting, and came to feel like a comfort, to be held in that gaze.

Across the room at a party, he’d have the feeling of being watched, and he’d turn and see Pagan there, considering him. When he was out on the hydroplane, he could feel Pagan’s eyes on him from across the lake.

Even the first time that Bixby came, held deep inside him, bringing Pagan off with a shudder and a soft gasp beneath him, Bixby thought: now, finally, he’ll have lowered his guard.

But no. When Bixby opened his eyes to look down at him where he lay on a bed of leaves, his eyes met Pagan’s— wide and bright and blue. Slightly unfocused, yes, Bixby noted with a fond smile, but still open and watchful.

Well, that’s fine, then, Bixby thought, rolling over into the leaves.

When they were around other people, Pagan’s mood might shift with the change of the winds.

But out in the woods, everything was different.

Pagan was all his, completely his. His…

His what?

Bixby looked over at Pagan, considered the slim length of him stretched out under the trees beside him, and thought about asking him his name.

The he remembered the tangerine.

Not now. Not quite yet. But soon. All things come to those who wait.

Bixby, as always, was sure of that.

That afternoon, out on his hydroplane, Bixby felt his heart might burst. He gunned the engine and flew through the water, filled with the pure joy of being alive.

Pagan usually seemed to disapprove of the hydroplane, but today, as Bixby soared along the shore to where he sat on the dock with Kay, showering them both in a spray of water, he laughed out loud. Bixby couldn’t hear it over the engine’s roar, but he could see his face brighten amidst the falling water that caught the sun and seemed to fall down around him in a halo of light.

Bixby wanted to say: If you stay with me, I’ll arrange the world so that you’d always laugh like that. I know you probably believe that money can’t buy happiness, but I’ll show you that’s not true. I’ll buy you any happiness you set your heart on.

But when he passed the dock for the fourth time, the scene had changed: two men in suits were there, talking with Pagan, Kay, Pippa and Tony. Pagan was sitting, his shoulders slumped, in an odd sort of way.

And then they learned that a body had been found in the lake.
This, obviously, cast a shadow over the group. Pagan was back to scarcely speaking. Something with that Inspector seemed to have left him rattled.

And then, soon after, they learned the body in the lake wasn’t that of some unfortunate stranger. It was Bunny. For several days, Bixby saw no sign of Pagan, nor of anyone else in his set, for that matter.

It was like having all the pieces of the backgammon board returned to their original positions.

The upcoming gala seemed a perfect bid to remedy that. Just invite him casually, keep it light. Say something to the effect off: I know you haven’t been outside a five-mile radius of that little hut of yours for months, how about a trip to London?

“No,” Pagan said.

“Why not?” Bixby asked.

“Because I don’t really like those sorts of parties and I don’t really like London.”

Oh.

“Nor do I,” Bixby said.

Pagan looked skeptical.

“Well, I do, and I don’t.” Bixby clarified. “It’s just part of doing business, I suppose. It’s odd; there’s always crowds of people, all laughing and dancing, but sometimes it seems as if they are trying a bit too hard, doesn’t it, to prove they are happy?”

Pagan remained silent.

“It would be a lot less lonely, if you’d come with me, old man.”

Pagan hesitated. “All right,” he said.

They set out in the morning, in one of Bixby’s convertibles. The sky overhead was achingly blue. When Pagan slid all the way to the center of the passenger seat, his leg solid and warm against his, Bixby felt his heart leap. Pagan had been so distant of late; the trip had been meant to take him out of himself for a bit, take him out of his sorrows. He hadn’t expected such an opening salvo of flirtatiousness. His surprise must have shown on his face.

“Do you mind?” Pagan asked, his brow furrowed.

Mind? He didn’t mind in the slightest.

Then he realized that Pagan was gesturing to the radio, in the center of the wide dashboard.

Oh.

Bixby steeled himself for what, invariably, was to come. “No,” he said. “Not at all.”

Pagan tuned the dial until, sure enough, he found a station on which a man and woman were screeching to one another in Italian. It sounded just wretched to Bixby, but Pagan turned it up.
They spent the day strolling around London, making the rounds of some of the pubs, Pagan diving into every used bookshop they passed. They stopped at Bixby’s place in London to change and arrived at the gala around nine.

