How Long We Were Fool'd
by iloveyoudie

Summary

As Morse fetched his bag and limped towards the waiting vehicle, Max wondered how many more times in his life he’d have to watch the man walk away from him.

**direct continuation of Song of Myself**
"Debryn."

Max was hunched over the kitchen counter, sleeves up and a smudge of flour on his cheek as the phone rang. He hadn't the hands to check who it was so he'd answered blind.

'Debryn,' came a woman's voice, deepened in mockery of his own, 'My brother doesn't do proper hullo's anymore?'

The doctor lit up with a chuckle, "Hullo Sarah. Sorry, I've got my hands full on this end and I couldn't see the ID."

'Yes, yes party prep. One of these years you'll come out to the country to ring in the new year. Like you used to.'

Max wiped his hands on a towel and checked that the oven timer was set properly as he slid the last of the desserts in.

"I saw the lot of you at Christmas. You know I'm on call," He was almost always on call, and even if he wasn't, he'd tell his sisters that he was, "Besides, I wouldn't have to find excuses for baking this much if someone didn't send so many bloody apples. It's still just me here, by myself," Max said dryly.

The doctor gave the first floor a last once over even if it would be a while before anyone arrived. His holiday decor still lingered, fairy lights around the mantle, garlands and bangles and baubles here or there. Max enjoyed the holidays, if only as an excuse to entertain and to bring a small bit of festivity into his home. He liked the lights and the jovial air the season brought. It was also a reliable date to see his family, a steadfast event that freed him up for the other 364 days of the calendar year. If Max hosted his family at Christmas and his friends on the New Year then he fulfilled his annual obligation to socialize with all of them at least once.

'I can continually hope you'll not be alone, Max,' He stared at the ceiling a moment in a silent bid for strength as his sister went on, 'But I also know you've got your posh Oxford crowd. And the hospital people and all those good looking police around.'

"I've made as best a running repair as I can," Max tried to stay close, half jogging to keep the pace with Strange as he helped escort Morse out of the Coke Norris house, "But you really need to go to the hospital."

Morse reached out and curled an arm around Max's shoulders for further support down the last few steps. They were difficult judging by the hisses and grimaces, "I haven't got time."

The doctor wanted to shake him, wanted to stop him, but was more overwhelmed with the relief that he was up and walking at all. When Strange had called and told him there were three shot...
Max didn't even remember driving here. He was sure it took longer than it should have, time distending with dark dread, and he could still feel the tingle in his palms from the vice grip he'd had on the steering wheel the entire way.

Did the stubborn bloody man know just how close that bullet came to hitting a major artery? Was he counting his blessings at all that it had passed clean through? This wasn't a slash in the dark. This wasn't strategically superficial. This hadn't been a clever message or a warning. This had been attempted murder. A gun had been pointed at him and been fired to kill.

Under a scattered swirl of snowflakes, Max didn't even have a moment to ask. He couldn't shake him. He couldn't stop him. Max had two other bodies to worry about and no freedom or time to press further into where the constable was off to on a wing and a prayer. All the doctor could do was watch as Morse was shuffled into Inspector Thursday's Jaguar, shut up on the passenger side, and whisked away.

'Aunt Sarah, is that Uncle Max?' He heard another voice come through the background and then the phone being shuffled, 'Happy New Year, Uncle Max.'

"Hullo, Margie. Happy New Year," Max checked the clock and pulled his sleeves down. He still had to shower and dress and then, once the hour was nigh, start putting out the food.

'Please, Uncle Max. Just Marge now. Even Margaret I'll take but I abhor Margie,' She sounded supremely belaboured by him and had given him the same lecture, near verbatim, at Christmas dinner but it was always worth it to wind her up. Wasn't that what uncles were for? Every little thing was the end of the world to a twenty-something year old.

"Well I suppose you ought to start just calling me Max then, haven't you, Marge?" He said wryly. She groaned.

'Have a good party, alright? One of these years you'll let me come and meet all your friends,' She'd asked him a dozen times. The answer was obvious and ever the same.

"And that year is not this. Have a good night with the family," his voice dropped, "Or do a runner with your friends."

Marge gave a conspiring laugh on the other end of the line.

"Give your mum my love. Where is she, by the way?"

'Off getting Da' from the train. Oh! Gotta go, someone's texting.' The phone was clearly passed off once more as Max headed up to his impending shower.

Sarah again, 'Listen, Max, I don't want to keep you. Just calling to give our love and say Happy New Year. Trying to talk to you on the hour will be a hellscape.'

"It always is. Say Happy New Year to everyone there as well, alright? Have Anne call me tomorrow if she's up to it and pass my compliments on to your wife."
'HONEY, MAX SENDS HIS LOVE!' Max winced away from the phone, 'She sends hers too. She said she emailed you that recipe you asked for.'

"Oh, ta! Listen, I've got to go. Love you."

'Love you too, Max. Have a good time.'

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At Christmas he sent out a group text.

It was genuine well wishing, out to the SOCO crew and the usual coppers, Strange and Jakes and Thursday.

And Morse.

Max hadn't heard word from him since he'd gone off home but that wasn't odd. He wasn't the type of man who required constant contact. He'd found out about Morse's father's ill health from Strange only moments after they'd put him in the car and he'd gone. Max had texted him later when he had a moment with the polite offer of help if he needed anything. When news came back a few days later with the worst, that his father had passed, Max had sent another with his condolences. He didn't receive an answer to either message but felt no offense. If he knew Morse, the man wanted his Oxford life kept as far away from his home life as possible.

When he'd hit send on the group message, regardless of the good holiday intentions, he could practically see Morse's annoyed twitching every time the phone went off with a new response. With each ding of 'Happy Christmas' or 'Merry Merry!', with each back and forth of who was doing what, who was in town, who was working, and who wanted to have a drink, Max imagined the tense line of Morse's jaw and his fingers rubbing against one another with agitation. He could feel his frustration all the way from Lincolnshire and wondered how long before he muted it or fumbled at trying to remove himself from the group.

The doctor wondered, with each irritating ding, if Morse's mind would inadvertently drift to him.

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"Debryn."

'Shame I didn't call a few minutes earlier. I could've had the full monty, eh?' The slightly reedy voice on the line chuckled and Max realized he answered a video call while still damp and wrapped in a dressing gown after his shower.

"Why do you insist on video, Jerome?" Max had just finished shaving and was currently running a comb through his hair. The wavier it got, the closer to a haircut he knew himself to be.

'I was hoping to catch what you were wearing tonight, fashion icon that you are,' Jerome continued even though Max snorted derisively, 'But this is just as good. Not the best angle, of course. Are you losing weight? You look ravishing.'
Max gave the camera an acidic stare. If he'd lost any weight it was sheer coincidence or stress.

'Maybe you and I should give it a go after all these years. Even if I'm not your type and you're not mine - by a mile. One of those pacts you know. If we both aren't married by the time we're fifty..' 

Max pursed his lips and ran his hands over his face in the mirror to make sure he didn't miss any spots shaving. Then his hands through his hair with the minimal amount of pomade to keep it in shape. Satisfied, he picked up the phone and moved down the hall. He didn't much care that the camera was pointed at the floor. He clearly was just going to let Jerome ramble on until he got to his point.

"Dicky bow," Max dropped his phone on the dresser and moved to the closet, "That's what I'm wearing."

'Ha. Ha. Listen,' Jerome's tone shifted, much more serious but nothing dire. Here it was, the real information he called to impart, 'I'm bringing a date if that's alright with you.'

"Why wouldn't it be alright with me? It's not some student of yours angling for a first is it?" He was only half joking.

'Now, Max, that's the sort of comment I'm worried about! You can't be careful enough these days with allegations being thrown about. He's not a student. Not anymore. My position here isn't exactly tenuous but people are always looking for something to dig up. They're like bloody vultures circling. Listen, it's just a night out, alright?'

"I'll behave. And you know I won't tolerate nonsense in my house, Jerome," Max made a non-committal sound as he picked through his shoes, his ties and shirts.

'Yes, of course but I'm just asking for a bit of leeway here. Won't you have a date, old chap? You couldn't con even one of those residents or those muscular young nurses for an evening?'

"I'm sure if I needed a date, I wouldn't have to con someone," Max picked a bold patterned shirt and plain tie, "I'll have my hands full with the rest of you. Besides, you know I don't date."

The line beeped with another incoming call.

"Jerome it's my other line. I'll see you later. Oh it's Dotty," Max had selected his top heavy tortoise frames and adjusted them as he hovered over the phone to answer.

'Tenner she asks what you're wearing."

"GOODBYE JEROME," Max said louder as his finger slid across the screen, "Dorothea, how can I help you?"

'Max,' She sounded very impatient, 'What are you wearing tonight?'

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_The week following was Christmas quiet for Max and lucky as much because pathology was low staffed while people worked out their various returns from holidays. Max had been catching up on long ignored paperwork when his phone buzzed._
M [ are you free? ]

The text gave him pause, though he wasn't sure why exactly. There was no overwhelming excitement in the message. If anything, Max had trepidation.

[ working. ]
[ are you back? ]

Thoughts of paperwork were fleeing quickly.

M [ I'm outside.]

Max snorted and typed a reply. Trepidation was replaced with his own stubbornness.

[ and i'm in my office ]

M [ I just need a minute ]
[ come down.]

Max's glasses bobbed on the edge of his fingers as he rubbed his tired eyes. The parts of him that were pleased to hear from Morse were warring resistantly against giving in to his every beck and call. Max was a man who liked to feel he was in control. He liked to give orders, not the other way round. But this was Morse who he'd last seen with a hole through his leg and no time to talk. He would be lying to himself more grandly than usual to say he hadn't spared the other man a thought or worry. Max fetched his coat and as an afterthought he grabbed a parcel from his bag, something that he'd been carting around since he'd picked it up weeks ago on a whim.

He found Morse perched on the edge of a bench outside the hospital's sliding doors. His knuckles were stark white where they curled around the edge of the wood and he looked so taught and tense that Max was sure a loud noise might make him skitter. He was pale and drawn, his strawberry blonde waves dulled to the shade of wet sand, and he very nearly disappeared into the battered leather jacket he clutched tightly around himself against the cold. It looked an inch too short at the waist and when his hands plucked out his earbuds, the same in the sleeves. Brought from home maybe? Seeing Max brought the slightest lip quirk of acknowledgment to his lips and Morse rose prim and straight without a moment's hesitation.

"Morse," Max couldn't help looking concerned as the other man limped towards him with only the slightest grimace, "Did you have that looked at?"

"Oh," Morse blinked as if the wound were the last thing on his mind and Max asking was a surprise, "I did. High praise on your needlepoint," He tried another small smile, "I'll be alright."

The compliment didn't make him feel any better and the battered looking duffle next to the bench told Max that this visit would not be lasting one.

"Leaving again?"

"Been assigned to light duty. I'll be doing records or something. On attachment at County until they deem me recovered," Morse rolled his eyes in his usual way. It was surprisingly reassuring.

"I'm sorry to hear about your father." It was awkward sounding, Max knew it. He was no good at sympathy. He was the man behind the glass waiting for an ID on a body, not the shoulder they clung to and cried on.

Morse didn't say much to that. He simply nodded. The tight line of his jaw said enough, the way his
eyes fell to his feet, the inhale of breath. Max knew immediately that Morse had been there. He'd seen his father go. What was it like for a man with necrophobia to watch someone pass in front of his eyes? Was there a difference when the death was natural? When you knew them? When was the line crossed, between living and the discomfort of death?

More importantly, how was he coping?

"I missed the sergeants exam.." Morse said distractedly, steering the conversation elsewhere. Annoyance seemed to come more naturally to him than anything more complex, "So I suppose I'll be looking towards another year of general duties."

The wind picked up and both men bristled against it. They stepped instinctively closer to one another, huddling nearer to the warm hospital vestibule. Max wanted to go in, sit down and have a coffee, anything to put some color into Morse's pale cheeks. He looked so very tired.

"Surely, Inspector Thursday wouldn't let that happen."

"I don't need him to fight my battles for me," Morse snorted and look out to the street as his hands pressed further into his pockets and pulled his small jacket tighter across his thin back.

Max didn't know what to say to that but he certainly hadn't meant for it to strike up a defensive reaction.

Fortunately, Morse seemed to sense it and sighed in a sorry way, "I wanted to ask you a favor. If you don't mind.. I.." Asking for favors seemed to come natural when they were impulsive accidents, but deliberate requests seemed much harder.

"I seem to always be doing you favors," Max's brows rose in slight admonishment, but it wasn't a refusal and there was no real weight behind the words, "What do you need?"

Morse produced a key from deep in his pockets and held it out, "Check up on my flat for me? Rent's alright. Direct withdraw but, I don't know, grab the post perhaps? I'd feel better if it was you," He smiled thin, "Hard enough to get the place. Don't want to lose it."

The key was warm when it passed into Max's hand after his agreement. Warmer, he was sure, than Morse looked at the moment.

A battered Ford with a young brunette behind the wheel pulled up. She looked out and waved. Max wondered idly if this was the sister but said nothing and waved back out of instinctive manners. She was a cute girl but he couldn't see an immediate resemblance from this distance.

"That'll be Joyce," Morse nodded over his shoulder and moved for his bag.

"Oh-" Max felt the weight of the parcel he'd brought along and produced it from the pocket of his coat. It was wrapped in only the paper bag it came in.

"What's this?" There was a hint of panic in Morse's eyes, "I don't have-"

"It's not like that-" Max waved dismissively and held it out until it was taken. He'd found a copy of Leaves of Grass in a second hand shop hidden under a hand-knit tea cosy in the likeness of a tawny owl. It was old and used - a bit beaten up - but bound in faded green book cloth and with a tasteful design of crossed stalks and sheaves. It had that particular allure of all old books, a certain look and smell. Traces of previous owners lingered in penciled underlines and margin notes that were rare enough to give character but not be a detriment to the volume. He'd bought it for Morse without a second thought. The second guessing came later, when he'd already got it home and he
realized it coincided too neatly with Christmas, "Consider it a replacement. I know it's missing from your collection now. It'll give you something to read while you are gone."

Morse slid the book from the paper bag, gave it a slow glance over, and gave Max a sudden genuine smile, "Thanks."

And as he finally fetched his bag and Morse limped towards the waiting vehicle, Max wondered how many more times in his life he'd have to watch the man walk away from him.

Dotty and Jerome arrived first. As most good friends did they'd plucked most of the finishing touches out of his hands and insisted he relax until the guests finally rolled in.

"You alright, Max? You seem…"

"Off?" Dotty supplied.

"Out-of-joint?" Jerome said helpfully.

"Discombobulated."

"Ohhh I like that..."

Max pinned each of them with a momentary stare and an unamused lift of brows, "I'm perfectly fine and if either of you asks one more time you'll be hosting the party next year."

"Not in my flat," Dotty huffed, "How about your rooms at college, Jerome?"

"Oh yes the porter will love that. Oh!" His phone buzzed, "This'll be Harry."

Harry was the date. Harry ended up being rather nice. Bookish, taller, friendly enough but clearly ill prepared for the level of piss taking that was common among their group.

The party, as it got going, ended up being a success. Most of his friends came every year but Max had a put upon obligation to worry over who was going to make it, who was bringing a guest, having enough food, having enough booze and making sure they all slept somewhere safe at the end of the night.

Dotty, it turned out, had a put upon obligation to make sure he always had alcohol in his hand.

"Max, tell me something," She sunk down beside him on the patio seating. They still had about an hour until the countdown and everyone was well on their way to regretting some of their decisions in the morning. Max had needed some air once things hit their stride. He was already, in a small way, looking forward to it all being over and done with. As much as he enjoyed his momentary flashes of sociability, the rest of him was content to be left alone for time immemorial.

He was feeling fuzzy and warm, and left on his own, a bit aimlessly melancholy. Max grasped for gossip instead of anything significant, "I think Jerome's Harry may be a bit more keen than Jerome is himself."

"Well you're not wrong," She took out a cigarette, held it between rouged lips (MAC probably - Lady Danger by the shade - his brain supplied pointlessly), and lit it, "But that's not what I meant.
Give me some news. What's going on at the hospital these days?"

He was drunk enough to take a drag when she offered the smoke to him. He hadn't smoked seriously since school, "You do know what confidentiality is don't you?"

She rolled her head in mild disgust and crossed her legs, "My usual police contact is MIA and It's beastly writing about city politics. I can't bear it. I never thought I'd wish more for a crime spree or a serial killer." Dotty slouched and rolled her head to rest on his shoulder, "Let's just start that food blog we talked about."

"Only if I can do the eating and you do all the writing." He chuckled.

The last revelers were escorted out by their sober handlers and into Ubers, carpools, or had wandered off to the nearest pub and Max was left on his stoop to watch the neighborhood children who were still allowed to be awake set off firecrackers in the street. The mess could wait and he was swirling the last bit of whiskey around in his glass, the end of a bottle he'd been working on for the second half of the evening, before he embarked upon the daunting journey of climbing the stairs even if the promise of bed would make it all worth it.

The last thing he expected was his phone to ring.

This time he checked who it was.

It took him a moment for his vision to unblur, another for the information to sink through the layers of pillowy warmth that his brain was floating in, and then another still for the disbelief.

"Morse?"

'Hullo, Max..' he sounded alright. Tentative but not too awkward.

Max's brain then jumped to the first possible reason that he could be calling, "There isn't a murder is there? I'm not-" sober? Prepared for that? Able to stitch you up if you've been shot? Did he say sober?

'No,' Morse actually seemed to laugh, 'I'm on attachment, remember?'

"Right, brilliant..." Max rubbed his face, feeling very sluggish and stupid. It was late. He was tired.

He was very drunk.

'Party go well?'

"Yes, everyone's off now," Max stood from the step and made his way inside. Somehow this felt private. He was very unaccustomed to having a normal straightforward conversation with the man and in his inebriation he was lacking the articulation to be more clever than delivering straightforward answers.

'Sorry I couldn't make it.'

"You're alright. Other things to worry about."
'Strange and Jakes go?'

Max squinted, "No. Why ever would they? I didn't invite them."

'Oh,' Morse sounded surprised and amused, perhaps only now realizing he had been the only one from CID who had been extended the invitation.

Max had a pretty discerning guest list, "How's the leg?"

'Better. Limp's almost gone.'

Inside, away from the ruckus of revelry, Max became aware that Morse seemed to be responding slower, like he was selecting his words with much more care. He was trying hard to make this conversation go smoothly and his voice was thicker and looser than usual.

'Get a new years kiss?'

"A whole party full, in fact," Max said with a chuckle though his mind had naturally gone elsewhere. There were certainly preferred kisses he could have gotten.

Morse was smiling, he could hear it, 'Good.'

"Did you celebrate tonight?" Max shut the lights on the first floor and made sure the back door was locked. He took the last swig from his glass, downing it, and hissing an 'Ah'.

'I.. was at a pub. For a while. Left before midnight though.'

Max's phone dinged with a text and he pulled it from his ear to check, only to laugh.

"Morse.. are you drunk?"

'What?'

"You just texted me a blurry selfie of the side of your face."

'No- I mean yes. A bit. That's not what I meant to- ' There was a light fumbling sound, 'I can't work these bloody phone cameras..'

The phone dinged again. This time a slightly less blurry photo of a bottle of Bell's and the copy of *Leaves of Grass* Max had given him. Debryn was struck with a warm and uncontrollable rush of affection.

"A typical Morse night in then, hm? I'll bet your bookmark's a crossword too."

'It is actually- ' Morse, in his inebriation, sounded like Max had done some sort of wizardry to predict such a thing.

Max chuckled again. He'd made it to his bed and sat, which turned into him flopping flat on his back while he talked. He could feel the relief sink into his body and was sure he wouldn't be getting up again.

'Right,' Morse realized his predictability with a little amused huff.

Max could almost feel the moment the other man began thinking. Probably furrowing his brow now, selecting words carefully, wondering if he'd misjudged the purpose of the call completely, wondering how he was supposed to dislodge from it. Max wasn't bothered, not with the detached
cotton insulation of drunkenness and the comfort of laying down working it's way through his weary body. As he was feeling right now, he found it all rather fascinating.

Morse finally just said, 'I should let you go.'

"I am knackered..." Max admitted with a sigh as his eyes closed.

'Get some rest. Happy New Year, Max.'

"Happy New Year. Good night, Morse. It was good to hear from you." It was. Really.

'G'night Max.'

Chapter End Notes

I like this chapter. I like creating social circles and families out of loose framework provided by the shows.

In Inspector Morse (The Last Bus to Woodstock) we meet Max's niece Marge and her husband. In fact these are the only scenes with Max we see him outside of him working on a case. They also mention a 'maiden aunt' Sarah who always sends him apples.

In my version he has 2 sisters - Anne (+ husband) who is Marge's mother, and Sarah (+ wife) who lives in the country and sends apples. The de Bryn's parents are deceased.

Also I think we have all always wanted Max and Dorothea Frazil to be friends.. so why the hell not. I also really like Jerome Hogg from his few scenes. He is both in Endeavour (Coda) and Inspector Morse (Greeks Bearing Gifts). He also never gets murder nor kills anyone - success!

So here he is, also a friend of Max's. No, no one knows they all know Morse. Not yet anyway.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Miss Oxfordshire parade was only a minor inconvenience for Debryn as he weaved his vehicle towards the call-out. The report had been made immediately and from what he'd been told, a meter maid had been issuing tickets when the victim plummeted into the roof of the car beside her. She was there, bundled in a fleece blanket and sniffing over a cup of steaming coffee when he arrived. The rest of SOCO was already milling about by the time Max hopped out of his Rover.

"Hello, Doc," Constable Strange stood down from a formal and intimidating 'guard' pose to greet him. He'd heard that Strange hadn't passed his sergeants exam but the man never volunteered the information so Max hadn't asked, "Body's over there."

"Thank you, Legolas, for your keen elven eyes," Max said with pointed sarcasm. He didn't need to be directed to the very obvious corpse pancaked and bleeding on top of a nearby sedan. Especially not while it was swarming with his team.

Strange never seemed much phased by the doctor's corpse-side manner, but before Debryn got too far away he called out to him, "He's back today."

"Hm?"

"Morse," Jim looked pleased at the very least, "He's back today."

"Ah," He had actually known. Morse had texted him several days ago. Nothing more than a short exchange that he was back, a thanks for getting his post, and Max saying no trouble. Hardly a memorable or groundbreaking interaction after several months of minimal to no contact following their New Years Eve conversation. Thankfully he was a man of zero expectations, "Well then, send him along when he gets here."

Max dealt with the corpus first and managed what he could before the detectives arrived. He eventually moved into the building and up to the roof where he awaited the delayed CID emissary. The doctor took a look over the edge to work out the distance and body position from above when he noticed the familiar black Jaguar parked next to his own vehicle. In the distance he could hear the sound of the crowds and the thumping of pre-recorded music from the parade route. Up this high, sound carried much better than it did street-side. It was an interesting duality - celebrations of beauty only blocks away from such a grisly death.

Max heard the crunch of footsteps behind him only seconds before he was joined at the roof's edge. Morse's familiar sandy head leaned with him, shoulder to shoulder, to get a good look down at the body but the other man immediately blanched and swayed backwards.

"Off heights are we?"

Morse looked predictably irritated that Max had pointed it out, which would always give the doctor no end of pleasure, "Lately, funnily enough," and he moved back towards the deceased man's belongings scattered behind them in the gravel.

Max noticed that Morse looked thinner, tired, and not any better than he had before he'd gone off to County. There was a lifelessness that hung like an albatross around his neck. It was unnatural, oppressed, like a caged animal and Max didn't like it.
He moved to join him, "Not how I'd my own quietus make, but he wouldn't've known much about it. Instantaneous. Dead before his mind had a chance to catch up to the rest of him."

"Must be nice," Morse murmured so low it was almost lost. Max said nothing and watched the detective pulled on a pair of gloves so he could sift through the bits and bobs between them, "What do you make of these?"

"Personal effects, glasses and the like, are commonly removed in suicides. Automatic gesture. And of course with the added benefit, in this instance, that he wouldn't have seen what was coming towards him," Max crouched opposite Morse and as each item was gone over, he accepted and bagged it.

"Cause?" Morse looked up at him and this close, he could really see the exhaustion in the other man's eyes. Red rimmed, glassy, hooded. But he was here and that was something.

"More than the Reichenbach fall? Something of a salmagundi. Does multiple catastrophic injuries do you well enough to be getting on with? Chapter and verse, of course, only once I really dig in."

Morse made the usual face of disgust, a wrinkle of the nose and a sneer, and Max realized very suddenly how much more himself he seemed in a state of casual dismay, and then equally as suddenly, realized how good it was to see him again face to face. The phone call on New Year's Eve had been a nice surprise, but the last time they'd spoken before that he'd been freshly shot and just lost his father. Morse certainly had a way of putting the people around him through the emotional ringer and Max knew he wasn't the only one who had been concerned.

"Nothing suspicious?" Morse interrupted his thoughts.

"Only you," Max couldn't help a smile, "Morse."

The detective looked at him as if he was unsure whether to take offense, but seeing Max's smile, he let one of his own ghost across his lips.

"You look thinner," Max said lightly, less doctor, more man, "What were they feeding you at County?"

"Mockery and humiliation mostly," Morse looked away, his smile fell and the spell was broken. He stood and pulled the rubber gloves off.

"You were shot," Max finished up with the evidence bags, "What's there to be humiliated about?"

"Shot by a house wife," Morse murmured.

"A multiple murderer," Max said much more plainly.

In the distance, the low musical presence of the parade was rocked by several loud, sharp pops that cracked and echoed resoundingly across the city's stones. Max's head rose, trying to figure out if they were gunshots or firecrackers and by the resulting commotion he had to guess the former. His eyes darted to Morse curiously, only to see that the man had curled into himself at the sound. His eyes were wide and staring, he was more pale than seemed possible, and before the doctor could say anything, Morse had spun on his heel.

"I'll see you later for your results," He said over his shoulder.

"Three o'clock," Max shouted at his retreating back before he could fully disappear, "Sharp!"
Morse arrived early and hovered uncomfortably on the edges of the room while Max finished up with man he had learned was a dentist named Meeker. The cause of death could have been a myriad of things considering the fall left him looking like he'd gone several rounds in the octagon. More puzzling was the poor state of his teeth, considering his profession.

Puzzling, yes, but not impossible and also not Max's department.

Morse seemed back to normal, as normal as he could ever be while within visual distance of a corpse. At the very least he had his color and his spine back now that they were down from the rooftops.

Acrophobia. Another one for the file... Max thought with a smirk, remembering how he'd riled the other man up after his slashing run-in with Mason Gull months ago. Rattling off his laundry list of phobias had certainly distracted Morse from the pain.

"Did a black notebook come in with him? There was one at the scene, on top of the car, with the body," Morse turned just as Max covered Mr. Meeker up and a colleague arrived to receive the clipboard he was handing off to finish up.

"I'm a pathologist," Max stripped off his gloves, "If something's been pinched I would call the police."

Morse looked frustrated with the answer but wordlessly followed, hands in pockets and silent as a ghost when Max was finally moving out through the morgue doors and heading towards his office. It was hardly an impressive space and his desk looked much like the one at home, a mess of files stuffed in and around a computer, but there was a small sofa if he needed a nap and a few heavily shaded windows that looked out into the hall. Morse closed the door behind him and gave the surrounding area only a quick sweeping glance.

When Max turned to him, lips parted to say something, words became moot when he found himself unexpectedly crowded up against the edge of the desk. Morse pressed close and slid his thin arms around Max's waist to sneak cool fingers under the hem of his scrubs. Max found himself being kissed, a warm clumsy nuzzle and soft breath against his mouth, and Max found himself kissing back and, oh he'd missed him hadn't he, and the doctor was burying a hand into tawny curls as he opened up to it and their tongues met hungrily. Morse tasted the same, down to the hint of whiskey, and it ignited a mighty need and a flood of emotion that momentarily overruled reason.

The doctor's sensible mind clawed desperately through the needy ache, even as the kiss deepened and he found himself perched on the corner of the desk with Morse pressed between his thighs. Common sense prodded over and over like a pricking needle until the insulating bubble burst and with it came a wave of paranoia and annoyance. Max broke the kiss with a small sound and pressed a bracing hand to Morse's chest.

"Morse, I'm at work," Which was not as convincing an argument when it was murmured breathlessly against the other's lips. He'd already been kissing him. Thoroughly. Gratefully. Greedily. Even now he had a leg curled around Morse to hold him flush and a hand carding through the curls at the back of his neck. He was entirely defeating the efforts of the part of him that seemed like it wanted to push him away.
"There's no one around," Morse watched his face, smirking a bit, and ran his hands over the thighs that he was pressed between. "I checked. And I'm also working if you hadn't noticed."

"Yes and I thought," Max found himself being kissed again, soft and light, and it rippled through him like electricity, "we had," his complaints felt ineffective between each lovely press of lips, "an understanding."

"So did I," Morse was cradling his jaw now, his fingers curling around an ear to brush over the short shorn silvering hair. Max's body practically hummed when Morse kissed the corner of his mouth enticingly.

"To keep work at work. And everything else at home?" Max huffed and glanced to the door and his shaded office windows. There was nothing to see. No audience. No one lurking waiting to burst in. Still, there had to be boundaries.

Morse's brow furrowed and face drew back, hands slipping away, "More that I wanted to spend time together. Go out..."

Max's hands moved only to hold Morse's thin hips (so thin) and he couldn't help rolling his head hopelessly back, "Well, yes, but Morse, that date of ours was missed months ago. This is work."

"It's not like I could help it!" The other's voice raised in annoyance and he took a step back as if he had been very ungraciously rejected. He stuffed his hands into his pockets again, hackles raising as his frustration flared.

"I know," Max realized very abruptly how much of the unsaid between them could potentially be a problem. He also didn't know why the other man was getting angry so quickly. He hadn't turned him away, he was just asking for caution. Professionalism. This shouldn't be an issue or debatable. Why couldn't anything just be easy between them?

Yet his body still hummed and where the other had been standing, warm and close, now felt like vast emptiness. He still wanted him and Morse, it seemed, shared the interest. Maybe with some down time they could talk instead of jumping straight into bickering anytime one of them was caught off guard or spoke off the cuff. His office just wasn't the place for heart to hearts and being had on his desk in the middle of the day wasn't exactly talking - as much as the fantasy of such a thing might be entertained, "Why don't you come by later?"

Morse clucked a petulant dismissive sound, "Not while I'm on a case."

"Oh, but my office is good enough? For what exactly? A quick snog to make you feel better and then off on your way again?" It was Max's turn to raise his voice in offense. He slipped from the desk and stood up straight. This was a hospital. He had a respected position. He wasn't going to have a lover's spat with someone he couldn't even confirm to be that.

The man was infuriating.

"I just wanted to see you-" Morse muttered darkly, almost in disbelief this argument was even happening.

"And you've been back for days and could have called or come round at any time!" Max, it seemed, couldn't stem the whole of his frustration once he got going, "In fact, that would have been nice, you know. You've never been shy about it before."

There was a sharp bang in the hall, one of the big metallic doors had slammed shut. It surprised the both of them into silence but Morse jolted and shrink like he was going to retract into his own suit
like a turtle into its shell. He was white as a sheet again and his open mouth - opened to argue - had slammed shut as he swallowed thickly.

"Morse.." His volume dropped. What Max had noticed before, he now really saw. Morse wasn't alright at all. The man was shell shocked. He was grasping at normality to get through the day and throwing himself into his work and everything else with abandon. Including this, "Come by later."

"No," Morse suddenly sneered, "Don't."

He ran a hand through his hair in agitation and made for the door, "The case. I wouldn't want to cut into my work time with personal matters."

Max felt the words sink sourly in his gut to be so quickly turned against him.

"Call me," Morse said as an afterthought, "if that notebook turns up."

And he was gone.

He did call. After dinner. After his work notes were sorted. After he'd drank a half a bottle of very strong claret very quickly. He hadn't found the notebook but Max called anyway.

Morse didn't answer.

"Inspector Thursday," A day later, Max blinked in surprise to find the senior detective loitering outside his office door at the lunch hour. He didn't look like he'd waited long but Max was more surprised at the unexpected visit than anything else, "No bagman in tow?"

"No, Morse is off to London for a few inquiries. Something's been on my mind is all," Thursday waited until Max unlocked the door, "I thought we might have a word."

Max's immediate assumption was that Thursday was having some sort of medical emergency. A great many people seemed to think that if you had 'Doctor' before your name that it meant you were a walking, talking WebMD. Fred Thursday was not usually one of those people and in the years they had known one another he'd never once come around with a weird mole or mystery symptom that needed diagnosis, but there was always a first time for everything.

"You're acting rather formal, Fred," Max gestured to the small love-seat in his office for the other man to sit, "Something the matter?"

"Not with me, no," Thursday unbuttoned his suit coat and sat with a heaving sigh, "It's Morse."

_Of course it is.

"Since he's been back he's been jumpy, irritable, drinking hard stuff during working hours.." Thursday leaned forward, elbows resting on his widespread knees like an athletics coach watching a close game and worrying over his favorite player. "He's gun-shy. A car backfired and I thought
he'd leap out of his ruddy skin!"

"Passed his physical and interview with the examiner?" Max knew the answers. He also knew what Thursday was saying was true, but he had to ask the expected questions. He'd seen it with his own eyes twice. He'd tasted the liquor on his tongue. He should have questioned it instead of being swept up.

"In body. And I'm sure he knew well enough what answers they wanted to hear, clever sod," Thursday sat back again and ran a hand through his greying hair. He plucked out his cell phone and gave it a look, as if he were paranoid that it had misdialed and Morse was secretly listening in to every word, "I don't think he'll take kindly to any suggestion he speak to a therapist."

"No," Max agreed with a frown, "It sounds like symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Not a surprise considering the shooting followed so closely by the death of his father. The mind attaches things to one another, whether we like it or not. It's a difficult chain of events to be associated. Usually the effects aren't permanent, in simple cases. They work themselves out over time," Or they didn't. Sometimes they got worse and with Morse being prone to a myriad of fears who could tell which way he would go.

Thursday looked expectant. He brushed something invisible from his trouser knee and gave Max only a fleeting glance, "I thought maybe you could speak to him."

Max's immediate reaction was actually a small huffed laugh, "I'm not that kind of doctor."

"Not like that. As a friend," Thursday's dark eyes were probing him. Max hoped he never to be on the other side of an interrogation table from him.

"I'm not sure he wants to hear it from me. He has other friends..."

Thursday snorted, "You think he's going to let Jim Strange talk to him about anything deeper than girls and office gossip? He barely tolerated my piss poor attempts."

Max began to worry. It was a quiet nagging thing. He worried that Thursday knew more about he and Morse than he was letting on. Not that it was a problem. It would be a point of gossip, yes, but probably just a curiosity for most. But if he barely had a grasp on their confusing relationship, Max didn't want Fred Thursday or anyone else coming to their own conclusions.

"I know you watched his flat for him when he was away," Thursday sat back again and before Max could protest more he continued, "And that might mean nothing to a normal bloke but this is Morse. It means he trusts you."

'I don't like hospitals. Or-' 'Doctors?' 'You know what I mean.'

'It's Endeavour - my given name.'

'I'd feel better if it was you.'

Morse's key had been warm in his hand long after he'd disappeared into the beat up Ford, shooed his sister out of the driver's seat and driven away. He hadn't immediately attributed the request to trust. It was hard, with Morse, to tell where his trust or favor lay. Max had always thought that maybe the constable couldn't generally see the forest for the trees but here he was, not realizing what had been staring him in this face for months until Fred Thursday, of all people, had to tell him.

Whatever it was that they had with one another, even if it all fizzled into nothing but begrudging
camaraderie, somehow he'd secured Morse's trust. 

Unfortunately that revelation didn't make anything any easier to navigate or ease any of the discomfort with Morse's current state of mind.

"I'll call him," Max sighed in agreement and Thursday smiled small in appreciation, "But I can't promise anything. I'm on this Meeker file and you've got your robbery to deal with."

"Yes, I know and once Morse gets his teeth into something he's a right terror to himself as well as everyone else. He's running himself ragged finding crimes on every crumb, at this rate-" Thursday shook his head, looked at his phone again in mild paranoia, and then seemed to decided that idle gossip about his bagman wouldn't do.

"Thanks, Max," Thursday stood and dropped his phone into the front pocket of his coat before buttoning his jacket again, "I appreciate it."

That night he called, he told himself, because Thursday asked him to. He didn't need a half a bottle of wine and he didn't even wait until he arrived home. Max gave Morse a quick ring on his drive back from work.

This time the call was clicked off after the first ring and all he got was that familiar robotic voicemail greeting.

The group of detectives looked like a funeral procession under their black umbrellas with heads bowed as Max arrived for Frida Yelland's body.

"Gentlemen," He piped under the misty rain as he waited for the corpse to be brought up from under the college, "Hail hail, the gang's all here."

Superintendent Bright did not look pleased and Inspector Thursday gazed hard towards the bustle of activity without diverting his eyes. Jakes wouldn't dare smoke in front of their Chief while at a crime scene but he shuffled as if he was jonesing for it. Morse, Max dared a glance, looked like he'd been in a fight. Black eyes, a laceration across the nose, and looking even more tired and withdrawn than he had before.

Well, shit.

He couldn't allow himself more than a glance. No time to dwell. No time to wonder why he hadn't come round for a patch job. The body, wrapped in a shroud of flowery fabric, was finally being raised from below and Max bounced idly on his toes, "More than two of you lot get together and the body count increases exponentially, doesn't it? Which came first, the copper or the kill?"

Max felt their glares burn into his back with some small measure of satisfaction as he moved off to do his job.
The weather and the long day were hard on him and Max didn't even try to call Morse that night. He'd come home exhausted and showered and took to bed with barely a moment for a meal. His back had been screaming and wouldn't be ignored.

It was another full day before he heard a peep from anyone in CID. Results ended up emailed when no one came for them and their investigations, if they were going between Oxford and London, must have been dominating their time.

Not his department.

Jakes showed up a day later, late in the afternoon, with a jaunt in his step when Max asked, "I thought Morse was your errand boy these days?"

Jakes laughed low, "Got himself taken off the case and sent home, didn't he? Went and accused some don up at the college of murder and theft just as we caught the real thieves, with the goods in hand. Bright wasn't having it, especially when he got all stroppy about being wrong."

Jakes slapped down a file and took the one he was there for, "Looks like shit anyway, even if he won't talk about who beat him up. Shot off his mouth again, I bet."

"Sure he'll be fine, like a terrier that one. He's probably already got another suspect," Jakes laughed at that, waved the file and saluted with it, "Ta."

Max was scrolling through his recent calls for Morse's number before Jakes was even out of the building. He wasn't sure why and by the time he hit send and put the phone to his ear the doctor wasn't entirely sure what he was going to say.

'Morse,' the man answered and sounded tired, annoyed, terse.

'It's Max," He was positive Morse wouldn't have answered if he'd checked the ID first.

'Oh,' Morse didn't sound disappointed so much as glum, 'I don't suppose you found that notebook.'

"No," Max leaned back in his chair, "But you're off the case I hear so it wouldn't do you much good anyway."

'Oh, I don't need to hear it from you too,' Morse sounded disgusted again, 'What are you calling for then?'

Max closed his eyes to try and not let himself get riled. It was too easy to lash back at Morse's annoyance with his own, "I suppose it's a stretch for you to think I may just be checking in? Seeing how you are doing?"

'What do you think? Why don't you tell me how I'm doing, Max? You seem to be well informed on my state of affairs considering I was only sent home an hour ago. It's hardly work relevant for a pathologist.'

"Really Morse!" Max could feel a pounding pain starting behind his eyes after the shout and he took a deep breath. Max's mutter was acidic, "You're a fucking horror when things don't go your way."
'Don't go my way?!' Morse seemed headed towards a fever pitch and Max couldn't see where it had gotten out of control, or perhaps it never had been under any control at all.

He should have planned this better.

He shouldn't have called at all.

'There's still a killer out there and-' Morse just let out a frustrated growl.

Max rubbed his brow, "Morse-"

'Don't feed me lines, Max. I don't want to hear it. Don't ask me if I bloody ate or slept or whatever diagnosis on my condition you're stewing on-'

"Morse!" Max barked.

'WHAT?!

Debryn opened his eyes and sighed, "All of this is unnecessary. I was just concerned. I just wanted to check on you."

'Yes, well,' Morse paused, not sounding any less agitated, 'With all due respect, you can shove your concern. Goodbye.'

Morse hung up.

Max didn't call back.

Chapter End Notes

Obviously this is in and around Trove - S2E1

I hope you don't come here for the super expert and comprehensively accurate depiction of crime scene work by the police and forensic pathology. What you will continue to get from me is glossed over TV versions. XD

Also writing arguments is hard on my soul.
Morse's hand trembled as he hung up the phone and there was only a moment of silence as he stared at the screen. DR. MAX DEBRYN was emblazoned in blinking bold letters over the red call symbol a second longer before it disappeared to his home screen. Like a flash he let out a low howl of frustration and hurled his mobile into the bedding. He heard it bounce off the mattress and thud lightly against the wall as he gripped his own hair and trembled.

Morse didn't have a word for the intense feelings that had wound around his heart and woven through his rib cage like so many barbed vines. They squeezed with every failure. Frustration. Anger. Disappointment. Displacement. And now regret was burrowing, crawling through his veins like a slow acting poison after his conversation with Max. Normally he would compartmentalize or isolate, maybe even just drown it all in whiskey, but it was too much all at once. The failures of the past week had intertwined to become an overbearing and oppressive mess.

He felt foul. He was lost. He was completely ineffective and the worst part was that he couldn't even see where he'd gone wrong. The case was all in pieces in his head and he hadn't gotten a minute's rest to try and reshuffle the bits and fit them back together.

If only he could focus… If he concentrated… If he removed the robbery from the equation...

A knock on the door interrupted and surprised him and Morse was wound so tightly that he jolted and fell out of the chair he'd been perched on like a schoolboy put into a corner. He scrambled up guiltily, protecting himself against non-existent witnesses, and swiped frustrated moisture from his eyes. With nothing else to do for it, the over-sized grey t-shirt and a maroon jumper were pulled on in a sad attempt to make himself look like an operational human being before he opened the door.

"Everything alright, Morse? I saw you rush in like the devil was on your heels when I was going for a run. Thought you could do with a coffee and a sandwich," It was Monica Hicks, his neighbor. She was dressed for a workout in a pullover and leggings and trainers, and her wireless headset was resting around her collar. She looked around his messy flat as if she expected to see someone else, "I heard a yell and a bit of banging."

"Yes, I'm-" Morse's eyes darted over her, her concern, her kindness, she was beautiful and then he was just as easily seeing Frida Yelland as she was in her photo - also beautiful and now forever static. Monica was saying she brought him food and it blurred somewhere in his ears with Max saying he was concerned and then like a static buzz it disappeared into Thursday telling that sometimes after a shooting...

Monica was looking at him expectantly and he realized he'd stopped listening mid-sentence and sunk into his own head again. Get it together, Morse.

"You needn't gone through the trouble-" Morse felt emotion burn the backs of his eyes again and breathed deep like the oxygen were slipping from the room. He shivered as he turned back to his flat to moved himself to the ill-fated chair.

When he'd returned from his duty assignment at County, Monica and he nearly collided around a
corner. She was in her work uniform and he’d nearly dropped his duffel as he fished for his keys.

"Oh, shit, sorry!" She scrambled lightly as he bumbled.

"Oh no, my fault. I wasn't... Too many keys," Morse had flashed a quick smile, not really looking until he recognized her from the bar that first night with Max, "Monica, right?"

She cocked her head, "Have we.. met?"

"Oh. No, well I mean, I know Max. Dr. Debryn," That at least had her relaxing, "We bumped into one another once at a pub. You and some other girls were with him."

"Oh," She smiled a bit, "I'm sorry I don't actually remember."

"It was hardly memorable," He lied with a small smile, "I'm Morse."

"Just Morse?" She inquired predictably.

"Detective Constable Morse."

"OH! His policeman friend that was moving into the building, yeah?" She took his hand for a shake and smiled and Morse again admired the curve of her mouth, "Nice to meet you."

And now that lovely mouth was fussing at him in concern and he was too tired to turn her away. The thought of him treating her as he had just treated Max would be too unbearable to live with. In a moment, moved by her unnecessary kindness, he choked out a sob and covered his face.

Monica set the coffee and paper bag on the table and dropped to her knees in front of him, "Hey now.. it's not as bad as all that, surely. You looked in a right state earlier when I passed you. I just thought you might do for a good rest and a meal. A proper feeding up, that's all."

He laughed through the frustrated tears despite himself, "I've heard that before."