It seemed to go well at first, until Bixby noticed that a certain dark-haired man was keeping an eye on Pagan, conveniently popping up wherever Pagan happened to be. Pagan kept within a certain radius of Bixby, but moved from place to place, as if he were trying to avoid the man, all the while downing enormous amounts of Scotch.

Then he was talking to Kay, half whispering in her ear. Then they were out on the dance floor. Kay looked like she was scanning the crowd for someone. Bixby wanted to keep an eye on what was happening, but he was caught up with a group of associates who wanted to discuss his new import-export venture in Marseille.

Then Pagan had disappeared.

When Bixby caught sight of him again, he was coming in from the terrace, followed a few seconds later by the dark-haired man. When Pagan saw Bixby, he made a beeline for him.

“That bastard,” he said.

“Who is that?” Bixby asked.

“Just a former colleague,” Pagan said, darting a quick look about. Then he headed for the bar.

From that point on, the evening went steadily downhill.

Just a former colleague or not, he certainly seemed to have left Pagan shaken. He drank glass after glass of Scotch, excessive amounts even by his own momentous standards. His movements grew erratic, his expression darkened.

“I can’t believe that bastard would say that to me,” he said, apropos of nothing.

Bixby hadn’t the slightest idea what Pagan was talking about. All efforts to get any solid food in him, predictably enough, ended in disaster.

After one particularly unpleasant outburst, Bixby tracked Pagan down again at the bar.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

Pagan looked up, glassy-eyed. “It’s none of his damn business,” he muttered.

Bixby felt a sudden chill.

“What’s none of his business?” he asked, cautiously.

Had the man been referring to . . . Did he voice any suspicion about . . . ?

“Pagan, what’s none of his business?”

“Huh?”

Well, that was certainly unhelpful.

Bixby’s mind was working in overdrive. Suddenly, he realized he had been careless, stupid beyond all belief to have brought Pagan here.
Bixby had a widespread and well-deserved reputation as a bit of a ladies’ man. He had depended on that, he realized, to deflect any attention they might receive.

And it was true, most of his acquaintances would not have thought Pagan his cup of tea—not only because was he a man, but because Bixby’s previous lovers had been all softness and smiles, charm and grace. Pagan was all sharpness and angles, with all the charisma of a live hand grenade.

No one really knew Bixby well, well enough, that is, to know that to him, a beautiful thing was a beautiful thing.

And all of his most successful investments had been the result of thinking outside the box.

Now, he suddenly he realized—well, of course that must be how it looked. He had bought the man suits and records and a typewriter and books—but then Bixby was known for his generosity—so what was surprising about that?

The car, that was perhaps going too far. But Bixby had so many. What was it to anyone if he gave one to Pagan? The man certainly wasn’t ever going to be able to create any sense of a normal life living in a shack by a lake, unable to get any further than his own two legs could carry him.

Maybe he needn’t have given him one that Bixby thought brought out his eyes—that may have taken it a bit far, true. But someone would have to be thinking pretty hard on the subject to read anything there.

Leave it to people to take a perfectly unremarkable situation and make it into a source of gossip. Although in this case, the gossip was all to true.

By the time they left, Pagan was barely able to stand, but still as angry as ever. Bixby worried he might make some sort of scene, but when he led him to the car, he was surprisingly docile.

On the ride home, Bixby turned on the radio and found a station that was playing more of the dreadful screeching that Pagan seemed to like. Pagan’s mood immediately brightened.

“That band was absolutely misery itself,” Pagan said. “It was like being trapped in a ring of Dante’s Inferno.”

Bixby huffed a laugh. As if the music had been the most alarming thing about the whole evening.

Although, who knew how Pagan’s mind worked? Perhaps that was what tipped him over the edge. Perhaps if a string quintet had been performing, he would have been able to handle whatever business he had with the dark-haired man in a calmer and more reasonable manner.

A few miles out, Pagan began singing, at first just under his breath, and then, after a while, more and more loudly, so that his voice was soaring with the roar of the engine and the rush of the wind in their faces. He actually sounded pretty good. If you liked that kind of thing. Which Bixby quite did now.

Good lord, Bixby thought, the fellow must be completely plastered.

Pagan turned and looked at Bixby and made a melodramatic face that must have matched whatever the hell it was he was singing. Then he laughed.