"There we go," She smiled at him again, "Now what's so bad that's got you this way?"

Morse sniffed back any more tears and lifted his chin in some pantomime of a stiff upper lip. No crying. Like at his parents' funerals. Get through. Worry about the rest later.

"A father's lost his daughter," He sighed and his eyes felt like they were melting, like they would slip from his skull if he kept them open a moment longer. In fact, just about everything in his face ached after the beating he'd taken and everytime he went to rub his eyes it was a fresh world of pain, "It needs to be put right."

But he hadn't any new ideas. He couldn't think past the pounding in his temples. He couldn't see past the flash of gunfire from Mrs. Coke Norris's gun every time he closed his eyes.

"If I can't do that," Morse stared at his hands and she did too, "there's nothing. Sitting here waiting- I suppose you can just add cowardice to my growing list of offenses."

Monica took his hands sympathetically and smiled again. She was so very beautiful.

"I don't see a coward," She squeezed his hands in hers, "I think you've taken a few knocks too many maybe. I think you're discouraged. But a coward only thinks of themself and it seems to me that you can't stop thinking about helping others, " Her dark eyes were gentle and encouraging and
he was so easily swayed by kindness, "I don't think you're a coward at all. You're just tired and I think you need a break."

And Morse, the fool that he was, so easily swayed and so needing someone, leaned forward and tried to kiss her.

He was not being led by his head, but the cobbled together pieces of his heart and he regretted it as soon as she leaned away and stiffened. Monica let go of his hands and instead grabbed his shoulders to stop him from moving any further, "Whoa- Alright then, hold on now."

"I'm sorry," Morse dissolved again, trembling in embarrassment, "I'm sorry."

"You're alright. Just upset," She fetched the coffee and brought it to him, pressing it between his hands. He could feel the warmth soaking through the paper cup and the crisp and potent smell brought him a bit more into himself.

"Is that what you usually do?" Monica wondered quietly as she moved to his medicine cabinet and shook him out some paracetemol.

"Is this what you do? Wine and ice cream?"

Max's eyes cut to Morse with a judgemental lift of brows and a glance up and down the whole of the man spread akimbo on his sofa, "Is this what you do?"

"What?" Morse blinked at her. God, he'd been terrible to Max, hadn't he? It hit him fresh. He was humiliated.

"Kiss people." She tilted her head and returned to press the pills into one of his hands, "Fight people. When you don't know what else to do?"

Morse's face twisted in the usual defensive denial but he didn't say anything else. He could tell she was frowning at him but he had so many thoughts and opinions on the subject that he couldn't find a way to express them.

And just like that he was running through it all again. He couldn't leave well enough alone. Everything overlaid. Monica's care and Frida's loss and Max's concern and Thursday's protection. Bright's anger and Strange's ambition. Every single muddled emotion, everyone else's, became indistinguishable from his own and wove tighter around his ribcage and compressed.

"Listen," Monica stood and sighed when he seemed to once more disassociate. She checked her phone, "Give yourself a break. Have a bite. Drink the coffee. Take the pills. Have a nap or get out and away a bit. I've got to go to work but I'll look in on you later. No kissing anymore strangers, alright?"

Get out and away. He looked up at her, "Thank you."

She smiled. She really was beautiful, "It's really no trouble."

Getaway. His eyes flashed with startling revelation. That was it.
Morse found the evidence he needed in the bungalow and like a keystone, it pulled all the scattered pieces of the case into place. Frida Yelland's loss may have been out of their control but the men responsible would be punished. Val Todd could threaten him and spit in his face but Morse was now planted firmly on the moral high ground. He felt steady again, steady enough.

Solving the case had also been the catalyst needed to bring him back to himself. So long as he could do his job, everything else could be handled in time.

When Morse returned to his flat that night the adrenaline that had him out all night, fueled and energized and determined in the face of the truth, was running low. He ran into Monica in the lift and judging by the hour and uniform she was coming back from work as well.

"You look-" She said after a careful glance, "-still tired, but better."

"Closed the case, finally," Morse gave a polite and small smile and his keys twirled around his finger in as much of a victorious flourish as he'd allow himself.

"Yeah? See. What did I tell you?" When she walked down the hall, he joined her.

Morse smirked and put his hands in his pockets, "It was something you said actually."

"Nah, really?"

"You said I needed to get away and it reminded me that there were these-" She wouldn't care. He also shouldn't say. He smiled and waved a hand. This was his door anyway, "Oh, nevermind. But you did help. Thank you."

Monica smiled, that beautiful curve of lips and pristine white teeth, "You did eat, yeah?"

"Yes," He paused, "Would you like to go eat sometime? With me I mean. Or a drink. I owe you."

Monica didn't even think twice about it. She bobbed a single shoulder and smiled that smile at him again, and easy as that said, "Yeah, alright. So long as there's no invasive snogging attempts."

He smiled, "Promise."

"'ll text you?"

"Sure," A door slammed around the corner and Morse didn't even blink, "Goodnight."

"Night, Morse."

Coke Norris's gun wasn't firing behind his eyelids anymore.

He could sleep.

Morse stripped himself and with it, the day and most of the past few weeks. He thought about how easily the oppressive weight in his chest had eased once the case had wrapped. Once the clues fell into place everything made sense, like a fog had cleared. Once he'd made Thursday understand, he could move forward. Once Mr. Bright had his apology, they could finally do real work. Once those horrible men were behind bars it no longer became a strain to breathe or feel or think.

Morse threw himself into bed and grabbed the worn grey shirt. It'd been in his wear-wash-wear cycle since he'd brought it home but realized it no longer smelled of its original owner.
Max.

He’d been right, Morse had been a fucking horror.

Then he thought of Monica and how easy it had been to ask her to dinner. A question and an answer. A no would have been accepted just as well, but she’d said yes. There were no denials or talk of propriety or rules to follow. It wasn't a battle to get an agreement to spend time together.

She was lovely and she simply said yes.

In the dark, Morse rolled over in his bed and pulled his sheets up to his eyes. He clutched his pillow with a squeeze and decided at the very least he should apologize.

Tomorrow. He'd need to sleep on what to say.

Morse and Debryn didn't speak again face to face until there was a body found in a local museum with its throat slit. Morse hadn't called or texted and work hadn't dictated anymore than emails would cover since the last big case. He'd actually typed up about 30 different texts over the course of a week, sat on them, stared at them, deleted them and finally given up. It got to the point where he'd convinced himself that the next case would simply hit and everything would go back to how it was before. There would be banter and acid and theorizing and gallows humor that made him grimace. He'd stand ten feet from the body and Max would be vague about the time of death and when he'd insist he'd be invited, in the cuttiest way possible, to get a closer look himself and Morse would sneer and that would be it.

Fixed.

But even the dusty ambiance of an aging history museum hadn't coaxed anything but simple and dry business as usual from the pathologist. No sly allusions, no puns, no 'another one bites the dusts'. When Morse looked him in the eye it was all The Doctor and no Max. The door had been opened and Morse had slammed it. If he wanted to knock again, he'd have to earn the right.

Morse didn't bother trying to hang around for more details. As soon as Max's head dipped once more to his notes, he left.

While the world was caught up in World Cup fever, Morse was caught up in reading about Indian daggers. Symbolism. Meaning. There had been a group from a girl's school at the museum on the day of the murder and now one of them was missing. To think they weren't connected would be foolish. They were also young and in need of protection if there was a killer on the loose. They weren't far off from his sister's age, not in the grand scheme of things. They were bright and clever, and for all their petty school games, still just children. He needed to know how they tied together.

This was important. More important than the woes of his love life and much more important than bloody football.
"Morse," Jim had hovered by his desk for a full ten minutes as Morse had been on the phone arguing about how he shouldn't have to submit a bloody online form for something so simple as old records.

"Morse."

He held a finger up.

"What's the website?" Morse said to the snappy man on the phone. The man proceeded to give him every letter and syllable slowly, as if he were an imbecile and Morse frowned deeply with each key plunk, "Yes, I've got it. Thanks," he hung up and added, "for nothing."

Jim seemed to bursting by the time Morse finally looked up at him expectantly.

"I got a date with Maureen, you know, that girl I was telling you about."

Had he? Better to act like he knew that, "Yes of course, good on you."

"Well she wants to bring a friend, you know, make sure I'm not a sexual predator and whatnot..." Jim didn't seem phased by that at all but Morse thought the idea sounded rather disrespectful.

"You're a policeman!"

"C'mon, Morse," Jim sighed, "Get with the program. It's not the 1950's. When's the last date you went on?"

Morse made a face.

"Well listen, I need a four. For her friend. Come along with me? Plan is to hit the pub and figure it out from there."

Morse pursed his lips as if it sounded awful but shrugged an agreement anyway, "Yeah alright."

Max was all work and no play once again when Morse brought Daisy Weiss to identify her uncle's body. The doctor waved him in solemnly through the glass and his shoes felt like they were made of lead as he made his way to speak with him. The dread was unneeded, the doctor merely wanting to impart his analysis of the wound and the weapon, but that brought it's own measure of disappointment. At least it was case relevant, the dagger wasn't what killed Weiss, but Morse found himself biting his tongue against puzzling it out aloud. Normally they'd talk through it or Max would be his sounding board.

Why was it left there, if it wasn't the weapon? To derail them? Waste their time? Or was it some sort message?

But Morse wasn't sure he was in the mood right now to listen to another prickly speech by Debryn about how such questions were outside of his job description.

The last time they were in a room alone together it had been Max's office and he'd gone through the whole gamut of emotions. Freshly home from County he'd been relieved to finally see the man and had realized very jarringly that he may have missed him a bit. And then they kissed and he could have soared. Those precious few seconds knowing the other man may have felt the same were
something he dare not think about now. It all crashed and burned so spectacularly, a piteous domino cascade, that everything said on both sides twisted hurtful and wrong.

Max had at least made the effort (several times) to call him...

Now would be the time to say something. Morse lingered and found himself unsurprisingly tongue tied. He had no idea where to start an apology and when he met Max's eyes across the table only silence stretched between them. Morse lost every bit of nerve he had.

He said, "Thanks. I've um.." and he thumbed towards the door and the waiting Daisy Weiss.

Smooth.

"You drag a girl out on a Sunday to ask about a century and a half year old case?" Ms. Frazil looked positively incensed at his request for help.

"There's some archives I simply can't gain access to.." Morse talked a bit lower.

She didn't seem very willing to donate her time or her access out of the kindness of her heart and Morse knew he had to make it worth her while, "It may be relevant to the recent museum killing and the girls' school."

Dotty gave him a look, a smirk, and sipped her tea, "You're lucky you're so pretty."

Morse smirked, "Ms. Frazil, really, that could be construed as sexual harassment."

She chuckled, "I'll see what I can do."

"When?" He flashed a grin.

And as they crowded around a computer later and printed out scans of ancient newspapers, she asked why he was so insistent and he told her all his instincts, all of his mental alarms, were blaring. It was an all encompassing bad feeling, it crawled across his skin and sunk into his gut. All he could sense was dread.

A case like this was devouring. Murder, ghost stories, heraldry, research, research, and more research. This would not end up boiling down to a deceptively simple motive. Puzzles were what Morse was good at. This was deep and old and it had rooted in him and filled in every crack that he was ignoring. Each hairline that had formed since Mason Gull took a swipe at him. Every gaping hole shot through him by Mrs. Coke Norris. The complicated fracture from his father's death and now an aching empty spot of his own making.

Morse was anxious that things weren't falling into place fast enough when Bunty Glossop, another schoolgirl, disappeared next. She was clever and bright, their brightest, her teacher said.

The police were supposed to be protecting them.
He couldn't leave anything to chance anymore. Morse pushed himself to search the house from tip to tail. Ghosts weren't real but bad people were, yet he found himself chasing a spectre when he crashed through floorboards in the school's annex and sent himself dropping a full story onto his back.

"Pop round to Dr. Debryn?" Thursday said it lightly, as if it were a given.

Something across his shoulders burned under his shirt and vest and Morse knew he'd broken the skin. His limbs had been knocked about and his ribs were tender but all Morse could see was Max's closed expression. He's stuck in that silence stretching between them over the body of Weiss.

"No. It's just a couple of scrapes and bruises."

"I'll drop you home then," And as Thursday pulled away and they were right back into the case.

Morse fished his keys out of his pocket and let out a hiss as his skin pulled and stretched. He'd left a trail of dust and drywall crumbles in his wake as he made his way to his flat.

"Proper rough boy aren't you? Need some help?" Monica appeared again, always happening by at just the right moment, "I am a nurse you know."

"This time I lost a fight with a floor and went through it. Or does that mean I won?" Morse wondered aloud, "Help, would be appreciated.." He was regretting not going to the hospital with the way his back stung, despite the uneven footing with Max. Now, he could hardly deny a pretty girl giving him a once over.

"Come down to mine. I don't imagine your first aid is well stocked," She thumbed down the hall and he dutifully followed. He'd never been into her flat before, nor any beside his own in the building, and was somehow comforted to know it was nearly a mirror to his own in layout. Her taste and design sense were obviously better.

By the time Morse, painfully, got his shirt off she was tutting him, "Should've gone to hospital. It's not bad but I'm not sure you could have dealt with this yourself."

"Stubborn I suppose- Ah!" He hissed as she pressed something cold and stinging to his shoulder blade.

"That's what Max said," Monica chuckled.

"Hm?"

"I mentioned to him that I met you."

Morse felt a dark dread in his gut, "I hope you didn't tell him-"

"About your little breakdown?" And humiliating kiss attempt, "No. No. Just that you seemed very dedicated to your job."

"And he said I was stubborn?" Morse actually scoffed at that.

"I think the word he used was obdurate. Sometimes I've got to look things up with him," She
"Yes, that's Max," Morse murmured.

"Alright. Patched up. It's going to hurt a bit. If you need help with the bandage let me know but really it should mostly be aches and pains for a few days," Monica patted his shoulder and handed him his stripped clothing.

"Thanks. I've actually got plans tonight. Hopefully I'm operational. I should have a nap and a pain killer," He had the the most rubbish luck, from being beaten up by thugs to beaten up by a house in less than a month.

Morse really didn't want to go out with Jim now. Not with the case going on. Not after everything else.

"I can't believe I agreed to go out tonight," Jim practically hopped in his seat. The pub was filled to the brim and every TV blared the World Cup match. Morse at least had the awareness to know that England was doing well and the common sense to play along with the enthusiasm to a small degree.

"You'd just be here doing this, regardless," Morse snorted. He looked out the window as if it would reveal their mystery dates or perhaps give him some clever route of escape that was heretofore unknown.

"I just agreed blindly. Just pleased she wanted to go out, really. SHIT!" Jim yelled with the surge of the crowd as Morse observed that one man on the telly had kicked the ball to another man in a different colored shirt and clearly that was A Bad Thing. He was fairly sure England was in white this game, so that was something, but the other team was in red so who could really tell.

"What's this friend like?" Morse tucked his hands between his knees with a tense stretch. The congestion of the crowd was getting to him a bit but once their dates arrived they were supposed to simply have a drink and go off somewhere a bit easier.

"Don't know- OOOoohhh.." Jim slapped his knee and glanced for the door, "Friend of hers. Says she smart and cute. You know girls. All their friends are cute."

"Unless they're funny," Morse actually yawned.

"Exactly," Jim agreed.

When the girls arrived moments later, Morse could only laugh.

"Hello Morse," Monica smiled and offered her hand for a shake. He found himself grinning and shook hers.

"Miss Hicks."

"You two know each other?!!" Maureen puffed, "Well boo on you."

"He actually owes me dinner," Monica smirked, "Two birds with one stone, I'd say."
"Imagine the luck," Morse offered her a seat and after a short introduction with Jim and Maureen, moved off to the bar to get them drinks.

When he came back, the table was deserted and the other two were at the bar chatting together while Monica idly looked at her phone.

"Well the blind date dread has gone at least," Morse smiled a bit as he put a vodka cranberry in front of her and set down on his chair, "How do you know Maureen?"

"Yoga," Monica glanced at her friend, "Well, yoga last year. No time anymore-"

Morse's eye wandered when the pub door opened. He always watched a door if he could, perhaps his defensive instincts, but he didn't always see one of his old school friends step in. Morse hadn't even the time to decide if he would try to avoid Jerome Hogg as they had immediately locked eyes.

"Is that Morse I see?!"

"Hello Jerome!" Morse smiled and popped to his feet. Jerome had been a friend when he was up, not extraordinarily close and a year or two older, but they always got on well and when things went to shit he'd been unattached to it. He could be a bit flamboyant and off color but last he'd heard the man had secured himself a teaching position and Morse was sure the Oxford academic drama suited him very well.

"Haunting old Oxford again or is this just a visit? My god, it's really Morse," Jerome's hand touched the breast of Morse's blazer as if to confirm that he was real, "As I live and breathe."

Morse could hear Monica laughing a bit at the dramatics from where she sat and he chuckled himself, "Living back here actually. I'm working in the city. This is Monica. Monica Hicks. We're just out with friends."

"Oh, look at you. Monica, lovely to meet you," Jerome smiled and took her hand, "Good old Morse, always drawn to a pretty face. Now where are you working? Christ what have I missed. Give me your number so we can catch up."

Phones were produced and Morse and Jerome went through the old game of 'let's get together sometime' when Morse knew more realistically he'd end up calling the man for work as soon as he needed an in at the University.

"Parking was a bugger, Jerome, I'm nearly two blocks off..." A displeased complaint came from behind the other man and Morse felt the familiar feeling of his stomach dropping to the soles of his feet.

"Oh! Max," Jerome turned to reveal Max Debryn, dressed for going out (Morse was trying not to notice) and with Jerome's arm curling through his to be brought forward and presented, "Meet my old friend Morse. We were up together in college and he's back in town again!"

Max looked a bit more surprised than Morse was sure he meant to let on.

"Max!" Monica grinned.

"Monica," Max smiled small and she got a lean in and a mutual cheek kiss. "Morse," He, instead, got a standard deadpan acknowledgment and an obliging nod.

Max's eyes went between them and Morse could see the moment those shutters fell again. The doctor adjusted his glasses as if a mask that had slipped out of place, and leaned to Jerome coolly,
"I'm afraid you're several steps behind again, Jerome. I work with both of them. Monica's a nurse and Morse is with the police."

"Really!? Pagan Morse in the police?" Jerome laughed, "What a bloody world."

"Morse, Monica-" Jim Strange leaned in, blinked at Debryn, "Oh hello Doc," then back to his friends, "You two ready to head out?"

"Don't let us keep you," Max said pleasantly, "Have fun, kids. Remember, if you can't be good-"

"Be careful. God, Max," Monica laughed as they tore themselves away.

Morse gritted his teeth.

"How about that, all evening in an arcade and it turns out you do know how to play video games," Monica chuckled as they walked back from their double date. Once Maureen had realized that Morse and Monica knowing each other made the night a bit easier, he reckoned she and Jim actually had had a decent time with one another.

"I didn't know they still had old games at places like that. You know, Tetris was the first ever digital entertainment exported by the Soviet Union," Morse informed her, "And only in 1996 did the rights revert back finally to the original inventor of the game."

She shook her head, looking amused, but then got quiet. Morse was sure there had been moments over the course of the evening where she had looked at him oddly or taken a moment to think. He also thought maybe it was just him being paranoid. In the back of his head he still thought about Max with Jerome on his arm acting like everything in the world were right as rain.

"Listen Morse," They were at their building when she spoke and he realized he'd been in his own head again, silent and brooding over if he were jealous or if this was some byproduct of his discomfort and worry over the case. He was out here on a date when he could have been doing work...

"Tonight at the pub. When we ran into Max," Monica put her hands in her jeans pockets, "I remembered. When you said you met me at a pub with him once? I saw you two tonight in the pub and I remembered it."

Ah. Well.

"He took you home that night, Morse. I know because he'd never gone off to chat anyone up before, not with us anyway. We got nosy. He's so private, you know? We were out having a smoke when you both went off to his car," She looked as if she'd been happy for him.

"It's not-" Morse started but she stopped him with a hand.

"I'm not judging you Morse. I don't care who you've buggered to be honest. Men or women," She was letting him down and he knew it, "So it doesn't matter to me what it is or isn't."

Morse looked down at his shoes.

"But he is my friend and a coworker. I don't want to muddle about in his personal business," She
turned towards the door now, "Besides you should have seen both of your faces when you saw one another. Your friend Jerome may have missed it, but I didn't. Something's going on with you two."

Morse sighed and rubbed his head. He wasn't the type to discuss his personal life with anyone but Monica was calling him on it, "I was very rude to him the last time we spoke. The last… several times we spoke outside of work. Every time I try and apologize I can't seem to do it."

"When in doubt, go with a gesture," Monica shrugged, "A favor or something. You have to talk to him eventually. If you're actually sorry, prove it."

Morse was embarrassed to find he was getting romance advice from a woman who had just turned him down.

"We're alright though, yeah?" Monica said in the lift on their way up to their floor. "Still neighbors. Still friends?"

"Yes," Morse nodded, "Friends."

She smiled and even now she was still so very beautiful, "Besides, Morse, your life seems a bit too dramatic for me."

Chapter End Notes

I hope this doesn't hop around too much. There were things I didn't want to slip by and Trove and Nocturne are pretty important Morse life moments I think.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sun was coming up rosy and pink on the horizon and the morning mist hung heavy around Shrivell House as Morse stared out, blind to the splendour. He silently mourned Maud Ashenden. An 11 year old girl was dead and as far as he was concerned, it was everyone's fault including his own. It wasn't just the blokes from County who didn't take his warnings seriously. Morse had been there too, walking around with that ghost-hunting nutter, when he should have been watching and guarding. He knew DI Church thought he was a smart arse and he knew the man had treated this danger flippantly and so, of course, his stubbornness overrode reason.

Now a little girl's parents would have to be notified that their daughter, who they thought was visiting a friend, was murdered in cold blood, and all in the name of what?

He didn't even have an answer.

No one was unaffected by the sight of the small girl clad in her victorian costume laying in the entry hall. She almost looked like a discarded doll in her bonnet and lace, if not for the growing pool of blood that had Morse looking away when he couldn't bear it anymore. The other girls would be haunted more literally than they ever intended, traumatized he was sure, by their game gone wrong and Ms. Symes school would take a heavy blow now that one of her students had died. Not even Jakes could look at the body without a tremor, but the tense in his jaw told Morse that he was angry. He envied Jakes that well of indignation to pull upon. It would keep him focused and sharp. Morse's anger, on the other hand, was aimed squarely at himself.

Even the pathology team was gentle when they arrived. Max was very serious that things be handled properly, the girl moved carefully, and that they didn't disturb the school any more than necessary. Morse was finally grateful for the lack of jokes and barbs. He trusted Debryn to do what needed to be done as respectfully as possible and tried not to think that the doctor's work had only begun. They could likely spare the post mortem but eventually the parents would need to identify the body and he didn't envy anyone that task.

The body. She was a girl only an hour before, thinking she was playing a brilliant joke with her friends, and now she was The Body. Just the thought of it ached him. Morse focused on interviews instead, powering through interrogations with Thursday and hoping not to drag the horrible morning out any longer than it needed to be. Bunty broke his heart further with a guilt he couldn't erase from her mind and Morse could only press his card into her hand and tell her to call him if she needed anything, anything at all.

He needed air.

Now he stared at a sunrise he didn't really see and the morning chill hadn't yet burned off and thinking of Bunty reminds him of his sister and little Maud is still dead. County can't be trusted and the killer is still on the loose and the dread he'd felt hadn't gone away at all. Everything layered on top of itself until he began to feel the weight of it tangibly. This wasn't over. The sword of Damocles still dangled by a hair, precarious, and Morse was sure that at any moment it would fall.

He wasn't sure when he learned the unique pace of Max's walk but hearing footsteps behind him on the gravel, Morse knew it was him. His heart jumped into his throat when the doctor stopped beside him. Shoulder to shoulder and silent, the backs of their hands brushed and Morse had never
wanted so badly to grab him and drag him away, but for what? Not sure. It was an impulsive and idealistic plan. They would just run off and leave corpses and child killers behind and he could apologize and for a moment in time it would all be fine again. They could be two blokes who met in a pub, exchanged snark that turned to compliments, discovered a mutual love of poetry and ale, and fell into bed together with hopes of more. Morse was inadequately at a loss for words. He abandoned his impossible fantasy. Instead his hands tucked behind his back to fidget out of sight.

"There's nothing you could have done," Max's voice was soft. No shutters today, "The wound was grievous. Mortal."

Morse glanced at him but Max was staring out at the dawn peeking up through the mist on the horizon. The doctor looked tired. He wasn't even wearing his chic frames, instead the plain household ones, and Morse wondered if he'd been roused from bed for this. What a cruel awakening. Max's fingers flexed at his side in that familiar anxious gesture and Morse regretted anew that he couldn't just take that hand in his own. Propriety be damned, if everything had been good between them, he would have. Even if Thursday or Jakes or Strange saw… he would have.

"The fall at least…" Max sighed and canted his head and Morse knew immediately what he was implying. The fall ended her suffering, "With adults one takes the rough with the smooth, but this…"

Morse felt the man's eyes on him long seconds before he could finally meet them. Max's expression was as open as he'd ever seen it outside of his bedroom. He was affected and Morse wasn't used to seeing him like this. What's somehow worse is that Max isn't shocked. No, he has seen more death and more bodies than Morse could even fathom. Max was instead angry. A seething, quiet, sad anger.

"You find this piece of work, Morse," It was not a question. It was a demand and the detective didn't know how to reply. Max's deep blue eyes were unflinching behind his glasses and Morse wanted so badly to feel as steady as that gaze.

"You find whoever did that," Max's hand clenched into a tight fist, "For me, alright? If you never give me anything else, give me this. You find them."

Max breathed out and sagged as if the spirit had left him and then, with only a momentary pause of thought, he went. Morse felt his self pity slide away. His eyes burned and his jaw clenched, and he was exhausted and aching but finding himself suddenly doubly determined.

By the following evening, the murderer was dead.

Morse watched Bunty shuffle back to her teachers wrapped in a blanket and the ghost of her kiss to his cheek still lingered in the chilly air. He was glad she was safe and still sorry her friend was not but he was also disappointed that Black wouldn't see his due punishment or know the suffering he'd caused.

Morse was… tired. But it was over.

"Hero of the day?" Max lingered several feet away as the ambulance packed up the body. He must have seen Bunty's goodbye.
"Hardly," Morse said with the usual self-deprecation, but Max was here and talking to him and that was progress.

"You did an admirable job," The doctor said carefully.

Morse looked at Max a moment, lingering with his kit in hand, and chanced a question, "Are you free?"

Debryn took a breath, glanced at the ambulance, and sighed, "The corpse formerly known as Terence Black needs to be checked in but, no, I don't have any plans at midnight..."

"God, is that the time?" Morse groaned and looked at his phone.

Max's brows lifted and without saying anything else, he walked away.

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Morse was on his doorstep when he arrived home.

A bit over an hour later, still in the same clothes and with his head in his arms, Morse waited. He wasn't sure why he came, not really. He was drifting in and out of his own head as the exhaustion of the last week finally settled in. In fact, he barely even noticed when the Range Rover pulled up and Max disembarked.

The doctor looked understandably wary and a cigarette hung loosely from his lips. Morse looked at it like it was an alien object until the shorter man took a final drag and flicked it off into the gutter.

"Morse," Max exhaled smoke through his nostrils as he turned his keys over in his hand, "It's now one o'clock in the morning."

"I know, I'm sorry-" Morse rose to his feet and everything in his body pulled and ached and his grimace was uncontrollable. In retrospect, still battered from his fall, going off to wrestle the killer hadn't been one of his more thought out plans. It was right up there with climbing rooftops and fighting Mason Gull with a fresh knife wound. Frankly, sore was an understatement, "Actually. I'm not sorry. Not for showing up here anyway."

Max watched him and waited and Morse could tell this silence between them was different. He was being given his chance.

"I was afraid that if I went back to my flat that I wouldn't see you again until the next body," Morse breathed all at once. It wasn't groundbreaking but his heart was thudding in his chest, "That we wouldn't talk again until someone died and then that would just..."

That would be it. That would be them.

Max finally approached, stepped up the few steps slowly and stood chest to chest with Morse in the doorway. He hadn't expected him to get so close so quickly but Max had that stiff and dominating posture, that dour look that said he was waiting to be impressed. It was that look that Morse had wanted to challenge that first night in the pub when they had met. The smoky cigarette tang that clung to him was new but not entirely unpleasant when paired with that particular expression.
There was a wave of weak nostalgia to see Max take his usual careful pause and weigh his options. Once his decision was made, he spoke softly as he turned for the door, "Better come in then."

Morse felt like he'd passed some minor test but he hadn't had expectations of going inside when he came out here tonight. Now that he was standing there he was actually worried that they had set some sort of unhealthy precedent, that they would go inside and eventually pretend it was fine and it would all blow up again at the smallest discordant note.

"I just wanted to make sure you were alright," Morse lingered.

"You weren't yesterday."

"No one was alright yesterday. No one should have been, at least," There was snap in his tone.

Morse sighed and pointed to the tiny still-glowing ember of the cigarette still smouldering in the dark gutter, "You're also smoking. That's a littering fine you know."

It was Max's turn to eye roll and he turned to the door, "Just come in, Morse."

"I know I was rude to you before and it was unwarranted," Morse interjected again. He didn't want to go in and lose his nerve. He didn't want to go in and have a drink and only want to touch the other man. Well, he did want that. But he wasn't going to get it unless he smoothed over the rest.

Morse rubbed the back of his neck, "I found an article on the five stages of grief-"

"Morse!" Max's tone was clipped, with weariness in his eyes, "It's one in the bloody morning and while you spent your day playing Sherlock Holmes and demonstrating your skillful baritsu, I was with the Ashendens identifying their daughter's body."

Morse's mouth clapped shut.

"Now, we are not doing this on my stoop so get in the fucking house or go home."

When the door swung open, Morse practically leapt through it.

He wasn't sure what he expected but the sitting room hadn't gone through any major changes. There was no outward disarray, no sign that Max was having a hard time, and it was strange standing there again after so many months and feeling like it was nearly unchanged. He'd missed the New Years Party of his own doing. His attachment assignment hadn't been exile so much as it had been a long drive away, but Morse had barely been able to deal with a crowded pub without copious amounts of alcohol to grease the wheels. He'd been drunk and lonely when he'd called Max, late enough that there was a chance he wouldn't answer. When he did, as nice as it was, he inevitably felt out of step by the conversation's end. Morse had spent the rest of his evening getting drunker and playing Wagner loud enough to drown out the haunting explosions of fireworks and the voice in his head that ran through every word they exchanged over and over again.

Some of the framed photos around the television had been rotated out and Morse curiously examined them as Max dropped his keys and kit in their usual places. The family photo had been updated, Max and several taller round faced women, a young-ish girl and a man. Judging by some of the old baby pictures missing, the young girl must have been the baby. So his niece looked to be about about Joyce's age. It explained a bit more, perhaps, about what had been so bothersome about this case.
As he looked at another framed photo, a smooshed in group with a selfie angle and clearly from the New Year party, Morse got a fresh pang of regret that he hadn't come. Several people kissed Max simultaneously from various angles and the man had a dimpled, closed-mouth smile. Even though Morse wasn't much for parties, Max didn't seem to be either, so his group of friends must have be a good one.

"You know Miss Frazil?" Morse pointed to the photo where Jerome also grinned and she was pressing red lips to Max's temple. The doctor had joined him and was plucking at his tie. Morse had the usual impulse to do it for him. He wasn't sure why he enjoyed it, perhaps shedding the trappings of The Doctor to get to Max. Perhaps just unbuttoning him a bit. Perhaps the reveal of his neck, his weak spot, and one of his favorite intimate places.

"Dotty? We took a cooking course together some years back," Max pulled the tie free of his own accord as if it had been choking him and popped his first few buttons.

"And Jerome?"

"Gay Men's Choir Benefit. Once he found me to be a sympathetic ear, he spent most of the evening providing a running commentary of gossip while everyone was safely out of earshot."

"So he hasn't changed much."

"One of the more memorable dinners I've had," Max observed.

"I can't believe you know my friends," Morse huffed with a small amusement.

"I'd say you know my friends," Max lifted his brows, "Jerome said he hadn't seen you in ten years at least and I'll assume you are Dotty's much touted police contact? I wonder about your definition of friendship, Morse."

He wasn't wrong. Morse hung his head. He wasn't exactly very good at contact. He generally just assumed that if he was on good terms with someone, that it would maintain itself.

"Are you and Jerome.. Ah.." What was he even asking?

"Jealous?" Max sounded a bit amused in his accusation, "What about you and Monica?"

"No," Morse could be sure about that, "She's just a friend. She lives down the hall and- that date was actually a funny coincidence."

Max got a pursed look, "She's too good for the likes of you anyway."

"What does that mean?!" It was his turn to be affronted.

Max gave him a stare, "A life unexamined, Morse? You have to admit things with you can get a bit histrionic."

"Histrionic!?!"

"A poor choice of words perhaps," Max rubbed his face tiredly, "I didn't invite you in to row. What did you want to say that you half-arsed on my doorstep?"

The idea that being shot and having his father die were simply melodramatics twinged sourly. Morse could feel the agitation stir the blood in his veins. It was a bit like coming back to life from a deep freeze. Max and his button pushing could turn even his most sorry of moods into teeth
gritting annoyance. But that was all part of this, wasn't it?

Morse puffed with indignation but the rush of blood brought a wave of lightheadedness. He took took a step back, swayed and half sat-half fell onto the sofa before his limbs gave out. It was quick and his heartbeat fluttered with the rush of air out of his lungs. Every muscle in his body ached in chorus.

The swoon wasn't lost on Max and the doctor was sitting beside him in a moment pushing a hand to his forehead. His other hand curled around Morse's wrist for a pulse, He growled, "This is what I'm talking about. You're a bloody disaster."

"Fuck you, Max," Morse barked weakly.

"It's not about what misfortunes befall you, Morse. Nobody, not even you, could have helped any of what happened in the past year. It's about taking care of yourself and frankly, you just don't do it. To force you on another decent human being would be a crime."

Morse snorted, "What about forcing myself on you?"

Max's brows raised.

Morse rolled his eyes, "Not like that. You know what I mean."

"I'm not a decent human being and unless you leave the police, I'll be stuck stitching you up for all eternity anyway."

Morse wanted to argue that, at least the first part about the nature of Max's character, he also didn't like insinuation that Max was 'stuck' with him but as with most things he would sit on it and stew until he found the right way to approach the topic. Max moved off to the kitchen but was back in moment carrying a glass of water and something wrapped up.

"Eat this," A sandwich was dropped in Morse's lap and the water set down in front of him. Max sunk back down beside him on the sofa, turned towards him and waited carefully for him to comply.

"It's late for food," Morse made a face.

"And someone decided we should socialize at zero dark thirty, so here we are."

He tucked in, not really tasting it, and Max didn't move again until he was convinced Morse would finish what he was given. The sandwich was cold but it was food. It disappeared so quickly that Morse realized he must have needed it. Max finally stood and moved about locking up and turning off lights and Morse realized that the man assumed he was staying.

"I don't expect to stay, Max," Morse said with a sigh, "We both have work tomorrow..."

"I don't. I'm taking a day. They call it self-care now. And you aren't going anywhere in this state. You certainly aren't walking the streets and I'm not driving you," He gave Morse a look that said 'who are we kidding?'.

Who indeed.

"I don't deserve to stay," Morse said. He didn't know how else to say it but it sounded foolish as soon as it had passed his lips.
"Deserve? I don't care what you deserve, Morse," Max expressed impatiently. He actually leaned against the kitchen island as if the conversation were sucking the life from him, "Christ, do you bring out the worst in people on purpose?"

"Me?!"

"I thought you were here to apologize for something, anyway."

"I WAS!" Morse was red, he could feel it in his face, but he wasn't sure if it was embarrassment or agitation at this point. He stood and balled his rubbish up and moved to the kitchen to dispose of it. Thankfully he had control of his legs again, "I am."

Morse sighed and dragged a hand through his bedraggled hair, "I'm sorry for how I acted- am acting. I was frustrated with the case and everything was piling on top, layers and layers of bullshit and…" It was pointless to try and explain how his mind worked, how it heaped upon itself, "At least know that I didn't ignore all of your calls. I was being beaten to a pulp during at least one of them."

"I'd noticed and too stubborn to go to the hospital?" Max finally approached and tentatively reached for Morse's face. His palm settled against the man's jaw and he tilted Morse's head down so he could get a look at the bridge of his nose. The split had healed but there was still a thin pink scar.

"Obdurate," Morse smirked as he watched Max carefully and tilted his face into the man's hand. The cigarette smell was strong on his fingers.

"Talking to Monica, were we?" Max ran his thumb over the pink seam that remained of the wound, "Healed alright."

"You're right. About her being too good for me," Morse finally agreed and Max didn't dispute it. The doctor still lingered, hand still pressed to his cheek, and when he finally deemed the contact had gone on too long he pulled away. Morse caught Max's wrist so he didn't go too far, "She saw us, you know, that first night. Her and your girls saw us go off together at the pub."

"My girls?"

Morse smirked, "That's what I called them in my head."

"I didn't know they'd seen..." Max frowned.

"She said she wouldn't mess about in your personal business. She's a good friend," Morse tilted his head, "She also said my life seemed a bit dramatic."

"She doesn't know the half of it," Max snorted.

"Is it a problem? That they saw?"

"No..."

Morse wasn't convinced, "Am I embarrassing to you somehow?"

"Oh god, no, Morse. Really," Max actually scoffed and he knew that much to be genuine.

Morse tugged the doctor by the wrist and slid his arms around the man's waist. There was no struggle from Max, thankfully, and the doctor's hands came to rest on his waist.
"In your office," Morse was searching his face, "That wasn't me grieving. I wasn't distracting myself from my misery. I wasn't deliberately trying to erode your personal standard of work ethics. I was just glad to see you again. I want you to know that."

Max's ears had gone pink even if his brow was furrowed in concern.

Morse searched his face and found the doctor as unreadable as ever. He wasn't sure what he wanted, or expected, but that same cautious and mournful expression wasn't reassuring. It was very nearly infuriating. He couldn't ever tell what the man was thinking, "Just tell me it's something more than you being stuck with me."

"And you tell me it's more than you feeling like you owe me something," Max said in reply, "A meal or a stitch up or some place to crash that you are grateful for."

Morse let out a disbelieving laugh, "Is that what you think? It seems like bargaining is the only way to get you to agree to anything! You know when I asked Monica to dinner she didn't have any rules or need to be convinced. She just said yes."

Max's brows rose, "So you did ask her to dinner."

"Well yes," Morse huffed, "But I owed her and then Strange asked me to make up a four so he could take a girl out and it just happened to be-"

Max was giving him a deadpan stare, still close, still holding him in his arms.

Morse realized what he'd said. Justifying his behaviors with what he owed people, "Okay. Alright. Point taken."

"I don't like subterfuge Morse. I don't abide lying or excuses. You don't need to tell me what you think I want to hear at any given moment. I don't expect you to change your spots on account of me but do me the courtesy of at least telling the truth when I ask you a question."

Morse let out a breath. It gave him something to think about but wasn't outside of his realm of capability. Was it a problem if he needed to make a conscious effort at transparency? Was this about Monica? Max had also made a point before to bring up Alice, when Jakes had shot off his mouth.

"Nothing happened with Monica, I promise you."

"This is not about Monica. You're being evasive. The correct response to 'Don't lie to me' is 'I won't, Max.'"

"I won't, Max," Morse ground out, "If you don't lie to me."

"It's not in my repertoire. Don't act like you haven't lied before either. You sound like an admonished child, Morse."

Morse's jaw tightened, "And you and Jerome aren't-?"

"God, no. You do know that not every pair of friends sleeps together, don't you?" That point hit Morse a bit harder than it should have, but Max continued, "You should know I'm not anything like his type. You very much are however."

Morse actually grimaced, "Oh please."
Max chuckled and his hands, settled on Morse's hips this whole time, finally slid to circle his waist more fully.

"So this is.." Morse searched Max's face, "something."

"Your vocabulary is astounding. Yes, you could call it… something," Max met his eyes but wandered. He glanced over his face, his brow, his scarred nose, his lips, and murmured, "Like an obscure thing… between the shadow and the soul."

Normally poetry was more than acceptable but Morse's mind was burnt out after the case and then talking and arguing and talking again. He was sluggish and couldn't even place the reference which was infuriating in it's own way, "Max."

"Christ, Morse, you are insistent," Max growled and then surged upwards and kissed him.

Some part of his brain told him that this was what he'd worried about, throwing themselves at one another instead of having a real conversation. He didn't feel any more enlightened aside from the fact that other man wasn't angry. He'd gotten his apology out and they'd acknowledged… something, but as their lips met and Morse kissed Max back, he didn't much care anymore. It was a sensory reminder what Max tasted like, what he smelled like, how he fit against him and even the new tinge of tobacco held its own appeal. In fact, there was a giddy flop of his insides when their lips touched.

It hit Morse rather obviously, like wiping film from a lens. He'd missed him.

Instead of deepening, the kiss turned into a chain of smaller ones, slow but short, until Max settled back on his heels and adjusted his glasses which had gone adorably askew.

"Can we sit down?" Morse finally sighed, "My entire body hurts."

Max nodded, "Upstairs with you. You did fight a battle to the death this evening, that deserves a rest at least." He swatted Morse lightly towards the staircase, "Why exactly are you so sore? I was under the impression your battle was more of a chase and a tussle?"

"That hole Black fell through?" Morse didn't feel bad about the death, the one saving grace in all of this, "I made it. Fell through the floor a couple of days ago."

Max shook his head and murmured to himself as he followed up the stairs, "Histrionics."

Max's study was in it's usual state of disarray and the only new addition (beside a couple new bottles on the mantle) was an ashtray with several ground out butts. Morse groaned as he set himself into the corner of the beaten leather sofa and then sighed a deep sound of relaxation as his body settled. When Max appeared again he had a bottle of water for Morse and several small white pills. Morse took them without question and when Max sat himself down he gestured for the other to stretch out. As the doctor picked open the pack of fags on the table, Morse's legs ended up across Max's lap.

"Stress reliever?" He inquired to the cigarettes.

"And appetite suppressant," Max offered Morse one, but it was waved away, "Old university habit."
Didn't you know all doctors smoked? I'll be done when the pack is.”

"I think everyone smoked in school," Morse picked up the blue BIC on the table and offered Max a light which he watched with interest. After the man had taken a puff and drag, the doctor leaned back and glanced idly at the TV, which he always turned on at a low volume like ingrained instinct. Max seemed to constantly provide himself with background noise.

They sat like that a while. Someone on the news was talking about the World Cup and Morse was paying a small amount of attention to the detail of the Finals tomorrow. Even if he had no interest, it was helpful to be able to not stumble too badly through the inevitable conversations around the station. He thought about taking a day off, like Max was doing, but at the very least he had a report or two to finish and some evidence that needed to be handled. By the time he came back to himself the bit on football was over and a commercial was playing in front of his unseeing eyes.

"How was it?" He glanced to Max, his cigarette now half gone, and his free hand curled around Morse's leg across his knees, "With the Ashendens."

"How do you think it was?" Max said roughly as he took another drag and exhaled with a sigh. His eyes lingered on Morse, "You know, when my niece Margaret was born I was terrified. She was this tiny living breathing miracle. She was defenseless. So small.." Max shook his head, "I was sure I'd drop her. I can juggle a man's slithering innards without blinking but a baby shook me."

Morse could picture it, the reluctant and loving uncle. He smiled small and stuck his hand out for the cigarette. He hadn't smoked in years, unless you counted the times he was too pissed to curb the desire and accepted a handout outside of a pub or at a party.

"Maud Ashenden was barely more than a baby. What's 11 years to a lifetime? Still small and young and defenseless. I can't even imagine how they feel, Morse," Max passed the smoke with a deep frown.

Morse took a drag and leaned his head sideways against the sofa, "I didn't meet my sister Joyce until she was already walking and talking. But she was so clever for such a little thing," Morse murmured. His mother was a paragon of strength and love but he'd always suspected the shrewd intelligence came from his father. Another depressing realization, "My step mother has always made it very clear that she didn't want me in her house but Joyce always showed me that I was welcome in her eyes." Morse rolled his head to look at Max, "It's enough to make you terrified to take your eyes off of them for a second."

"I'm not much for rigid black and white when it comes to anything," Max took another inhaled puff of his cigarette before he leaned forward to snub it out, still holding Morse's leg so as not to ruin his lounge, "But anyone who would kill a child is evil. The snuffing out of innocence and potential is non-negotiable."