Well, thought Bixby, as they sped down a deserted road, to hell with all of them.
The trees raced along beside them and the stars flew overhead, and with Pagan singing in a torrent of words beside him, Bixby felt as if everything he had been through was worth it—he’d do it all over again, just to have this moment.

*****

By the time they neared the lake house, Pagan had fallen asleep, his head leaning on Bixby’s shoulder. It felt warm and heavy and right, resting there against him. He wished for a moment that they could keep on driving.

When they pulled up at the lake house, Bixby turned and looked down at Pagan’s face. His eyes were closed, lips slightly parted. He was absolutely dead to the world.

“Pagan?” he said. “Pagan, you’re home.”

“Huh?”

“Pagan?”

Pagan lifted his head and looked blearily around.

“Pagan?”

“Hmmmmm?”

“I want to tell you something.”

“Hmmmmm?”

“I’m not calling you Pagan anymore,” he said, in words as firm as granite. “I don’t know how you acquired that nickname, but it doesn’t suit you at all.”

Bixby steeled himself for what Pagan’s reaction to this might be. Except for his occasional insistence that Pagan eat something now and again, Bixby had thus far been careful to follow his lead, to make no demands.

Instead, Pagan simply said, “Oh.”

Bixby, surprised at his sudden and surprising meekness, decided to push his luck.

“Do you like it? Being called Pagan? You don’t really seem to.”

“No. Not particularly,” he admitted softly. He sighed and looked away into the trees.

“You could call me Morse, then,” he said.

“No,” Bixby said. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Why is that ridiculous?”

Bixby huffed a laugh at this. “I think you can guess the answer to that.”

“Oh,” Pagan said again. “So, what do you want to call me then?”

“Well, I suppose I’d like to call you by your name.”

For once, Pagan wasn’t looking at him. Now he was looking up. He kept his eyes fixed on the
branches and stars above.

“Perhaps when we know one another better,” he said.

Bixby couldn’t help but laugh.

Pagan scowled. “What’s so amusing?”

“Goodness, you set a high standard. I’m not quite sure how I could possibly know you any better at this point.”

Pagan turned his face away. Bixby felt his heart seize up: he’d been too flip, he’d annoyed him, this is when he’d get up and disappear into the house, close that flimsy wooden door on him.

Instead he murmured something softly. It sounded a bit like, “It’s ’n endeavour.”

Bixby felt his stomach twist. Was it always going to be thus? Game after game? Were they ever going to be able to speak clearly to one another?

But then, what else could they have really? What future could there be for them? He had a mansion the size of a fortress, Pagan a secluded shack, and still, neither place was safe: there was the scurry of servants at his place, unexpected knocks on the door from Kay, Tony and Inspector Thursday at his.

What were they reduced to? Meeting in the woods at some place in between like a couple of guilty teenagers. Something that at first had seemed the height of romance, but now just felt absurd.

Suddenly, Bixby felt angry. Not just with Pagan, but with the whole world for being arranged as it was.

“It’s an endeavour?” Bixby sighed. “What is that supposed to mean, old man? Is it a challenge? Something I’m just going to have to figure out? Look, I’m sorry, but I’m not like your friends—I’m just no good at these sorts of riddles. Can’t you simply tell me?

Pagan turned, and was facing him once again, his eyes close and blue and luminous in the half-light.

“No,” he said. “I mean, that’s my name. It’s Endeavour.”

Oh.

Not a riddle, then.

Could it really be as simple as that?

“Endeavour?” Bixby asked.

“Yes. My mother was a Quaker. It’s a virtue name.”

Oh.

“Well, what’s wrong with that?”

Endeavour shrugged. “Lots of things, I should say.”

“Good Lord, old man. You had was thinking it must be Rumpelstiltskin or something like that.”
Endeavour laughed.

Encouraged, Bixby pushed on. “There’s nothing wrong with your name. You should use it.”

He scowled, furrowing his brow.

“You do know,” Bixby said, “if you don’t use your name, other people will go ahead and come up with a name for you, don’t you?”

Endeavour stilled at this.

“I suppose that might be true,” he said.

********

On the day Inspector Thursday left the lake house with Corcoran’s letter, Endeavour crumpled. For a few moments he said nothing, just stared desolately at the closed door.

“He had it checked for prints,” he said finally. “He’s just coddling me now.”