Morse understood perfectly and now also understood a bit more about Max himself. When the doctor began to lean back, Morse swung his leg down and reached for the man. He smoothed his hands across Max's back and over his shoulders before guiding him back against himself, "All goes onward and outward… and nothing collapses."

Max only hesitated a moment before he complied and shifted to slide down at an angle into the crook of Morse's arm. He finished the Whitman acceptably, "And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier."

Morse's arm curled around Max's shoulder and chest and he squeezed. The silence that fell now was one of comfort and a small measure of understanding. Perhaps it was the painkillers but he
was finally relaxed and warm and whatever had been nagging at him imperceptibly for weeks seemed to be momentarily forgotten. He'd be foolish to assume anything was ever fixed but Morse was learning to take the small pleasures and moments where he could.

He then got an idea and gave the man in his arms a gentle jostle, "Let's text them. Joyce and Margaret."

"What? It's an ungodly hour."

"I guarantee they'll answer," Morse was already pulling out his phone, lifting his hips to fish in his pocket.

Max leaned and grabbed his own, "Why are we doing this, exactly?"

For reassurance? To feel better? It was rather sentimental to need reinforcement that the girls were fine, but he wouldn't admit to it, "Just do it, Max."

The doctor huffed grumpily, "What do I even say?"

"Who cares? Worst case scenario, you're reinforced as the weird uncle," Morse was already typing, arms still draped around the other man.

"Truly life goals," Max snorted, also tapping out a message.

Both men sat in silence for minutes, each alternating between texting and waiting, with expressions of restrained relief and amusement when both girls reliably answered. It went on like that a while, still pressed together and neither talking, both cast in the white blue glow of their phones in the dimly lit room.

Morse felt better knowing Joyce was fine. The short conversation he'd concocted on the spot couldn't erase his continual worry for her or the revelation that nowhere was really ever safe, but it dulled the immediate edge well enough. Unfortunately she'd begun to pester him about coming to visit. She wanted to see Oxford 'his way'. She wanted to see where he worked and meet his friends and he'd thought it would be one of those things that they talked about but never did, but she was getting to the point that she was picking dates.

Absorbed in his own thoughts he hadn't even noticed that Max had put his phone down and had turned and was now looking at him. He was barely inches away staring him straight in the face and he hadn't even realized.

Max huffed a small laugh, "You really go somewhere else, don't you?"

Morse found himself feeling unexpectedly sheepish but Max leaned in and kissed him and his eyes fell closed until their lips parted again.

"With me, Morse," Max hovered and his fingers rested on Morse's jaw, ever so subtly tilting his face so they were locking eyes and nearly nose to nose.

"You've got my attention," He wrapped his arms around Max's waist and attempted to pull him ever closer.

"The trouble is keeping it," Max drawled before trying to push Morse back a bit, "Stretch out."

Morse hummed a bit and maneuvered, but instead of stretching himself out, he pushed Max onto his back along the length of the sofa and crawled on top of him. Only then did he splay out over
the man and rest his head on his chest while he wrapped an arm around Max's middle. Debryn chuckled and Morse could feel it under his ear.

"You're much too long for that. You're half hanging off..." One of Max's hands pushed through Morse's hair now that it was in reach, fingers combing in a light scratch. Morse closed his eyes.

"I'm not tall, Max, just taller than you. OW!" Max pulled his hair in punishment for the commentary and in retaliation, Morse turned his face and nipped the doctor's chest through his shirt. The hand in his hair gripped for another split second and Morse could feel Max's body heat and twitch with interest beneath his own.

Morse gave in to his immediate instinct: he straddled Max's hips, slid up his chest, and kissed him. It was exploratory and smokey and savouring and it sparked a fire in him that felt like it had lain dormant since the last time they were together. There were no misunderstandings here, no confusion. Morse may have had a poor grasp on the nature of this relationship but when they came together like this, the feeling was so clear.

Max's hands slid along his thighs until he could grip Morse's arse and their bodies rolled together with an eager friction. The heat between them was palpable and their mutual arousal was evident. Morse tugged and released Max's bottom lip with his teeth as he pulled slowly away.

"I missed you," Morse murmured huskily against Max's mouth as he plucked a few more of his shirt buttons undone to reveal a stretch of throat and chest. His lips moved across Max's jaw to drag his teeth lightly across the man's neck and nip a spot on his collarbone in a place he knew would get a measurable reaction.

"You would say that now," Max shivered under those teeth and rutted his hips up with a groan.

Morse continued his unbuttoning until he was tugging Max's shirt fully open and he could smooth his hands lightly across the man's chest. There was always some satisfaction in seeing Max's tattoos, like it was a special privilege. He leaned down to kiss the fine inked lines and changed his mind. With completely sinister intent, he sucked a patch of skin sharply and worried it with his teeth and tongue.

Max hissed and pinched his arse, "Morse-!"

Morse laughed and squirmed, rolling his hips again while he admired the now dark red spot he'd left beside the Vitruvian Man.

"Like a bloody teenager.." Max lifted his head to look down, saw the scarlet love-mark on his skin and then reclined back again with resignation.

In their past entanglements the doctor had been a bit more dominant and controlling of how things went but tonight he had released the reigns. Morse enjoyed Max for that, his definite and demanding presence, but to be trusted with even a small modicum of control felt like a privilege he shouldn't waste.

Morse slid further down, interrupting the delicious friction of their hips, and palmed Max firmly through his trousers while he placed another teasing bite on the softness of his stomach. The other's hips rose to the firmness of his hand and Morse could hear Max let out a puff of frustrated breath. When Morse looked up at him, cheek resting against the man's belly and massaging his cock slowly through the fabric, he found Max watching him with that intense and quiet admiration. Morse flushed as he always did and a warmth bloomed through him, unfurling in his chest and expanding outward until he tingled to his fingers and toes. For all his ego, Morse never felt worthy
of looks like that and all his attempts to return the sentiment seemed inadequate.

Because he realized, aware of and in spite of his own eager and foolish heart, Morse was entirely smitten.

When he'd met Max in the pub that night months and months ago he'd thought it amazing to meet a poetic doctor with whom he could hold a conversation, like he'd won some sort of one-night stand lottery. He'd left the next morning thinking that Max was the sort of man he'd like to see again and while he did, that core sentiment had never really changed. Max was brilliant and contentious. Others may have been put off by his cutting humor and his unorthodox methods but Morse had never cared about others' opinions. Neither of them seemed like wholly sociable creatures, yet they seemed to get on like a house on fire.

And there certainly was fire.

Morse knew that he was the lucky one to be able to get through the Max's walls, to appreciate his qualities in ways others didn't, even if he was sure the doctor wouldn't ever acknowledge his own appeal. He may not have been conventionally handsome but convention was boring. Max was singular and Morse actually found him rather distracting. He found himself staring too long at Max's hands when given a quiet moment. If his sleeves were rolled up he would drift into thinking about his tattoo. He enjoyed seeing Max in the thin and flimsy scrubs he wore in the lab more than he should, and if he thought too much about peeling him out of his ties or getting at his belly…

What was it he'd said once? *Sex on the brain.*

Morse got to work on the other man's belt hurriedly. He nudged Max to lift his hips and shimmied the fabric as far down as he could manage without having to get up. Between the tangle of trousers and Morse's unchanged position, Max was rather trapped, so when Morse dropped his head to nip once more at the soft skin of Max's stomach and place infuriatingly soft kisses around his navel, the doctor could only helplessly writhe against the other's weight. Morse moved lower to mouth Max's cock through the clinging fabric of his briefs and Max made a noise deep in his chest. He buried a hand in Morse's hair again and it was all the encouragement the detective needed. He kneaded Max's bollocks with slow and even pressure and nuzzled the firm length of him. The feel, the heat, the musk was all so desperately missed.

He'd missed him. The phrase returned unbidden with another skin tingle of affection.

Morse traced the length of the cock with his lips and open mouth, a tease and a promise, with a gentle scrape of teeth on the damp fabric and a hot exhale of breath. Max shuddered and tightened his hand in Morse's curls as he let out an audible exhale, and with a flick of a glance at the man looking rumpled and eager, Morse finally hooked his fingers in the elastic and freed Max from restraint.

It was Morse's turn to admire the man looking tousled and breathy and pink and the doctor's flush spread darker to his chest when he realized it. Max tried to tug him up, a gentle pressure in his hair, for a kiss or an embrace or simply pressing their bodies together, but as much as Morse wanted it, he wanted this more. Max's ruddy cock was already in his hand, hot and heavy, and he gave it a slow firm stroke from root to glistening tip. The doctor's head fell back with a sigh and Morse found he was too eager himself to drag out the teasing much longer. He dipped to taste him, a flick of tongue over the head and then a circling swipe of the salty precome, before he slid his lips over the crown and Max let out a deep rumble of pleasure.

Morse handled pleasuring Max as he handled everything, with obsessive focus. He took him as deep as possible, providing gentle steady suction until he felt a physical shudder and Max's hips
twitched and tried to writhe again. Morse chuckled around the length and withdrew, cheeks hollowed in a slow drag until he released the cock with a wet pop and cast his eyes up to the other man. Max was watching him again but instead of flushing with embarrassment, Morse instead was encouraged. He smiled against the tip before took him into his mouth again, this time a bit more swiftly. Max's hand tighten in Morse's hair as he began to move, lips slick and pliant and his tongue wicked and quick each time he pulled back. Each bob of his head was chased with a firm circling stroke of his hand and soon Max's hips were moving with him as best he could. Morse lost himself to the rhythm. It was blissfully mind blanking, no thoughts but the feel and the taste and movement. Nothing to pay attention to but Max's quivering thighs and hips, his low muttered curses, and the hitches and sighs in his breathing when he lost the words.

Passion could bring on all sorts of unusual confidences and when Morse looked up at Max again, the man twitching in need against the movement of his tongue, the doctor looked near to falling apart. His eyes were dark and his lips pink and parted and he panted out Morse's name with quiet desperation. Max was caught in his glance and the hand in Morse's hair dropped instead to brush his cheek. The fingers touched his face reverently and Morse was flooded with confidence. He hummed warmly around the cock in his mouth, almost a chuckle, before withdrawing with such an intense suction that it left Max stuttered unintelligibly. Morse made a bit of a show out of it now, dragging his tongue slowly down the shaft and back up, and when he wrapped his lips just around the head flicked his tongue again, Max finally shuddered dangerously.

"Morse.." Max's voice went higher in a recognizable warning, and when his breath hitched again, Morse took advantage.

He swallowed the man to his base and with the goal so near and present and he rushed headlong towards it like he did with everything. He wouldn't pull away, he wanted to taste him, please him, show him he'd missed him, missed this.

There it was again, that thought, insistent that he make Max understand.

*He'd missed him.*

Morse took Max quick and hot and deep, lips and tongue and firm stroking hands, and it didn't take long for another more immediate warning cry to erupt from the man. Max spilled moments later with Morse's lips still wrapped around him and it wasn't neat or tidy but nothing with them ever was. Morse stayed, working him gently, until Max's shuddering eased and when he finally pulled away he took a moment to enjoy the sight of Max looking unraveled, disheveled and completely undone.

Max shifted weakly when Morse slid away to pluck some tissues from the table to clean them both off. He then silently helped Max button back up. Morse sat on the sofa edge until the other man recovered enough to crook a beckoning finger at him. He was met with a kiss, grateful and slow, and he couldn't quite put his finger on it, but it was different somehow. Max was soft and pliant. There was a sated and lazy sensuality in him that tingled across Morse's skin like static. Max's arms went around him to pull him tight and close like he couldn't bear to be apart from him in that moment. Post-coital Max was not something he'd ever experienced sober and unaffected. Morse found a tight mess of feeling where words should have been and all he could do was turn as best he could to return the clinging embrace.

There was silence as they broke apart and pressed forehead to forehead. A dozen flowery quotations fluttered inadequately through his mind. A thousand more, too much, too telling, were dismissed. Morse hovered on the edge of a terrifying chasm, to speak would mean him saying something foolish - or something infuriating - and it choked him in fear of ruining the moment. He
was only saved by Max closing his eyes and tucking his head down into Morse's neck, taking another long moment to rest and recover.

"Give me a moment," Max sounded near to a chuckle.

Regardless of his own unsatisfied arousal, he was more eager to go to bed, to lay down with the other man and enjoy the momentary security with the least amount of physical effort. Even with the painkillers Morse was distantly aware of his complaining muscles and what it would feel like the next day. He sighed and ran one hand gently across the back of Max's head and the nicely shorn hair along his neck.

"Bed," Morse murmured into Max's hair, "It's been a trial of a week."

Max inhaled deeply and finally released him. He fixed his glasses and let out a single yawn, "You may be onto something."

The before bed rituals were swiftly completed once they got out of the study and Morse hadn't been able to strip out of his clothes fast enough once he'd seen the expanse of the other man's bed.

"I missed this bed," Morse stretched out across the mattress, right in the center of it, as Max sat on the edge.

"Ah, yes we come to the true crux of things..." Max slid under the duvet, his softness returned to something more in the usual range, and shoved Morse none-so-gently to give way.

"Ah! Easy, everything hurts," Morse rolled and rubbed his hand over his arm.

"Have you always been this much of a disaster?" Max leaned for the light and settled down once the room was plunged in darkness.

"What did Jerome say?" Morse turned to him, eyes bright even in the darkness.

"We don't sit around and talk about you, Morse," Max shifted closer and grunted with no room for argument, "Roll that way, you're the little spoon."

Morse complied, tucking an arm under his head as Max curled against his back and wrapped an arm around his middle, "You're trying to tell me that Jerome Hogg, gossip overlord of Oxford, told you absolutely nothing from the Good Old Pagan Morse Days?" The last few words were said in a gentle imitation of Jerome's particular cadence.

"I'm saying maybe he thinks enough of you not to air all of your dirty laundry in one go," Max shifted against him until he was pressing his lips gently to the back of Morse's neck. His hand ran up Morse's stomach and chest gently, "Relax, Morse, you're wound like a bloody spring."

He hadn't even realized his entire body was tensed and Morse put a concerted effort into relaxing. Max's fingers rubbed into his muscles as they moved and it helped greatly.

"All he said was that you were a clever chap and a bit of an old man, even back in school," Max's lips against moved against his neck as he spoke and with the addition of the still roaming hand, Morse was finally loosening up, "Said he thought you were a bit too romantic for Oxford."

Morse 'tched' and Max chuckled a bit, "Your sordid history is safe for the time being. Now relax."

Max's other hand was smoothing over his back, across his shoulder blades and down his spine, while he continued to stroke his chest and belly. Even with his exhaustion Morse couldn't fight off
the return of his unsatisfied arousal.

"I thought we were sleeping," Morse murmured.

"Oh you do complain, don't you?" Max pressed teeth into his neck and Morse's cock twitched. It also effectively shushed him.

Max's hands did all the work. They moved over every reachable inch of him in a slow, firm pressure. Even though Max was silent, with each touch he could hear the doctor's voice in his head, droll and rhythmic, going over the bones and muscles as he would cataloguing the wounds at a crime scene. It was surprisingly soothing.

*Scapula.. Thoracic vertebrae.. Lumbar.. Sacrum.. Coccyx.. Gluteus Maximus*..

Morse could feel the fingers dip further and he shifted his legs. Max's other hand still ran down chest and stomach, fingertips brushing his nipples, across his abdomen, the divots of his hips and the tops of his thighs, but never touched the aching curve of his cock that now bobbed eagerly against his belly.

Morse was turning to putty. Max's nails dragged across his waist and at the same time a slick finger was now curling around his arse and he couldn't ignore the feel of the cool circling digit against his entrance. He sighed when it eased in him but when he pushed back against the hand Max pressed his teeth to his neck again in warning.

*Relax.*

So he did. Morse closed his eyes and abandoned himself. He wasn't wrong about Max being good with his hands, they soothed down the front of him, never aggressive or demanding, keeping his body pliant, while from behind he was worked and stretched, slow and calm. The build of pleasure was gradual and gentle and only escalated when a second finger joined the first. They stretched and pressed further until a particular curl of digit hit that spot inside and Morse shuddered with an uncontrollably resonant moan.

Morse was already on a razor's edge between Max's coaxing hands. It didn't take long before those fingers, moving slowly in and out of him, touching him just right, sent him hurtling to his end. He never even touched his cock. Max had worked his body into an internal frenzy, all slow pooling heat and shocks of overwhelming pleasure, until he simply couldn't take anymore.

Morse came gasping Max's name into the pillow, as sparks exploded through his body and he spilled across his own belly and thigh. Max continued to soothe, to stroke his body all the way through it until his shudders died down and his body went rather limp. While Morse caught his breath Max leaned away, returning to clean him up, and then in silence, lay back beside him.

Morse had no words at first, he was overwhelmed, he was boneless and his exhaustion, while far from erased, had turned into something blissfully comfortable. He rolled onto his back, this time Max settling against his side and casting an arm and leg over him.

His brain ran through ridiculous admissions of adoration, poems and lines and scenes full of melodrama and saccharine anecdotes but nothing felt right. He snorted.

"What is it?" Max sounded tired finally.

"You've got me stuck on Pride and Prejudice," Morse admitted.

"While we may both be chock full of those things," Max sounded like he may choke with a sudden
laugh, "I must have missed a scene."

Morse felt his body flush at a now completely other thought of Darcy and Bingley in flagrante delicto, "No."

He turned his face towards Max, "More the bit about how much I ardently admire you..."

Max kissed him in the dark and he could feel the doctor's face warmed like his own, "Jerome was right. You are too romantic for Oxford."

Morse smiled to himself then and closed his eyes, "I'll go in late tomorrow. Pick me up after work? We'll go out to eat. Anywhere without a TV will be deserted while the Final is on."

Max actually chuckled and without hesitation, without a battle or a justification replied, "Alright."

Morse gave him a look in the dark, a bit disbelieving, "Easy as that?"

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, Morse."

"I'm not complaining..." He closed his eyes.

Max yawned against his shoulder before pressing his lips there, "Then yes, easy as that. Maybe I'll even drive you in."

Chapter End Notes

_I don’t love you as if you were a rose of salt, topaz,  
or arrow of carnations that propagate fire:  
I love you as one loves certain obscure things,  
secretly, between the shadow and the soul._  
--One Hundred Love Sonnets: XVII by Pablo Neruda--

This got a bit away from me. It's... a long one.

No regrets.

Notes on the smoking: In the Inspector Morse novels, Morse is in a continual struggle to quit smoking. Max has a cigarette in his mouth almost every time you see him. In Endeavour, both men smoke on camera at least once. I just found it an interesting detail and maybe I got a bit of a thing for a good smoking scene.
"I'm picking Joyce up from the train at four," Morse glanced at the inside of his wrist to check his watch, then checked his phone, and finding them in agreement, put the mobile back down, "and then we're off to the Thursday's for dinner."

Max and he lounged in the study, both in the laziest clothing they could muster after a long lie-in, breakfast and a shower that morning. The doctor was at the computer, flipping through a file and idly tapping things into a database as Morse stretched across the sofa with the newspaper and his second cup of coffee of the day.

Max drawled without looking up, "How uncharacteristically familial of you."

Morse sipped at his mug and pulled a bunched up jumper out of the couch cushions underneath him. He only noted after the patterned navy knit was over his head that it was (for once) one of his own, "'To be with those I like is enough.' I'm not back to full bagman duties but since I'm driving Thursday again, I can use the car while Joyce is here barring unforeseen circumstances."

"You're a policeman in Oxford. What exactly qualifies as unforeseen? Murdered with a church bell? Catapulted to death with bottles of wine? A tank?" Max glanced over his glasses at the other man with an amused closed-mouth smile. Morse's expression fell in dismay at the mental pictures Max had conjured, even if he was clueless as to what he was specifically referencing. He was positive the doctor had made some decision early on in their acquaintance that he would push Morse's boundaries of acceptance as far as he could as often as possible, and it was clear that he got great enjoyment out of watching the man squirm in more ways than one. If they hadn't become friends, they certainly would have been nemeses instead. His only consolation came from the very overt flicker of Max's gaze across the length of his body before he turned away.

"What will you do if there's an important case while your sister is here?"

"She's an adult," Morse propped up his knee and used it as a flat surface for the crossword as he idly chewed his pen and mulled over a clue, "She'll entertain herself."

The chaos of the spring and early summer and the affecting case at the girl's school were now nothing more than memories. Just like all of his accumulated old scars, the distress had been filtered and packed away, to ever mark him but never hinder, and he had moved on. This time, having Max had been a comfort. While there had been no more groundbreaking emotional developments between them since that night Morse showed up on Max's step with a half-formed apology and a prayer, the agreement that there was something between them had turned into an unspoken routine in the subsequent months that most people would call 'dating' but they never would. It was for the most part this: spending their free time together, having meals, and staying the night when schedules allowed. As much as it was a bit of a departure for both men, it didn't seem that the rest of the universe had even noticed. They were on the same page when it came to privacy, loathe to discuss anything about their free time at all as a rule, so besides one single evening that the pair of them had run into Monica on their way back to Morse's flat (which should have been expected really, she was everywhere), not a single soul seemed to have a clue.

When Max had dropped Morse at the station on the afternoon after the Blythe Mount case concluded, Morse had been cautious and concerned that someone may see him getting out of the
doctor's vehicle in the same clothes from the previous night.

When he was picked up later, after evidence and reports were handed in, the same pervading thoughts fluttered through his mind but not a single soul even glanced his way.

When the pair of them had their long awaited dinner together as Morse's treat, tucked away from the football-mad crowds, he'd been ashamed to realize that his worrying was more of a defensive dislike of people knowing his business than it was about what that business was.

When they had fallen into Max's bed together that night and pressed close, there was a new and comfortable intimacy. They talked into the wee hours and enjoyed a bit more of each other than they had known in their previous impulsive and almost exclusively sexual forays.

When the country around them imploded from England's World Cup loss, both men slept hard, wrapped up together, and tried to put the vulnerability of the past weeks behind them.

Morse had reclaimed his life bit by bit as time crawled on, though perhaps it was more that he was properly settling in for the first time in his nearly-a-year back in Oxford. He had started back up with his choral group and resumed his study for the sergeants exam. His sister Joyce had eventually bullied her way into a scheduled visit on the week of Guy Fawkes, this week, and Morse was sure his step-mother hadn't easily agreed to it. It seemed that his sister had also inherited their father's stubbornness and she was too old for Gwen to stop her.

"How's the desperate clawing back into Mr. Bright's good graces going?" Max said a bit distantly as he hit a few more keystrokes.

Morse scratched a hand through his hair then attempted to flatten it. He was probably do for a haircut but Max had once passingly mentioned liking it a bit longer and he'd been putting it off. "I drew up a few well worded emails from him to HQ. He was pleased with himself more than me. That's about as adventurous as he gets really, when it comes to extending extra effort. Apparently constables are only suited to be secretaries," Morse sighed and drummed his pen on his knee with a reverberating tap of plastic, "Oh, and Jakes and I wrapped up that robbery case. Boring, but Thursday was happy with some 'real police work'." He air quoted.

Morse's eyes then rose to the doctor in his chair, "He won't let me near Chard's murder case. I think he actually may have Strange keeping me out of the room."

Max hummed without looking away from his monitor.

"Not going to tell me anything?"

"Not your case, Morse," Max turned in his chair to cast the other man an amused, but no nonsense look, "I am not your personal pathologist."

"He's missing something, is all," Morse grumbled before sipping his mug again, "I'm sure of it."

Max hummed once more and Morse was sure the other man was thinking what everyone else was, that he shouldn't be questioning the work of a superior and it wouldn't endear him to anyone of influence in the nick. But Morse also knew that Max had sense and knew him well enough to realize that if murder was going unsolved than he couldn't leave it go.

When his coffee finished, so did his puzzle and Morse checked his watch again. He stood and stretched, "I should put real pants on. Are you working right now? It's your day off."

"No rest for the wicked, Morse," Max again cast him an eye over his glasses, watching closely as
Morse's jumper rode up to expose an inch of skin. A strawberry-red love bite stood out brightly on his hip and the doctor got a momentarily smug expression.

"Don't I know it," Morse snorted wryly as he drifted behind Max's chair and rested his hands on the man's shoulders. His thumbs pressed and rubbed lightly into the back of Max's neck and the doctor sighed and dropped his head to his chest before he struck a few final keystrokes and saved his work. Finished, he turned the office chair on its axis and tugged Morse down into his lap. The detective huffed to being manhandled and squirmed lightly until, under the weight of the both of them, the base of the chair gave a sudden and alarming crack. The entire seat shivered as if it may give way at any moment and they both froze as if breathing would be the final straw that sent them crashing to the ground. The collapse never came and they exhaled with relief, faces pressed into each other's necks with soft chuckles, before they met in a warm kiss.

"You need a new chair," Morse murmured against Max's lips as one hand curled around the back of the man's head to brush satisfyingly across the nicely shorn hair on his neck.

"Or I need to lose a few pounds," Max's fingers were already under the hem of the jumper and exploring the warm skin of Morse's waist.

"Mmmm, no definitely not," Morse replied definitely as his free hand smoothed over the other man's belly and side.

"Go get dressed," Max was pink after the moment dragged out a big longer with kisses and mutual roaming hands. He finally squeezed Morse around the middle and released him, "You're having dinner with your boss and his family. Make yourself presentable."

In the months since this arrangement began Morse had become comfortable in Max's house and inevitably bits of his belongings ended up scattered about, though he was far from living there. Even in his own flat Max had a spare toothbrush, a loose rotation of clothing and an extra phone charger that had all taken up residence. They were lucky if they even spent two nights a week together, between work and other engagements, but they'd started making time when they could. Neither Morse or Max were paragons of communication, they weren't even fully informed on one another's day-to-day, but they'd started making time when they could. Neither Morse or Max were paragons of communication, they weren't even fully informed on one another's day-to-day, but Morse felt finally on more steady ground with Max and the casual nature of this suited them.

In the bedroom, Morse had pulled on a clean shirt and now hopped in place as he pulled a pair of dark jeans up his thighs. Max appeared and reclined against the door frame with his hands behind his back as he watched the detective bounce until the denim was up around his thin hips. When Morse began to push the ends of his shirt into his waistband, Max's usual neutral frown deepened into a judgemental one.

"No. Absolutely not," He was on Morse in moments, yanking the shirt out of his hands and loose, "You'll not be seen leaving my house with a shirt tucked into your jeans. You don't need to brown nose Thursday by dressing like him. I do wonder sometimes about which decade you think you exist in." All the while he admonished him he was buttoning the pants and adjusting them and straightening his shirt.

Morse looked mildly amused but didn't stop Max from fussing. Normally he'd absolutely do battle over something so overly critical and frivolous just for the satisfaction of the argument, but he was leaving soon and knew the pair of them may not see each other outside of work for the next foreseeable stretch of days. They hadn't talked about Max meeting Joyce and he assumed at some point in her visit they would get around to it, but like most things that should have been talked about, it had been pushed to the wayside. To introduce his sister would require a bit more thought into the nature of their relationship than he was ready to deal with right now, yet every
time they parted he felt like he should say something more than goodbye, something affectionate or
endearing, something so the other knew this was important to him, but it never came. Maybe part
of him wanted to hear it from Max first, the man always shuttered about his feelings, always
restrained until Morse himself broke the dam of communication. He didn't need a name for this, he
didn't even need grand confessions, but he often felt that when it came to Max Debryn he did a lot
of reading between the lines.

"Are you dressing me now?" Morse had reached for Max just as the man stepped away.

The doctor fetched the blue jumper again, gave it a cautious sniff, and brought it back to Morse,
"No, but put that on. Brings out your eyes. What I am doing is saving a life. I swore an oath you
know."

Morse's brows rose to the comment about his eyes, "Does 'do no harm' really apply? Are you
implying that I may die from a fashion faux pas?"

"No, Morse. As always, not everything is about you. It's about me," Max's forehead furrowed
seriously as he tugged the jumper down and rested his hands on Morse's waist, "I may die from
your fashion faux pas."

"You're a very odd man," Morse's own quick smile couldn't penetrate Max's severe deadpan.

Thankfully, a kiss could.

Or a few.

He didn't have to leave immediately.

"God, she's lovely," Joyce sighed when she saw the Jag for the first time. She looked reluctant to
even drag a hand across the glossy black paint job for fear it would leave smudges.

"It's a car, not a woman. You're as bad as Pop," Morse frowned. Their father's career as a cab driver
had instilled in both of them a love of automobiles. Morse may have fought being like his father
tooth and nail, but he couldn't deny the appeal of a nice car and Joyce had embraced it fully in
making it her trade.

"I can't drive her, can I?" Joyce clearly ignored him.

"No. It's a police vehicle," he unlocked with the key fob and as she opened the passenger door and
sat down, he loaded her couple of bags into the boot. When Morse joined her, she was clearly
restraining herself from reaching out to fiddle with things.

"So that's the police radio?"

"Yes," he started the engine.

"Which means we can't fool around with it."

"Absolutely not!"

"Does it have lights and a siren?"
Morse cut her a narrow glance, "Yes. No, we will not be using them before you even ask."

Joyce made a face as he pre-empted her, one that implied he was being a drag even if she didn't say it. After a quiet moment, "Don't suppose I could peep under the bonnet-"

"Joycie."

"Alright," Joyce flipped her hands up in defense a moment before they dropped back to her lap.

They had been closest when they were young, when Morse was a teenager and had freshly lost his mother. Both of them, previously only children as far as they knew, were thrust together as new siblings and under their father and Gwen's yoke, they were one another's only allies and companions on the home front. Morse always took the brunt of punishments and the blowback for disobedience, but in typical fashion he handled being a big brother very seriously when it was thrust upon him. It was his job. Unfortunately, that earnest dedication to being a responsible older sibling came with distance as they aged, even more so after he left home.

"You look good," She noted with a smile at him, "Better than last time. New clothes maybe? Did you get yourself a girlfriend?"

Morse snorted at that, "No."

"Boyfriend?"

Morse cut her another withering look and responded with deflection, "How's your mother?"

"Alright, considering," Joyce shrugged and looked out the window.

"Considering?" He gave her a glance.

"Considering her husband died not a year ago?" His sister's head snapped back towards him in utter disbelief.

Oh. That. Yes, "Right."

"How are you doing?" Morse turned the wheel, "With all that?"

Joyce gave him a soft look, "Better. You?"

"Fine," Morse said rather abruptly. He gave her a look, a quick smile that was not as reassuring as he'd like, and moved on, "And you on the romance front? You talked about your friend Di a lot last time I saw you."

"Oh she's brilliant, but just a friend," But Joyce had perked, "Mum doesn't know but I've been seeing a bloke."

"The one from work?"

"Oh god no, that was ages ago," Joyce rolled her eyes lightly and tilted her head to look out at the passing buildings. Morse took the long way and cruised them along the scenic route so she could look at the city with no touristy pressure while she rambled on about the bloke she met at the pub who worked in a shop and played the guitar and liked 'literally everything' she liked. His name was Ted. The last one had been a John. He vaguely recalled that before that there were a string of one date mix-n-match app hookups that he hadn't wanted to know anything about. When he'd come home during their father's last days, they'd sat out on the porch and smoked and had beers while
Gwen was asleep and Joyce had simply talked at him for hours about the state of her life. Morse had always exploited his freedom to leave home, unbound by familial duties for the most part, but Joyce felt obligated to be home and help care for her parents. In their village, she couldn't even pop down the shop without someone asking after her mother and father. It had been stress relief to talk to him about anything that wasn't their father dying several rooms away and how her mum was coping.

"It's a bit weird, innit?" Joyce finally said as the car pulled up outside of the Thursday's house. The windows were golden and inviting and Morse could see bodies moving beyond the curtains.

"What?"

"Us going to eat at your boss's house. I wouldn't go to eat with my boss. I'd probably not even get invited," She looked skeptical.

"You also work in a garage," Morse's brows lifted.

Joyce looked momentarily offended, "And what's that mean?"

"Our work structures are entirely different, that's all. Inspector Thursday is... a mentor. I'm his bagman," He had of course defined his role by using the role itself, but explaining the dynamic was more conversation than he was willing to have on the topic. Thursday's opinion of him, he found, was very important but he didn't feel the need to explain that to his sister.

"Mentor?" Her brows bobbed.

Morse looked momentarily stormy.

"You're such an old man! I've only ever heard anyone say bagman on the telly," Joyce reached out and shoved his shoulder lightly, "All I'm saying is that you could have just taken me to a pub to meet some of your friends and have a pint. It just feels a bit," she paused and made a face, "formal to meet your boss as soon as I get off the train."

"The Thursdays are nice people. It's not formal," Morse defended, "And it was nice of them to invite us."

Was she always like this? Was every Morse argumentative? When he glanced over at Joyce to gauge her reaction, she was simply smoothing her fly-aways in the mirror. He felt suddenly foolish for getting riled.

"You'll like them. I promise," Morse huffed and heaved himself out of the car, "Now, come on."

After Morse's quick knock, there was the sound of thudding of feet in the hallway on the other side of the door, followed by a muffled and familiar bellow from the depths of the house. When the door was yanked open, both Joan and Sam were there though Sam was the one with his hand on the knob and he looked eager despite obvious efforts not to. Joan hung back a step, leaning out from the doorway to the parlor.

"Hullo Morse," Sam grinned and his eyes darted to Joyce quickly.
"Morses. Plural," Joan corrected, "We've never had two Morses before."

Morse could feel his sister's eyes on him as it dawned on her that he still only went by his last name. He had always gone by Morse since school and she knew it, but she must have assumed that in pastures new and with the passage of time that he may have grown out of it. He was sure she was working out how she was supposed to address him now, knowing her brother's idiosyncrasies well enough to realize it may be an issue. They'd never actually socialized together in mixed company before.

"Sam, Joan" Morse smiled politely, "This is Joyce. Joyce, Joan and Sam Thursday."

"Nice to meet you, Joyce. Sam was just saying how curious he was about you-" She was shot a dirty cut of eyes from her brother, "Nothing shifty, just if you were like your brother at all!"

"Nice to meet you both. You'll have to let me know," She gave him a look and a smirk, "Not too alike I hope..."

Morse had never given thought to whether they were similar. She was dark haired and hazel eyed and in contrast he had his father's coloration and his mother's slight build. Besides a smattering of freckles across Joyce's nose there wasn't much they shared in appearance. She even spoke with a stronger accent, while he had trained himself out of the northern lilt as best he could. There were definitely similar personality quirks but Morse had always felt so much of an outsider in the family he assumed himself to be entirely self contained.

"Don't hold them up on the stoop!" Mrs. Thursday passed through the hallway holding some discarded clothing to hang on a hook, "Take their coats if you're going to act like house staff, Mr. Bates."

Sam waved them in with a huff at his mother, "C'mon in."

"That a new jacket Morse?" Joan looked approving, "Barbour?"

Sam accepted Joyce's and Morse's coats and checked his label without asking, "Yeah, it is. Nice, Morse. Mum, I need a new coat!"

"The hell you do!" Mrs. Thursday's voice came from the dining room, "Stop buying new trainers every three weeks! And watches, christ on a raft. You're glued to your mobile. What do you even need watches for?"

"Fashion," Sam yelled back.

Morse wasn't sure why his wardrobe had been a topic of conversation lately but he had found his clothing being commented on with increasing frequency. It was true that he'd gone and gotten a few new things but it wasn't like it had been some epic life changing event. He and Max had been out to dinner and were walking back to the car when they had passed a shop and Morse had eyed up a coat in the window.

"Is a proposal inevitable?" Max had said with his usual droll edge.

"What?"

"You and that coat. In lieu of 'why don't you marry it', why don't you just go in and buy it?"

"I don't need a coat," Morse had shrugged and frowned. He was often frugal with his money to a fault.
"Yes, you do. Your mackintosh is practically an old worn potato sack and Winter is Coming, Jon Snow," Max's arm had curled through his and he'd pulled him towards the shop door.

He'd spent the first few minutes glaring at the neatly folded color coded rows of menswear in defiance that his current wardrobe was in any way lacking, but eventually Morse had caved. By the time they'd left he had picked out a completely different jacket, a couple better fitting pairs of pants and a few shirts and jumpers (with help). Ever since, everyone had been commenting on his clothes. Did people really spend that much time worrying about what anyone wore?

Morse nodded to the Thursdays with a relaxed shrug. "I thought I was do for a new one."

"I was just telling him he was looking better in the car," Joyce agreed.

"Come in, loves. Make yourselves at home," Mrs. Thursday appeared again and stepped in close to give them cheek kisses. Morse's was accepted with tensing of surprise and awkward shifting.

"Morse, really, you act like you aren't here every morning. Fred's cooking tonight. He's in the kitchen."

"MORSE!" Inspector Thursday's voice boomed from the back of the house, "Come in here and taste this."

Joyce, thankfully, seemed to fall in easily with the Thursdays and was content take up in the living room with Sam and Joan. The TV was on and they all had their phones out in seconds, talking about this or that.

Morse found his sister's adaptability and sociability enviable as he moved down the front hall towards the kitchen where it was a few degrees warmer, smelled very good, and he discovered his governor with his cell phone in one hand and a wooden spoon in the other as he stirred a pot.

"There you are. Where's your sister?" The older man had his reading glasses perched on the end of his nose as he peered at something on his phone screen.

Morse was horrified to discover the man had his plaid button up shirt tucked into his belted jeans. Bloody Max. Before this morning he would have never have looked or noticed, "She's in with Joan and Sam."

"They getting on? Good. Sam's been on and on about him and the lads becoming YouTube stars for a bloody week and he needs fresh ears to talk off," Thursday's eyes still hadn't left his screen, "Now come here and taste this and tell me if it's missing something."

The older man finally dropped his mobile into his shirt pocket and lifted the wooden spoon with a cupped hand underneath as he offered it out, but when his glance finally fell on Morse, his eyebrows raised with interest, "Oh, is that a new jumper? Very nice."

Win swept by him to grab drinks and added, "Isn't it? Brings out his eyes."

Bloody Max.

"How long have you been married, Mrs. Thursday?" Joyce was taking a second helping of
something and Morse had just finished his own seconds and was considering his level of fullness.

He'd never had family dinners like the ones he had with the Thursdays. At home, his step-mother had always acted like any excess food gone into his own mouth was a meal robbed from his sister. It certainly made eating less appealing when he was made to feel guilty for it. Even in college, when he ate with friends out at cafes or was invited to their rare posh family dinners, or even in the dining hall, it felt unusual for him to indulge too much. Everyone was so easy and smooth and content, they picked at this and that, cool and balanced and he wanted to be that way too. It had felt offensive to want to fill his belly, like the warm sated feeling would bog him down to a sluggish pace and once he fell behind everyone else there would be no catching up. Somewhere along the line he'd convinced himself that the edging gnaw of slight hunger kept him sharp, kept him honed and on his toes, and that the subtle buzz of alcohol could dampen the empty feeling enough to get him to the next required meal. Food was to keep his body going and nothing more. Fuel. Only recently, with the Thursdays and with Max, had he realized he could try and take the time to appreciate it. It was the first time in his life that not eating had become the bigger offense in pleasant company.

Mrs. Thursday cut a challenging look to her husband, "It's our silver anniversary this week, isn't it Fred?"

"I didn't forget!" Fred insisted, "Already got you something too, didn't I Morse?"

Morses nodded obediently, "He did."

He'd actually helped his governor pick out a matching jewelry set online and have it delivered to the station so the surprise wouldn't be ruined if it came to the house.

Twenty-five years sounded like such a long time, but all that time with someone you loved? Someone you didn't want to be away from? It appealed to every unrealistically romantic bone in Morse's body. Only once in his life had he felt that certainty and the end result had been his ruination. He didn't dare think too long on it now.

"Happy Anniversary! How did you two meet?" Joyce asked and watched the Thursday siblings give each other looks as if they had heard the story a dozen times or more.

"Oh you know, the old fashioned way, friends with football tickets. None of this internet malarkey," Fred said as he tore off a piece of bread to eat.

"We were a bit impulsive," Win admitted, "Fred was in the army and we got engaged rather fast. Then he was sent off you know, what with the Troubles, and on his first bit of leave we just went ahead and took the plunge."

"No reason to wait," Fred said matter-of-factly, "Sit around too long and someone would've snatched you up, ring or no ring."

Win chuckled lightly and Morse did too. He'd never seen his parents happy together and he often thought that his birth had been the beginning of the end for them. He knew there must have been great love there once, his mother wouldn't have been with his father otherwise, and even after her death her memory hung like a spectre between himself, his father and Gwen. They had never appeared to be an overly affectionate couple in front of him but Joyce had been raised well-adjusted and she held quite a bit of affection for her mum. It made Morse wonder, truly, if it hadn't just been his presence all along that added sourness to their household. Maybe it had been his fault, the awkward teenager thrust on a happy family at the wrong moment. He knocked everything askew, a jam in the cogs of their homelife. The Thursdays had never made him feel that way. They were
Morse didn't understand how they did it and he didn't always believe it could be so easy, but he liked them and he liked it here, even if he expressed that poorly.

"Do you have someone, Joyce?" It was Joan this time, steering away from her parents reminiscing rather expertly, "Talking to Morse about his private life is like getting blood from a stone."

"Oh, no one serious," Joyce said coolly.

Morse snorted, and like a good sibling, called her out, "Bollocks. You should have heard her on and on about some bloke in the car. Ted, was it?"

Joyce gasped, affronted, and forgot her expert steering around his first name that had been so successful all night, "Ya are a rat, Endeavour Morse!"

The Thursday siblings froze with unexpectedly wide eyes. They'd never heard his name before, though they knew his initial. Morse's avoidance had turned into a mystery for them. Sam especially, and E names ended up collected to become a bombardment of guesses when the mood struck. His favorites thus far had been Ebeneezer, Eldridge, Eggbert and funny enough, Eazy-E.

He'd had to google that one.

Morse's eyes fell to his plate, Inspector Thursday's brow furrowed at his children, and Mrs. Thursday, bless her soul, piped up with a, "Dessert anyone?"

Morse, despite the hot flush under his collar, couldn't help his own little laugh and, as if given permission, everyone else joined in.

"You were right, they were nice," Joyce finally admitted in the car on the way home. After revealing to Inspector Thursday that she was a mechanic, she'd managed a supervised inspection of the Jag and a peep under the bonnet. She'd even made plans to go shopping with Mrs. Thursday and Joan by the time they had left the house.

"Still a bit weird though. Promise me whenever you get a significant other you don't take them to your boss's house first?"

"Oh, shut up," The beleaguered Morse admired his sister's easy nature but was unaccustomed to her unfiltered opinions. He was quiet for a while, long enough where it seemed that conversation had simply run dry, but Morse in his disjointed way, spoke up again just as he was parking the car right in front of his building, "They liked you more than me, I think."

"Well you don't do yourself any favors, Ender," Joyce commented as they both emerged from the car and fetched her bags from the boot, "You act like an international man of mystery with your one name and the whole shy and brooding routine."

"I don't brood," He murmured with mild amusement.

Joyce's use of his old childhood nickname plucked at some small warm and reminiscent part of him. He'd never thought himself shy but ever since he was a boy his introspective nature had come across that way. He'd done his share of troublemaking when he could but he had always been someone who preferred just being left alone. It certainly wasn't a 'routine' as Joyce said. People just
sometimes felt as much like puzzles as complicated cases did, puzzles that couldn't be solved, puzzles that often gave little satisfaction once you worked at unravelling them.

In the lift on the way up she brought it up again as if her views on the topic hadn't been fully expressed, "You know you can just go change your name. To whatever you want. Godzilla or Harry Styles or Wagner or something."

"You're making a bigger thing of this than it is, Joyce," Morse sighed and when the lift shuddered to a stop on his floor, he gesturing ahead for her to get out

"Am I, though? You didn't even warn me about what to call you and then I get tossed into a family dinner scenario and I'm stumbling about over my own brother's first name," She stepped out, waited for him to lead the way, then dutifully followed while casting eyes back and forth at the succession of silent doorways, all painted the same solid kelly green, "God, I sound stupid but should I really just call you Morse from now on?"

It felt foreign when it passed through Joyce's lips. She knew more and better of him than Just Morse implied.

"No," He opened his flat door, "It sounds bizarre when you say it. Endeavour is fine from you and Ender still works. Now, in."

Morse had made an effort to tidy up in preparation for her visit. He'd even recruited Strange in acquiring, transporting and delivering a futon so they both would have somewhere to sleep while she was here. He could be organized when a concerted effort was made so the rather neat looking flat that opened before them was not entirely unappealing. The walls were a bit bare but his shelves were full of books and music and his kitchenette was clean. Any bit of clutter beyond a few days old newspapers had been either purged or tucked away. He'd scoured rather closely to make sure all of Max's things were gathered up and put into the corner of one his bedroom drawers. Unwanted conversations aside, he didn't want anything to happen to them.