“How can you know that?”

“I just know. I just know,” he buried his face in his hands, began again with that awful keening. “Oh, God. Oh, God.”

Bixby felt completely out of his depth. He had no idea what to say or do.

Then, abruptly, Endeavour stopped and looked up, took a deep, shuddering breath. “He must have meant it as some awful joke. He could play terrible tricks, Bunny.”

“That must be it then,” Bixby said, heartily. “I’m sure this will all get sorted out.”

But then, Endeavour was staring out of the window, his eyes glazed, looking strangely disassociated from his surroundings. As if he were now following a completely different train of thought.

“Why does Inspector Thursday keep coming here? Why does he keep asking me about this?”

Finally, a question Bixby could answer easily. Bixby knew well the value of employees you could trust. “You used to work for him, didn’t you? He must value your opinion.”

“But why?”

“He must trust your judgment.”

“But should he?” Endeavour asked. “I think he forgets, I’m friends with the people he’s obviously considering as suspects. That I’ve known them much longer than I’ve known him. How can he be so certain that it isn’t me? . . . Or is it . . . Or maybe he’s realized it could be me. That’s why he’s stopped telling me all of the details. He never should have told me anything to begin with, really.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Bixby said. “He knows you. He knows you couldn’t kill anyone.”

But Endeavor went still at that. Then he said, “Couldn’t I?”
Bixby froze. It wasn’t just the words, it was the coldness, the strange exactitude with which he spoke them.

“I think I might be able to kill someone. Possibly.”

Bixby felt his pulse quicken, could almost feel his heart beating in his chest. He remembered a few weeks ago, when he woke in the woods to find Endeavour missing and had walked up to the lake house to be sure he had gotten home all right. How Endeavour tore the door open and shouted, “Why did you follow me? I don’t need a warden!”

At the time, he thought it an odd word choice.

But now?

He remembered, too, the strange look of fear on Bruce’s face on the night that he lost so much at the tables, the night Endeavour hurled himself between them.

The precision with which he hit the carnival targets one by one.

What exactly did he know about Endeavour’s past, after all?

But then, Endeavour said, “Of course, I wouldn’t have done that to Bunny. I would never have done that to anyone, the way Bunny was killed. With his arms behind his back. That must have been so awful . . . I just can’t imagine.” His voice began to tremble on the last phrase. He looked away and wiped at his eyes.

“Of course not,” Bixby said, trying to sound as hearty as possible.

But, after a long moment, Endeavour looked up, and his face—all sharp cheekbones and square chin—looked as impassive as if it were carved out of white marble. His eyes, usually like prisms catching the light and refracting every possible shade of blue, had gone arctic, frozen.

“If I were to murder someone, he would have to see it was me. He’d have to know it was me doing it. Otherwise there would be no point.”

No point? Bixby thought weakly. He would have hoped there would be “no point” in murdering someone regardless.

“I’d want them to look at me first. To know what was coming.”

Wildly, Bixby remembered the days he considered Endeavour a sparrow, something slight and fragile that could be steadily drawn in to a gentle, outreached hand.

Now Bixby was left to wonder—perhaps it was he who had been lured into something far beyond his depth.

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At dinner that night, his fears were not allayed.

He was discussing a bit of business with Belborough, McKinnon and Rose at the end of a long table lined with dinner guests up from London. Kay was there, a polite but disinterested smile on her face, and Pagan, his expression openly dripping with contempt.

They were just wrapping matters up, when Rose said, looking to him and Bruce, “I wonder if I might borrow your muses for the weekend?” He gestured to Kay and Endeavour.
Kay kept her smile, but it became even more unfocused, like one she might absentmindedly give someone she was passing on the street on her way to her car.

Endeavour scowled, confused. “What do you mean?”

“I’m giving a huge bash up at my place in London. Mostly a diplomatic crowd. Older set. I thought you and Kay might help give the party a little ambiance. I’m pulling out all the stops—it ought to be a lot of fun. You wouldn’t have to do anything you wouldn’t want to, of course.”

A particularly uncomfortable silence followed.

“Oh. That’s certainly good to know,” Endeavour said.

He tossed his napkin onto his plate, got up and left the room in a manner that left Bixby feeling more terrified than if he had punched Rose right in the face.