Joyce smiled a bit and drifted around the small flat as if it were enchanting, but perhaps to a girl who had never been able to leave her parents home, it was. She smiled and peered out the single window that looked onto a side alley and the flat grey of the neighboring roof before turning back to him, "It's very you."

"Thank you, I think," Morse shook his head. He moved to the bedroom and plopped her bag, "You can have the bed. I'll sleep on the futon."

"What a gentleman," She chuckled, "Do you have somewhere I can plug in my phone? After the train and all, I'm drained."

"Oh, right by the door," He motioned. His own phone was plugged in by his stereo system and set on a side table before he went to the fridge, "Do you want a drink?"

"Oh, please, what do you have?" She moved to the offered outlet and paused, "Oh, there's already a charger in here. Doesn't fit. Hm."

Morse glanced quickly before he realized he'd missed Max's spare charger. The other man's phone was newer and took a different cord. At the first opportunity, it would be spirited away into the drawer with the rest of the doctor's belongings. For now, Morse suddenly felt like he was keeping some dire secret but his sister didn't seem to think twice about unplugging it and setting her own phone up in its place. He ran through a mental checklist one final time, ensuring that he'd hidden anything questionable away. The last thing he needed was her finding a box of condoms or lube or
something. Hopefully she didn't go through his drawers...

"Ender?"

"Hm?" He blinked when he realized he was staring at her with wide, startled eyes.

"What do you have to drink?"

Joyce had turned on his long unused television and after they both changed into more comfortable clothes, the siblings flattened out the futon and sat around and shared the end of a bottle of brandy. Joyce had dragged his blanket around herself and looked as if she had no lower body now amongst a swathe of baby blue fleece.

"I can't believe you still have that shirt," Morse had let her pick the programme and now was stuck with *Britain's Got Talent* playing in his flat for the first time in his life. A rather terrifying young man with a ventriloquist dummy was currently performing and it was all he could do not to have to look.

"This?" Joyce plucked the old careworn tee that bore the logo and motto of Lonsdale College, "It's one of my most treasured possessions. My big brother sent it to me when he went away to college. You've never been very good at the big holidays.. Or birthdays."

"Sorry," Morse sipped his brandy lightly while frowning. He'd always been good about sending a card but it was often late, "I've been trying."

"You have. I was swimming in this shirt when you first sent it to me. I always slept in it like a nightdress. Now it fits and it's vintage!" Joyce smiled and nudged him with her shoulder. She cast her own eyes to his ancient bike on a mount above some of his lowset book shelves, "I can't believe you still have that."

"I had it in storage but my friends insisted on bringing it to the flat when I moved," He had sort of hovered a second too long on the word 'friends' as if to admit such a thing was locking him into something he wasn't quite ready for.

"You used to constantly take off on that thing when you first moved in with us," Her eyes drifted to the TV a moment.

"I would just ride and end up at a manor house or an estate or a church.." He gave her a look, "You should do it sometime. It's interesting."

She gave him a sympathetic smile, something that was just a bit patronizing as much as it was kind, "Not my thing and I would probably drive."

"Like Pop," Morse snorted as his phone buzzed on the table across the room. He drained his glass and moved to fetch it, tossing himself back down in the futon and stealing a bit of the blanket to cover his feet.

**MD [ how did it go? ]**

"Who is it?" Joyce's brows lifted inquisitively.
Morse gave her a pursed lipped look, "A friend."

"One of the ones who helped you move?"

"Yes, actually," Morse cast his eyes to the phone screen.

[ Went well. She's already been adopted.]
[ Home now. ]

"Well am I going to meet them?" Joyce lifted her brows, "Do you know any quality single blokes?"

"What about Ted or John or whoever!?!" Morse half-laughed.

"I'm on vacation in a different city. What if I meet a single man of a decent fortune??"

Morse tapped another text out with a head shake.

[ Are all sisters a pain in the arse? ]

"So when do I meet them? Your friends?" Joyce said again.

"They're all cops, Joyce," Jim would be fine. He was gentleman enough and from what he could tell he hadn't stuck it out with Maureen for very long. So long as Joyce didn't latch onto Jakes. Never Jakes.

"And the doctor. The one from the hospital."

Morse almost laughed, "You aren't really his type."

His phone buzzed.

MD [ absolutely ]

"If you say so," Joyce cut him a look and finished her glass. She then stretched and yawned pushed herself up. "You want me to leave this on, I'm going to turn in and call mum."

"No," He snorted and was grateful to see the TV turned off but Morse froze when Joyce came over, leaned down, and kissed him in the center of his forehead. He looked absolutely flabbergasted, "Since when do we do that?"

"Since now, you arse. G'night Ender. Thanks for letting me come visit. I'll stop being so pushy, I swear."

Morse cast her a sympathetic eye and softened, "I think it's a family trait. Night, Joycie."

She fetched her phone from the charger and after putting her glass into the sink, disappeared into the bedroom.

Morse sunk back into the futon and finally spread out under the blanket. He stared at his text with Max a moment and tried to think of something to say. He wanted to talk to him more, he discovered, but a phone call would be a bit much. Was asking about his day too trite?

[ She wants to meet my friends. ]
[ Is there any chance I could keep her away from Jakes if we do a pub night? ]

He started to type again, something like 'she remembers you from the hospital' but the dots began
to dance and he watched them raptly.

MD [ i could certainly run interference ]

Morse smiled.

[ A scholar and a gentleman. ]

He could feel the familiar giddy flutter in his chest and tossed his phone into the blanket mass as if that would in some way help him filter the emotion. Morse stood up and cut the lights and checked the locks before settling back in just as his phone buzzed once more.

MD [ i aim to please ]

Morse was quick on the response this time, settling in to his temporary bed and momentarily wishing he was elsewhere.

[ No you don't. ]

MD [ no i don't ]

The response was almost instantaneous as if Max had been typing at the same time. Morse grinned in the light of the phone screen.

MD [ work tomorrow ]

Morse looked at the time.

[ There is a time for many words, and a time for sleep. ]

MD [ exit light, enter night ]

Morse had to google that one.

MD [ are you on rota? ]

[ Nothing short of homicide. Thursday's words. ]

MD [ so always a chance then ]

[ :/ ]

He could see Max typing again. Then it stopped. Then it started again.

MD [ night morse zzz ]

He wrestled through responses in his head. He even stared at the emoji keyboard before he felt foolish about it.

[ Goodnight ]

Morse woke up to the low sound of the television playing a morning talk show and the sounds of Joyce eating something rather noisily out of a bowl. The environmental sounds weren't actually what stirred him. Instead it was the buzz of his phone next to his head at half-battery and half under
his pillow.

He slapped it as he rubbed his face in the bedding with groggy distress. The phone buzzed again. Morse rolled onto his back, swiped to answer, and cast his arm across his eyes as he groaned, "Morse."

"Sorry, matey, I know you've got your sister visiting," It was Strange. Morse cringed internally, "But we've got a body. You want to call Inspector Thursday or should I?"

Chapter End Notes

This bunch of story is set around the events of Sway. In the show he's in a fairly stable relationship with Monica and I thought it would be nice to give him some stability here- at least for a little while >.>

Joyce only appears in two episodes ever - Home (Endeavour) and Cherubim & Seraphim (Inspector Morse) but she is the woman that Morse seems to always act the most comfortable and normal with. By the time he is old, he's fairly present in her and her family's lives, even if not always reliable. He also helps pay for his step-mother's care, despite her continued hatred of him, well into all of their old age. Family is something Morse always has struggled on the topic of. I wanted to explore her a bit more, their dynamic, and how they may be similar having shared the same dad - who we also have only viewed through Morse's narrow scope.
When Morse and Thursday arrived at the North Oxford home that would serve as their scene of crime, the usual collection of vehicles were already assembled. PC Strange was leaning against the side panel of a police car with a dark skinned woman who shakily accepted a light for her cigarette while simultaneously clutching a bright red cooler bag with a bold white logo.

“Food delivery driver found her, according to Strange,” Morse relayed.

“So she ordered herself food?” Thursday wound between the Jaguar and Max’s familiar green Rover as they made for the door.

“Scheduled in advance through an app. Regular thing for her, always food enough for one, always on the same days of the week. There was no sign of a break in but the door was left ajar,” Morse paused as they were given scene suits to tug on, gloves and shoe covers before they were allowed past the police lines.

Max was sitting on the living room sofa, right above the lifeless body of the middle-aged woman, with his arm draped across the back as if he were just casually spending his afternoon there. He’d clearly been waiting patiently for CID and was well finished with his cursory examination of the body and surroundings.

“Doctor.”

“Inspector. Morse,” Debryn’s greeting was ever constant in its professionalism. With everyone gathered finally, he hunched towards the corpse without pause and began the usual routine, “The victim was strangled from behind with a silk stocking. Real silk, by my examination.”

“Vivien Haldane, forty-three,” Morse ran through the preliminaries that Strange had provided him, “Her husband, Rufus Haldane, is a don at St. Saviours.”

“We’ll have to pay him a visit,” Thursday drifted around the room and looked at the decor, the mantle, the electronics, while Morse took a moment to look at the body. He kept his usual uncomfortable distance but got enough of a view that he could glance her over and absorb the necessary details.

“The stocking isn’t hers,” Max noted, “Not from her person anyway. Her garments are mostly intact, with the exception of her underwear which was balled up in her handbag. Physical relations had taken place within an hour or two of her death,” His eyes finally lifted to the detectives, “Nothing to say unwillingly.”

They met eyes and Max tilted his head, “Sex and murder. A veritable Silk Stalkings.”

Morse frowned.

Jakes had appeared in his usual miasma of sickly sweet mint vape scent and hung about in the doorway until most of the conversation had stopped, “The sex is in line with the Curran-Matthews killing. And the strangulation.”

“But the stocking’s new,” Morse noted as he rubbed his chin in thought, “Odd too, don’t you think?
Real silk stockings are, well, a bit pricey I think?"

Jakes nodded and moved into the room to loom over the body like a bird of prey, “Yeah, most gals go without these days. Or they go with leggings or tights. I mean stockings aren’t exactly comfortable and you don’t want to spend that much on something that’d likely pull as easy as any other…”

“You know from experience, do you?” Morse snorted.

“Not all of us are too up our own arses to have a bit of fun, Morse. I done my share of midnight Rocky Horror showings. Ya boy’s no stranger to fishnets and heels.”

“Oh, *Rocky*,” Max said with the appropriate Tim Curry infused affectation, “Or were you a Frank?”

Jakes flashed a crooked grin, “You won’t believe it, Doc. A pretty dashing Brad if I do say so myself.”

“A rose tint my world…” Max smirked.

Morse wasn’t sure why, but being out of that particular loop sent a low tremor of annoyance through him. He focused on the work instead and turned away from their conversation to do his own circuit about the room.

Thursday, thankfully, stayed focused, “Wasn’t Curran-Matthews strangled by hand?”

“And Mrs. Merchant as well, at the beginning of the month,” Morse added. Despite the obvious differences, he was sure this was all headed towards the conclusion he’d suspected all along. He was convinced these killings were connected.

“I thought the husband was charged in that’n?” Thursday mused. He’d wandered to the windows, peered through curtains to see what views of the street could be made and if there were any visible CCTV cameras, then drifted back.

“Chard’s case,” Morse said loftily and he caught Max’s amused glance in the corner of his eye, “But I may have glanced at the case files.”

Jakes let out a bark of a laugh and Thursday huffed and shook his head at the ceiling a moment, “Chard’ll love that.”

Jakes chuckled through his rebuttal, ”But Mrs. Merchant was found outdoors-”

Morse could already feel the argument building in his head, like starting from the edges of a puzzle to form the frame and working his way in. He straightened and gestured pointedly, “But Mrs. Curran-Matthews *was* at home.”

“If it was the same bloke-”

“It was,” Morse was firm and getting more insistent as he counted on his fingers, “Mrs. Merchant, Mrs. Haldane, and Mrs. Curran-Matthews. All strangled.”

“So other than the fact that they are just three women-” Jakes had moved back to the door, happy to put distance between himself and Morse as he gained momentum.

“Three *married* women,” Morse clarified and suddenly it all clicked. The piece he’d been missing, “Not one of whom was found wearing a wedding ring.”
All the men in the room blinked and looked at one another, then finally they all looked at Max. The doctor, very rightly, lifted the delicate curve of Mrs. Haldane’s limp hand and showed the room the pale naked ring of skin where her wedding band should have been.

Debryn couldn’t help looking mildly impressed, “No ring.”

After they returned to the station to inform Mr. Bright of their findings, Thursday and Morse were off to question Mrs. Haldane’s husband. Morse read him to be a rather lame duck, emanating a pathetic energy that didn’t entirely have to do with his wife’s death. He certainly seemed sorry enough to hear about her murder, but their marriage wasn’t, by his own admission, the most mutually involved. Morse understood well about marriages of convenience and he knew that often couples had operational lives outside of one another, but when it came to adultery that led to murder, one had to question the sense of it all. Was the distance really worth it if you couldn’t even mourn your spouse properly? If they were a stranger to you? According to Rufus Haldane his wife kept her own friends, her own activities, and their home was, for the most part, entirely her domain. By the time their inquiries had run course it was obvious enough that while Haldane was certainly lacking involvement as a husband, he was not a killer.

The nature of relationships was nagging at Morse lately. The topic was not generally anything he put his mind to if it wasn’t to do with a case, and even now it wasn’t continual consideration, not something that was eating away at him, but things kept cropping up, snippets of conversation or passing thoughts. Perhaps it was set off by his sister’s visit or the nebulous nature of his and Max’s current liaison. Even the simple act of having dinner at the Thursday’s had him dwelling on who he kept close. Now with these killings, there was something about them that lingered unpleasantly. Wives were being slain and, as a rule, suspicion by default fell upon the husband. Love and death in such close relation. Marriage was supposed to be a solemn vow, the ultimate declaration, the epitome of what it could mean to not want to live without someone. Morse knew that personal relationships were his weak point, both in his susceptibility to them and his poor understanding of them, but it seemed cruel to automatically suspect a spouse or a family member - those with near unbreakable connections - when the most heinous of crimes were committed.

Taking a step back from himself, Morse realized he played at his own relationships like a hobby, like things he was trying out or trying on in the hopes that finally one may just fit. If he found the right fit, would he wear them to death like a good pair of trousers? He knew that he was a chore, his life - as others had said - a mess. Would he break someone else with his own inability to yield or bend? The rest of the world moved with ease through one another’s lives and all he could do was sit around and think about it. If he were to die, who would be the one they told? Who would truly mourn? Who would be dumped with his handful of belongings? Who even truly knew him?

As he and Thursday settled into the pub for their usual lunch, Morse felt a strange kinship with the detachment and quiet resignation of Professor Haldane. There was a kinship in distance and lack of understanding, the way the man felt he simply lacked. Unfortunately, that was also something he was beginning to revile in himself and something he wanted to fix.

“She had her phone on her,” Morse shrugged out of his coat and folded it beside him after his pint was set on the table top and Thursday dropped heavily onto the wooden bench next to him, “Which makes another difference from the others.”

“It’s not so odd their phones were missing. If the victims had contact with their killer, you’d expect
them to be disposed of,” Thursday produced his usual sandwich from his pocket and began to open the wax paper.

“Ham and tomato,” Morse said as an automatic reflex. He didn’t even blink before continuing,
“And their phones are probably at the bottom of the Cherwell by now. But not Mrs. Haldane’s.”

“Why’s that, d’you think?”

“Maybe this time the killer wanted us to know it was them.”

“What?”

“The stocking, the phone-” Morse took a sip of his pint, “-forensics are going through it all now but my bets are on something being trackable. The killer is giving us a trail to follow.”

“Are you saying they want to be caught?” Thursday’s brows raised in disbelief.

“No, not directly, but we hadn’t penned the first two killings as connected until now. I think they wanted us to know it was all their own work. Give credit where it’s due. Don’t forget Mason Gull.”

Thursday hummed with a sour sound as he took a bite of his ham and tomato. Neither of them wanted to remember Mason Gull too well. He was sick, killing with a relish and a sense of drama that chilled to the core, “Only you would want another Mason Gull.”

“I don’t want it,” Morse's lip curled distastefully, “But there's a profile, isn't there, to these types? Taking the rings is a sign of something compulsive. They’re mementos. Trophies. There's definitely some ego involved. They just want their pattern to be recognized.”

Thursday thought on it but didn't reply. Instead he slowly ate his sandwich and Morse took a deep draught of his beer and cast his eyes to the folded newspaper he’d pulled from the inner pocket of his blazer.

When the last crust of Fred's lunch disappeared he finally sat back with a change of subject, “Your sister alright on her own with you working?”

“Oh,” Morse nodded with only a slight glance up from his crossword, “Yes. Actually she has plans with your wife and daughter today. Shopping, I think.”

“Oh good,” Thursday nodded his approval and took out his cell phone, “With a killer about, I feel better about them being together.”

Morse paused on his half-finished puzzle and lingered on that thought. It hadn’t occurred to him to be concerned about his sister’s well being while she was here staying with him. Usually she was back home and his worries could be distant and ineffectual, but with her here now, Thursday had sling-shotted his mind unwillingly through all of the grisly possibilities. A young woman in a new city, not necessarily even a dangerous one, but Morse knew what lurked here better than most. Now that it had been said he wouldn’t be able to forget it, “He’s targeting married women. You don’t really think they are in danger, do you?”

“This day and age, can’t be too careful.”

Morse’s puzzled was abandoned to his own thoughts now and lost in his own head he didn’t notice Thursday’s eyes on him until his governor spoke up and broke through the overpowering mental image of Mrs. Haldane’s asphyxiated corpse taking on the guise of Mrs. Thursday or Joan or Joyce.
“Don’t worry yourself, Morse. I need you focused so we can stop this bugger,” Thursday lifted his drink, sipped it, and then cleared his throat in the way he did when he was steering away from work and gearing up for something particularly important, “I wanted to talk to you about something anyway. All that about my and Win’s anniversary the other night,” Thursday segued awkwardly, “The kids are throwing a surprise do. They don’t think we know but—”

Morse smirked, “You are a detective, sir.”

“Yes,” Thursday smoothed his hand through his hair with a small smile, “And Sam’s rubbish at hiding his spending besides. Anyway, Win and I’d like you to come.”

The invitation was unexpected and Morse felt himself flushing uncharacteristically. Usually his blushes were reserved for behind closed doors and very different circumstances. This immediately derailed him from his worries about his sister, the case and life in general, “Surely that’s a family affair.”

“Right,” Fred agreed, “And I’d like to see you there. Bring Joyce too if she’s still about. You’re both very welcome.”

Morse didn’t know what to say, so as usual he said nothing. He didn’t know how to process the swirl of pride, anxiety, care and confusion that stuttered his brain unhelpfully. He took a drink of his pint and swallowed it all down with a noncommittal nod. Beyond the surprise of the invitation was his own reticence to ever commit to social arrangements in advance. He never knew where his mood may take him on the day-of. Morse was well aware that his own awkwardness got in his way more than it was ever a benefit.

“How’re you coming along with all that?” Thursday said lightly.

“With what?” Morse blinked as he licked foam from his lip.

“A man your age ought to have someone to come home to. I know sweeping off and getting married isn’t like it used to be, and I know people these days are all about dragging out their independence, but it’s good to have someone. Someone to relax with at least. Especially in this job.”

Morse snorted and bristled in natural defense, “I do alright.”

“Now, now. No need to get stroppy, lad,” Thursday exasperated as if he should have expected Morse’s reaction, “I just thought with the new clothes- maybe you’d already—”

“People must really think I’m a hopeless case. Now, I can’t even dress myself on my own,” Morse dragged a hand through his hair, “Weren’t you the one who told me to buckle down? The sergeants will be coming soon after all,” Morse shrugged and then tried to lighten things with a smile, “I mean, who has the time for romance anyway?”

Faced with the opportunity, he realized he wasn’t ready to share the more personal parts of his life with the Inspector. Or maybe he was and he felt a bit guilty that he couldn’t. Morse had never been very forthcoming with his personal life but considering how often his intimate entanglements fell apart, he didn’t much see the sense. He and Max weren’t quite enough of a sure thing for him to start telling people. Yes, he was overly romantic, and yes, he knew that perhaps he was rather more attached than he was letting on, but there had never been any indication that they were involved something deeply committed. Morse also wasn’t quite ready to yet unpack the deep fear that he may be judged for his choices. By his peers, by Thursday, by anyone.
“Everyone else in the station seems to have the time, by the sounds of things. You ever heard Jakes go on?”

Morse clucked, “But have you seen who he dates?”

It was Thursday’s turn to smile and laugh, and as if by divine providence, Morse’s phone buzzed an interruption.

“Mrs. Haldane’s phone contents. They’ve got text records, one string with an individual called ‘X’ seems to point towards an ongoing affair. They’re working on tracing the number. She’s also on some dating apps that seem to cater to married people.”


“Apparently,” Morse was surprised as any, “It may be difficult to get the company to open up with her records. They’re rather serious about their customers’ privacy.”

“Anything else?”

“Well according to her emails she did a lot of online shopping. In fact she did most everything online. Groceries, take away, dating, bill paying... and those particular stockings of hers came from Burridge’s.”

“Well that’s not far,” Thursday lifted his glass, gauged the remainder of his drink, and drank it down.

“She has quite a sales history there it seems. Clothing, appliances, electronics.”

“Sexless marriage and free reign with the finances,” Thursday shook his head, “My Joanie’d call that retail therapy.”

“Shall I go round and ask some questions?”

“Yeah. See if she frequented in person as often as she did online and if they can give us sales records on those stockings,” Thursday pulled on his flat cap, “I’ll get back to the station, keep Mr. Bright abreast of things, and then swing back to pick you up.”

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Burridge’s, even in Morse’s college days, had always been considered an institution in Oxford. It was one of the only family run establishments to survive the rise of big chain stores and year after year still managed to maintain enough of a reputation for quality and service that it held its own against the more rampant retail giants. In its heyday the store was the complete high-end and hands on experience, from three-piece suited floor managers to a piano player tinkling out softened live renditions of all the hits before the advent of overhead speakers and satellite radio. They still brought in a piano for a nostalgic throwback during the holiday season and impeccable service was still expected, but the semi-formal floor staff was now gone in favor of pock-marked teenagers and beleaguered college students who now stocked the shelves, keeping out of most shoppers way by request, while widows and single mothers still ruled the perfume and makeup departments.