Later, Bixby found him out on the dock.

“I hope you told him to go to hell,” Endeavour said quietly.

“Kay let him know you two would be otherwise engaged that weekend,” Bixby said. He laughed, remembering Kay’s words at dinner. “She did it rather well, I think. Most of it went over poor old Rose’s head.”

Endeavour scowled. “She shouldn’t have had to say it so that it went over his head. She should have just told him to go to hell.”

“Look,” Bixby said. “I have a lot of money wrapped up in this deal. I just want to see it through, and then Rose will have to find someone else the next time, alright? And as for that business we discussed last week, I’ve already made it clear—diplomatically clear—that I’m not interested.”

Endeavour’s face went dead at this. He refused to look at him, continued to stare out over the water.

“I . . .,” Bixby said, “I . . . invited him up. For the next party.”

Endeavour let out a sharp cry, as if he’d taken a surprise hit. “Well, I certainly won’t be there,” he said.

“That’s fine,” Bixby said. “I just can’t afford to go around burning bridges right now.”

Was it really possible, Bixby thought, that he completely missed the broader suggestion behind Rose’s words? Was he really going to have to spell it out?

“Well I certainly can. I’ll burn any bridge I want to. I’m not some toy to be bandied about,” Endeavour snapped.

“Of course, you aren’t,” Bixby said. “But you have to be reasonable. You can’t antagonize people just for the sake of doing so.”

“Oh, dear. He was going to have to spell it out, it seemed.

“Endeavour, didn’t you catch what he said?”
“What?”

“My ‘muse?’ You do know, don’t you, what he’s implying?”

Endeavour scoffed at that. “He’s got no proof about anything. He can’t do anything to us.”

“I think he could do plenty,” Bixby said quietly. “If he had a mind to.”

Then, to deflect attention away from the precariousness of their situation, Bixby turned the blame back on himself. After all, he wanted Pagan to be cautious, not fearful.

“Sorry if you are disappointed. I’m just not a very confrontational person.”

“Hrmmpffmmmm,” Endeavor hummed. “It’s lucky you met me then. I’m confrontational enough for the both of us.”

Bixby wondered if Rose should fear for his life, but when he looked at the man next to him, he saw another person entirely in those set, determined features. Someone just below the mask that was Pagan and above the core that was Endeavour, someone who must have been very much like DC Morse.

So. Something legal then.

Or, at least one would hope so.

Well, in that case, let him plot away.

Endeavour remained on the dock, planning, no doubt, some elaborate downfall for the old man. Something baroque, with hidden identities and purloined letters. Franky, Bixby couldn’t care less if Endeavour brought the crass old bastard down. So long as it was nothing he might end up in prison for.

No, while Endeavour was doubtless formulating an operatic style revenge, Bixby was busy crunching the numbers.

He had the import-export companies in Marseille. He had a few finance concerns in Paris. How difficult would it be, really, to transfer his base of operations to France?

There, Endeavour could antagonize whomever he liked without any fear of repercussions. There, he, Bixby, wouldn’t be forced to smile at people who really deserved a good swift kick in the arse.

There, as Endeavour had muttered at the gala, it really wouldn’t be anyone’s damn business.

**********

At the last party he held in Oxfordshire, Bixby found himself in a situation he had never been in before.

And it wasn’t the experience of having a man press a gun to his beloved’s head. Although there was that.

He’d never been in a situation where he couldn’t come up with a winning move.

Now, delegated to the sidelines, he remembered the night when Bruce lost at cards, when he threw the punch, when Pagan hurled himself between them.
He’d love to do something heroic like that right now. If only that might have accomplished something.

But with the gun right against Endeavour’s temple, knocking Henry out of the way would most likely cause Henry to hit the trigger faster.

Or he could simply stand and wait for Henry to pull the trigger.

Two options. Both losing ones.

He looked to Inspector Thursday, and felt slightly heartened. The man’s narrow dark eyes were everywhere; he at least, seemed to feel there were more options available, and was running through them one by one.

After all, the man had been trained for this, hadn’t he? There must be a manual about these things, surely?

Bixby had no idea what Henry was talking about—Latin aphorisms and characters out of Dostoyevsky were not his thing.

But Henry had said one thing true, at least.

If they got through this night, they were leaving for France. First thing in the morning, if it would be possible.

Certainly, the stories about this night, however it ended, would center around the drama of Susan and Henry.

But Susan had just referred to Endeavour as his “bought thing” in front of a crowd of hundreds. How long would it take before the gossips got bored with the one tale and began looking for the threads of others?

If they got through this night, they were leaving. And even Endeavour he thought—or he hoped—couldn’t find a way to argue with that.

**********

When they first settled in France, Bixby never ceased to worry that Endeavour might disappear. He’d done that before, it seemed. Several times, actually.

Each time he came in through the hall, Bixby first checked the drawing room to see if his records had been moved around a bit, looking for proof that he was somewhere about the place.

After visiting the Thursdays, he came to wish their home was more like theirs—snug and cozy enough for Endeavour’s presence to be immediately verifiable.

But then, just the other morning when Bixby came down to breakfast, he found Endeavour at the table, already dressed and scribbling in a journal.

Bixby tossed him a letter that had come for him in the morning post. “It’s from the Thursdays,” he
said.

Endeavour opened it and read.

“They got the plane tickets,” he said. “They’ve said they are going to come.”

“Oh, good,” Bixby said. “Maybe give them that suite in the east wing. Mrs. Thursday would probably like those rooms, with the view of the garden.”

Endeavour hummed. “All right.”

“Hang on,” Bixby said. “Shouldn’t you be going? I thought you were going up to Paris today. I thought they wanted you to meet with that translator.”

Endeavour made a face at this. “I don’t think I much like the idea. Having my poems translated into French.”

“Why on earth not? I’m sure they’ll give you full artistic control or whatever they call it.”

“If the publishers want to reach a broader audience,” he said, looking suddenly more cheerful, “maybe I could do the translating myself. I wouldn’t feel comfortable setting them into French quite yet, but I could do Latin. Or ancient Greek.”

Bixby paused, sought a way to put it diplomatically. “I’m not sure that’s a very good plan.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Well, if I said yes, would you read them? And tell me if you think they’ve got the sense of them right? Your French is better than mine. I’d feel better about it, if you would.”

Bixby stilled at this, inwardly thrilled that Endeavour would think that he, who’s never read much seriously—not even that damn Inferno thing that he brings up to categorize anything that’s not to his liking—would choose him as the one who would best understand his poetry.

“Will I get credit? As a consultant?” he said.

Good God. Why did he always make a joke of things when he meant to be serious? Would he ever outgrow that?

But Endeavour just hummed. “I thought I’d already given you that. Or if I didn’t, I meant to.”

Bixby wasn’t sure what to say. Endeavour’s eyes were fully trained on him, as they were during the days when they first met. He looked troubled.

Bixby stooped down to give him a quick good-bye kiss.

“I should go,” he said. “See you when I get back?”

He meant it to sound casual, but it came out as more of a question than he meant it.

Endeavour hummed. “Of course. I might still be sitting right here, actually.”

“Endeavour,” he said. “Go to the meeting.”
“Fine, fine. I’ll go.”
Bixby nodded.
“But Joss?”
“Yes?”
“You do know that I wouldn’t leave, don’t you?”
Bixby was so surprised by the sudden directness of the question, he wasn’t sure what to say.
“No. No, I suppose I don’t.” he said.
“Oh,” he said, “I’m sorry for that.”
Bixby smiled. “It’s all right,” he said. “See you tonight, then?” And this time it was the casual parting he meant it to be, not an entreaty.
Endeavour nodded solemnly. “Yes,” he said, his brow still furrowed.

*******
And now, he’s come to find himself here, with Endeavour’s head resting heavily across his chest, his eyes closed, face peaceful in the morning sun.

It’s no wonder he’s out for the count, Bixby thinks. He’d been up half the night, it sounded like, clacking away on that typewriter. Bixby really should look to see if there’s a quieter model available. He has a study of his own downstairs, but every once in a while, at night, he lugs the typewriter up to the sitting room of their suite and works in there.

The first time Endeavour hauled the noisy thing up to their rooms, he asked, “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Why don’t you want to work in your study?” Bixby had asked. “Don’t you like it?”

“I do . . . I just . . . don’t like to be downstairs alone at night, I suppose.”

Bixby didn’t understand. “At the lake house, all you ever wanted was to be alone,” he said. Then he frowned. “Is there something you don’t like about the house? Aren’t you happy here?”

“No, no,” he said. “It’s not that. The lake house, it was so just so small. I could always see I was the only . . . the only person there.”

Bixby regarded him for a moment. He felt afraid even to ask. “It’s fine,” he said, finally.

A few minutes later, the clacking began. Bixby put a pillow over his head.

Now, each time he does it, it’s the same: he’ll invariably stand in the doorway, arms crossed defensively, and ask, “You don’t mind, do you?” But Bixby can tell what he means to say is, “I know it bothers you, but please say it doesn’t.”

And as long as he crosses his arms like that, as long as his eyes are filled with a plea for understanding, Bixby will say, “It’s fine.”
But as the months pass, Endeavour’s eyes look less wary and his cheekbones less sharp.

And Bixby knows that there will come a night when Endeavour will lug the typewriter upstairs, and ask, “You don’t mind do you?” And Bixby will toss a pillow at him and say, “Take that noisy thing downstairs, for God’s sake.”

And Endeavour will simply laugh, the laugh that sounds like the water lapping at the dock back in Oxfordshire.

He doesn’t know when that day will come. But he knows it will. And Bixby knows how to wait.

He’s never told Endeavour this, because he knows that he’d turn red and shrug it off. But he’s the bravest person that Bixby has ever known.

Bixby knows that when people look at him, they see a success. He knows that he has the charm to pull of whatever he sets his mind to. But deep down, he is afraid, has always been afraid.

It’s the fear shared by many successful men: If you lose everything, who will you be? If you lose everything, who will you have?

But Endeavour was proof positive that there was always life to be found beyond that fear.

The thing you dreaded most, might, indeed, happen. Life may course completely out of your control. You might be left with nothing. But that doesn’t mean it has to be the end of the story.

Bixby looks down and considers Endeavour’s sleeping face. In the morning light, his red-gold waves resemble nothing so much as the soft feathers of phoenix wings. At that’s just what he is. A daily reminder that it’s possible to rise again from the ashes.

Ah. A mythical reference. How he’d laugh at Bixby for that.

But it’s true. Bixby’s life has had its struggles, yes, but it’s been a steady, upwards climb. Endeavour had done many times something he has yet to do once: he’s remade his life once, twice and then again.

Sweetheart, haven’t you even begun to pack your things? Your father will be here any minute….

I’m sorry Devvy. You’ll just never understand me. Henry’s the only one who will ever understand me . . .

Endeavour Morse, I’m arresting you for the murder of Chief Constable Rupert Standish….

Poor old Pagan, now you’ll know why we found it so frightfully amusing when you became a detective. You won’t take it so personally now, will you?

Bixby loves everything about Endeavour’s poems except the title he gave to his book. After-comers Cannot Guess The Beauty Been. In the end, he took the title not from one of his Greeks or Romans, but from a late Victorian of all things—it’s a phrase from a poem by Hopkins about the desolation left behind by the felling of a row of poplar trees.

The phrase might be true about a grove of trees, Bixby thinks. But sometimes he worries that it’s something Endeavour is saying about himself. And it isn’t true, he wants to tell him. It isn’t so at all. Sometimes the beauty that survives the disaster is all the more breathtaking, all the more
lovely.

But he suspects that, as Endeavour once shouted at Tony, that’s something he’ll have to figure out for himself.

Endeavour stirs and his eyes slip open, not wide and wary, but slivers of forget-me-not blue.

He yawns. “You’re going to be late,” he says. “I hung your suit out for you last night.”

“Late?” Bixby asks. “Late for what?”

But Endeavour’s eyes close and he’s again out for the count.

The light is brighter now, shining directly in Bixby’s face. He should be getting up.

But late? What did Endeavour mean? He’s been coming and going so much of late he can scarcely remember what day it is. But if Endeavour hung out his suit for him, there must be something that he’s forgotten.

Bixby rubs his eyes and stretches. Coffee, he thinks, that’s the answer. And a look over his appointment book, obviously.

As he goes out through the bedroom and into the sitting room, he passes a large wardrobe that spans the wall between two large windows. On the door of the wardrobe, his suit is all hung out for him.

“Ah,” he says, with a glance at the tie hanging across the shoulder of the jacket. “Blue,” he says. “It must be Wednesday.”

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