The current floor manager, Mr. Quinbury, stood out in his aqua polo shirt and dark sports blazer.
He ran a tight ship for those under his watchful eye and despite fading respect on a societal scale, he insisted on it while on his shopping floor. With a poppy and RAF pin on his lapel, he was a strict and serious looking man and the obvious figure of authority when Morse went seeking one. Quinbury sternly directed a young blonde back to her position in the women’s section as Morse approached. He made sure to hover noticeably until the admonishment about a long cigarette break came to its end.

“Can I help you, sir?” Quinbury flashed a lightning quick business smile that fell as soon as Morse flashed his identification.

“Constable Morse, Thames Valley police. We’re investigating a suspicious death, a long time customer of your store, and I was wondering if we could ask a few questions of the staff?”

“A death? I say,” Quinbury lingered on the warrant card a moment longer out of caution, “I’m afraid permission isn’t mine to give, but if you don’t mind waiting a few minutes I can speak to the owner, Mr. Burridge.”

“Certainly,” Morse bobbed on his toes and tucked his warrant card away, “We may also need access to your records.”

“Ah, yes sir. You can speak to Mr. Burridge about all of that. Please have a walk round and I’ll have you paged when he’s ready for you.”

Morse took the recommendation and went on a stroll through the store, starting in the ladies section. He first went to the hosiery but found only the usual familiar brands in the display rack and not the fine silks that had been an accessory to their murder. He asked the dark haired woman restocking the bras and she was kind enough to search in the database only to find that the particular brand he was seeking were an online exclusive item. From there, he wandered into the men’s clothing and browsed idly. Shopping had never been a big interest for him and without a companion almost everything simply looked like colors and shapes with too large a price tag. Distinguishing cuts and styles and materials had always been a bit too much effort in the past, but he’d discovered in his recent fashion explorations that sometimes the higher price tag for the right fit were worth the effort. Even to his novice eye, it was obvious that Burridge’s had a good selection, with medium to high-end brand names, and it was comparable to the trendier shop he’d visited not so long ago with Max.

As he drifted towards the Home Goods, there was a tap on his shoulder and Morse whipped around with surprise, only to be met with Monica’s familiar and smiling face.

“Hello stranger,” She grinned, ever lovely, “It’s been a bit. I haven’t seen you since—”

“Yes,” Morse smiled back awkwardly, effectively cutting her off from saying he’d been with Max at the time, “How’re you?”

“Alright. Working too much as usual. Looking for a new mattress at this immediate moment,” She gestured for him to walk with her and Morse was happy to oblige while he waited to be paged. He’d have to seek out Mr. Quinbury again if the wait ended up too long.

“Upgrading?”

“Oh, yes. Mine’s awful. Springs popping everywhere.”

Morse may have, at one point, used the new mattress as an open door to try it on with her once more, and the thought crawled it’s way through his mind slower than he appreciated. There was a
split second flash of what could have been if she’d have had him, if he’d played it a bit wiser: kissing her in his flat on one of those mornings she brought him a coffee, maybe in hers as she patched him up, playfully falling in and trying out the new mattress when she got it, perhaps an embrace under the stars somewhere, her lovely lips on his and the curves of her body pressed against him. Christ, what was wrong with him? Morse cursed his overactive and disloyal mind.

As they approached the mattresses they found no attendant in sight and he took his personal frustrations out in a mutter, “Does no one even work this department?”

Monica finally plopped herself on the end of a particularly soft king size, oblivious to his mental tangent, after hemming and hawing and pressing it with her fingers. She bounced on the padded topper, “How’ve you been?”

“Oh, fine. You know me.”

“Working too much and thinking too much?”

Morse averted his eyes, “My sister’s in town visiting. Staying with me.”

“I didn’t know you had a sister. Is she much like you?”

Morse tsked dispassionately, “Why do people keep asking that?”

Monica gave him a look that he felt he was supposed to understand but didn’t.

“We’re going to meet up in the pub later, if you’re free. You can just meet her yourself, I suppose. Everyone seems interested,” Morse scanned the displays again in an off-hand way.

Monica was not one to be derailed, “And how’s Max?”


“That’s not what I mean,” Monica tilted her head as she bounced on a second mattress, “I meant how’re things with Max.”

“Oh, ah,” Morse, not prepared for the line of questioning, shrugged dismissively, “Fine.”

“Just fine?” Monica bounced up and moved on. The next was larger and made out of some hi-tech foam that had an excess of advertising signs plastered around the headboard with made up words that sounded scientific to the layman but Morse knew to be absolute rubbish.

“You act like there’s anything worth talking about,” Morse bobbed in an awkward shrug, “Everything is… operational.”

Monica laughed, “You really do have a way with words. So let’s go back over it, yea? Last I saw you, the two of you were headed back to your place and the last I heard before that was that he was cross with you. So did you take my advice on a grand gesture?”

“What is this,” Morse barked lightly in disbelief, “an interrogation?”

“Not used to being on that side of one, eh?” She grinned, “So?”

“You should join the force,” Morse pulled his hand through his hair and sighed, “We talked. That seemed to work well enough.”

“So you didn’t actually do anything special? Or… prove yourself? ‘Look at me, I’m not my own
worst enemy after all?’"

Morse was a bit affronted at her candor and it must have shown on his face.

“You are though, you know that?”

He exasperated a breath aloud that came out as a ‘PAH!’ that made him feel a bit like Ebenezer Scrooge. Suddenly, like divine intervention a mellow customer-service toned voice clicked across the speakers, ‘Mr. Morse please report to the manager’s office. Mr. Morse-

“Duty calls,” He said as he tried to not betray his own relief. Monica’s questions and his own traitorous thoughts chipped away at him. Whatever seeds of doubt he’d sown in his own mind now sprouted and took root, sapping his confidence in his situation little by little. As always, Morse felt left out of something, as if he’d missed the class that everyone else had taken, the guide to society and romance and friendship. Today every corner he turned reinforced that he was a novice, incapable of normal healthy feeling, and everyone he knew had managed to inadvertently undermine his personal security - whether they knew it or not.

Monica nodded, “Text me about the pub later, alright?”

“Sure,” Morse nodded, paused, and pointed out a rather nice mattress that he recognized by the tasteful stripe of black label. It was the same brand as Max’s, “That one’s good. You should try it.”

Mr. Burridge was much younger than Morse had imagined. The owner of a generational family run establishment, in his mind, was someone rather stately or grey, perhaps with a bit of masterfully dominating facial hair. Alan Burridge was none of those things. He was youthful and handsome with a very caring sort of demeanour that Morse was sure endeared him very much to his staff. He was keen to help the investigation in any way he could, already having agreed to let the police cross reference their databases within certain parameters of privacy, and he’d even gone so far as to call in the head of the women’s department to assist Morse in-house.

“Mrs. Armstrong, this is Detective Constable Morse. Please help him with his inquiries as best you can.”

“Of course, Mr. Burridge,” She smiled, “A pleasure to meet you officer.”

Louisa Armstrong was a middle aged woman of that particular generation that still made themselves up very carefully for work, pressed trousers and blouses and full makeup with a hint of perfume. He imagined she was still the type to spend her Saturdays with curlers in her hair while pre-preparing for Sunday family dinner after mass. She had a hint of an accent that he couldn’t place immediately with so few words but intrigued him. Italian maybe?

“I’ll just need to ask you a few questions. Mr. Burridge tells me that you’re familiar with most of the regular customers with long running accounts.”

“Yes, I’ve been a full-time employee here for ten years or so now,” She smiled. Morse read her as the type of woman who smiled a lot, as if she were always existing in a state of customer service to ease her way through life. She at least seemed genuine, “Even without trying very hard you do begin to know people.”
The door of Burridge’s office cracked and Mr. Quinbury poked in his dark head, “I’m sorry sir. There’s another policeman here. A Detective Inspector.”

Burridge looked to Morse and Morse nodded back. He’d been expecting Thursday at any moment and it would be good for him to meet the store owner.

“DI Fred Thursday,” The man stepped in and whipped off his flat cap as he cast out a broad hand for a shake. Mr. Burridge stood, as did Morse, but Mrs. Armstrong gasped.

“Fredo?”

Thursday’s head turned like a shot, his face paling an entire shade, and Morse had never seen him look so surprised. He and Mrs. Armstrong locked eyes for one silent moment before her lids fluttered and she slid out of her chair and onto the floor in a dead faint.

As Morse walked his governor out to the car, it was him who spoke up first, “You aren't going to tell me what that was about?”

“Mrs...? Armstrong was it?” Thursday’s flat expression didn't change and the tone of his voice betrayed nothing which was telling in itself. Whatever he was hiding, he was doing it too well. The Inspector’s dark eyes were serious and unyielding.

“Yes. Mrs. Armstrong. She’s in charge of the women’s department. She’s worked here ten years she said,” Morse played it carefully. There was something going unsaid, something weighty.

“We knew each other when I was in service during the Troubles. That's all,” Thursday turned for the car door.

“That's all? You looked like you'd seen a ghost and the poor woman fainted dead away!”

“We had a rough time of it. You wouldn’t understand and she certainly wouldn’t want all that dredged up again. That is all,” Thursday’s mood rolled in stormy just under the skin and Morse at least had the sense to not press any more.

“Go through this stocking business with her and check with our computer people,” Thursday moved past it all without wavering, though there was an edge to his tone, “I’ll see you back at the nick. Hopefully Dr. Debryn will have the DNA results by the time you’re finished.”

Morse's exasperated disbelief had simmered down into anger as Thursday tugged on his hat again and opened the car door. He couldn’t place why it made him so angry but the idea that the older man was keeping secrets irked him. He had the right to keep his business close to the chest but when his past reared its head in conjunction with a case Morse, felt he equally had the right to know. As Thursday drove off he was reminded of the business last winter with Vic Casper and the personal vendetta that nearly put their lives and their case in jeopardy. Mrs. Armstrong was not just some person he’d met during his service, that much was obvious, but what she meant to the man Morse could now only wonder and worry. It shook him to think that the solid foundation, the family man he so admired, was possibly not at all that he seemed.

Morse’s mobile buzzed in succession in his pocket as he stood outside of Burridge’s and his phone signal caught up with itself. There were several messages waiting. The first was his sister telling
him where and when for the pub later. The second was from the nick saying that a neighbor had seen a green car frequenting Mrs. Haldane’s home on several occasions and they were currently checking CCTV footage for any record of it. The third was from Max to confirm what Thursday had said, that he’d been called in to a meeting with Mr. Bright to review the DNA evidence. Morse was expected to be in attendance.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long wait. Life happens. And other fic.

I've yet to go deep into any case in this fic and I really didn't intend to start now, but for the sake of the pacing, the plot of Sway will be followed a bit more closely (day to day) than I've done in previous parts of this story. It will of course be modernized and changed slightly.

It is nice watching Morse do actual detective work for once, I suppose.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Mrs. Armstrong had recovered with the help of Mr. Quinbury and offered Morse her apologies when he returned to the inside of the store. She was as vague as his Inspector had been about their connection from the old days and if Morse hadn’t known better, the nearly identical stories would have made him think they’d conspired it. It was a shock, she’d said like a parrot of his governor, after so many years to see someone from such a difficult period of her life. That was it, all she offered before she resumed her help of the investigation without any further ado.

Mrs. Armstrong took Morse behind the scenes to see just how the online orders were filled at Burridge’s. He was introduced to Norman Parkis, one of their warehouse associates, who was very defensive about having the police poking around in his domain. Mrs. Armstrong called him a good and trustworthy man despite his surly demeanour and anxious stutter. He was a whiz with the computers, she told Morse, even if he wasn’t as personable or quick in other areas. Online orders were received by computer, distributed to back-end associates, and filled before they were packaged and shipped out via the usual courier companies. The only exceptions were big purchases, appliances and furniture, which the store delivered in their own trucks and with their own staff, namely a Mr. Dobbs and a Mr. Huggins who seemed to run that department. Morse was shown the stock shelves as Mr. Parkis cross referenced the supplier of the silk stockings in question, and when his inquiries had run their course, Morse felt he knew all he needed to about how things worked.

When he stepped back outside of Burridge’s for the last time that day, his phone buzzed again. CCTV had captured the green car in question and they were currently attempting to identify the registration from various unclear camera angles. Morse texted in several of the provided employee names as well as the distribution company he’d unearthed for a bit of background, and finally moved along to his next destination.

The business front of Goldfarb-Ligourin was smaller and dingier than he had expected from a supplier of a reputable business like Burridge’s but Mrs. Armstrong had assured Morse that they dealt exclusively in imported luxury goods in reasonably small quantities and at decent prices. He was sure there had to be something shifty in their business practices to manage such a supply and by the look of Mr. Lisk, their lead salesman, he knew his suspicions couldn’t be far off. By his overly potent body spray and obnoxious gelled hair, Morse disliked the man on instinct, but he would need more than an early 2000’s sense of style to stick the man as their killer, so after the tertiary questions (and Lisk’s emphatic denial of his involvement) Morse headed back to the station. Later, he would discover that Joey Lisk had a short record of minor assault charges attached to his name. There were small domestic disputes with old girlfriends and a few pub altercations over young ladies that ended with fights and fines for damages, but nothing serious and nothing close to strangulation or murder.

By the time he returned to the station, Inspector Thursday was waiting, and just as expected, Max was as well. Mr. Bright had asked the pathologist to do another going over of the victims, in light of the new knowledge that the killings were connected, and upon Morse’s arrival they were all pulled in for a meeting to review the results. The conclusion was that the same man had consensual sex with all their victims within a few hours of their deaths. Unfortunately the DNA present didn’t match anything currently in their databases and there was no other physical evidence that connected them. The killer had been let into each home willingly, or at the very least hadn’t needed
to use force, and there were very few defensive wounds on all the women involved. In a case such as this Max suggested a criminal psychologist but after the lack of oversight with Mason Gull the last time, Mr. Bright wasn’t keen and they were finally all let go.

Strange, Jakes and Max hung around for Morse as he finished up in the office and Inspector Thursday, once more, brusquely dismissed himself. He had ‘things to do’ he said when Morse invited him to the pub with them and he didn’t feel comfortable pressing any further with the squad hanging about. Morse wondered at how swiftly the day had flipped his governor’s mood. Only hours ago Thursday had invited him to a party, as good as called him family, and by late afternoon he felt like they may as well been strangers.

With nothing more to do, they all piled into the Rover to head out to Old Bookbinder’s where they were to meet Joyce and Joan. Morse had, entirely without planning it, acquired his own small entourage.

“Never been in your car before, Doctor,” Jakes settled back into his seat comfortably and bounced once, “Nice.”

“There’s a first and last time for everything, Sergeant,” Max cast him a look in the mirror as Jakes shifted on a hip and reached into his jacket pocket, “No smoking.”

Jakes’ hand retracted.

“Is your sister going to be there solo, Morse?” Strange curled his hand around Morse’s seat and leaned forward, as he always seemed to do when he ended up in the back (which he always did).

“Her and Joan Thursday. They’re fast friends apparently,” Morse was flipping through his phone to make sure Joyce hadn’t sent him any follow up information.

“Oh, Joanie? It’s been an age,” Jim grinned and settled back into his own seat satisfaction, “That’ll be alright then.”

“Good Luck with that, mate,” Jakes snorted.

“Shit,” Morse cursed under his breath, “Monica.”

“Oh is she coming?” Max’s brows raised.

“I was supposed to text her. Bugger,” Morse’s fingers rubbed together before he furiously tapped out a message to her.

“Who’s this Monica then?” Jakes perked.

“Nurse at the hospital,” Morse and Max said simultaneously, only giving each other a look as it happened.

“She and you aren’t uh-” Jakes chanced, looking rather disturbed at their simultaneous delivery.

“No, she lives in my building,” Morse answered and Max smirked.

“Well, alright then,” Jakes’ brows bobbed hopefully and he took out his phone to fix his hair in the camera.

“She’s definitely too good for you,” Morse added with detachment as Monica answered back with a thumbs up emoji to the plans.
“Listen, Don Juan,” Jakes was now looking at his teeth in the camera, “You can’t claim possession over every decent girl in Oxford.”

“I’m not claiming-” Morse’s voice got an edge of agitated defense but when he looked back over his shoulder at Jakes, he realized the man was grinning at him. Morse’s brow furrowed with annoyance to have fallen into the trap so easily. He doubted Jakes knew even a pittance about Don Juan anyway.

“You know there’s not going to be a bit of bloody parking..” Max complained low as they headed along Cowley Road towards their destination.

“I didn’t pick the place,” Morse sighed. He wasn’t sure why he even felt the need to defend himself. Maybe he was defending Joyce by proxy. Either way, with Jakes ribbing him and Max griping, his mood was headed downhill fast.

“Didn’t think to mention it to them? It’s a work evening in Jericho-”

“Oh yes, of course,” Morse said sarcastically and mimed like he was typing out a text, “Sorry Joyce. Dr. Debryn will be severely inconvenienced by your choice of pub, regardless of your own preference or their ale selection-”

“Ah! Right,” Max drawled, “This is about your malted malediction.”

“Very clever,” Morse said flatly.

Strange turned that over in his mind for a few ticking seconds, “Oh, his beer thing!”

“It’s not a thing.”

Jaked piped up, “Oh, it’s definitely a thing, bruv. I thought you’d spew the first time you saw me drinking lager.”

“It’s not a thing.”

“It’s a bit of a thing, matey,” Jim tilted his head and smirked and that was enough to strike Morse silent.

Everyone fell quiet then. Morse was stewing and Max was now overly focused on the road.

Jim finally held up a finger with a valiant attempt to break the silence, “I did suggest an uber.”

“I’ve a perfectly good vehicle!” Max exclaimed just as Morse cried out, “Oh come off it!”

Jakes burst out laughing and with that the tension seemed to have snapped clean through. Max smirked in spite of himself and Morse just sighed out his tension as he stared out the window. He wasn’t sure why he felt so edgy or why Max was being so disagreeable. The usual knot of anxiety was present, but that was expected when it came to planning and following through on any outing. Unfortunately there was more to this. This was his work life meeting his personal one, his sister meeting his friends, meeting - whatever Max was, and then Monica - the only person who knew about his romantic life - mixing with all of them. Morse tried not to think about it, tried to reassure himself that he was worrying over nothing, and tried to cling to the idea that it didn’t matter what anyone found out about him.

It was sheer luck that when they came down Canal Street that another vehicle was pulling out of a spot just as they arrived. Max murmured under his breath in relief, “And the waters were divided..”
It earned him another look.

Joyce and Joan hovered by the outdoor tables, each clutching a bag of shopping, and scanning each passing car. Upon being spotted, they grinned and flicked up their hands in simultaneous waves to the men headed towards them.

“Finally,” Joyce curled her arm through her brother’s as soon as he was close enough and Morse, as always, was stiff to the unexpected affection.

“Case coming along alright?” Joan inquired, “Dad sounded a bit rushed when I called him. He said he was busy with it. That this Strangler thing that’s all over the news?”

Morse was sure they’d done all they could for the day and Inspector Thursday was usually the first to encourage them to sleep on things when the well had run dry, but since his encounter with Mrs. Armstrong earlier in the day he’d been distant and closed off. There was the temptation to ask Joan if she knew anything of her dad’s time in the military, but once again Morse felt this would be overstepping, and was unsure about the manners relevant to such topics. Instead, he shrugged one shoulder, “Yeah. You know... Can’t really talk about it.”

Joyce squeezed his arm and released him after a pause and gave an expectant, “Weeell?”

“Oh, right. This is PC Strange and DS Jakes.” Morse gestured to the men waiting in the wings.

“Pete,” Jakes already had his electronic pen out and was sucking on it before he blew a thick vaporous plume away from the group and flashed a quick smile.

“Jim,” Strange actually extended a hand for a shake and after the greeting moved to Joan for chit chat.

“And Dr. Debryn.”

“Max, please.”

“Nice to meet you finally,” Joyce smiled and leaned in, “Not just through a car window.”

“Morse!” Monica’s voice piped from down the block and she waved as she neared their little group, “Long time no see, Max.”

“Who’s this?” Joyce leaned with interest and asked as Monica and Max exchanged greetings and cheek kisses.

“Monica Hicks. She’s my neighbor and also works with Max at the hospital,” Morse said softly.

“Is she a doctor too?” Joyce asked.

“Nurse.”

“She’s cute,” Joyce elbowed him and Morse eye rolled right before he introduced them as well.

Morse had found the perfect balm for his sour mood after they’d gotten themselves a couple of tables and and he’d been free to explore the ale selection. He was relieved to find that once the
Everyone had the opportunity to satisfy their curiosities when it came to Joyce and she was able to rope him into conversation as much as possible before it became a chore. Jakes made sure to tell her how glad he was that she wasn’t too much like her brother and Strange tried to laugh that off in his usual friendly way, but in the end it had gone the way of most pub nights and everyone got drinks and found their stride, and in that manner, paired up and grouped off.

Morse learned that Strange’s sister had gone to school with Joan and as a result they had several mutual friends. The pair of them spent a good amount of time catching up and swapping gossip at a table of their own. Jakes sat in with them a while as well, and Morse was keen on he and Joan to see if part of their brief courtship remained, it seemed not, but Joan was much more relaxed without the uncomfortable yoke of the police uniform or her father looming over the proceedings. At their own table, Max, Monica and Joyce talked around Morse about how her sight seeing had been, where she’d gone shopping, and her own questions about their work at the hospital. Joyce was very interested in Max’s job in particular, and didn’t seem to share her brother’s weak stomach when it came to gory details. Jakes was the first to drift, first testing the waters with Monica, then talking to Joyce, then back to Joan and Jim to laugh about one thing or other, before he eventually found another girl at the bar and inevitably ended up outside to smoke.

The first round of drinks smoothed Morse’s edges. His paranoia about a communal attack on his privacy faded into an afterthought. By the second round he found the familiar mental clarity that formed the basis of him calling beer ‘brain food’. It did help him think, regardless of what others thought. It muddled out his unnecessary thoughts and worries and some of his overactive brain dulled and rested, and if he focused, concentration on his tasks was much easier. The rise and fall of voices in the pub wasn’t so bad with a bit of cotton insulation and soon the increasing bustle of the evening crowd was hardly was a bother at all.

By round three he was almost comfortable.

On one side of Morse was his sister, who leaned across him to talk to the other two, and he was content to be silent and sit back and allow it. On his other side was Max, not close enough to be out of the ordinary, nor far enough to be unreachable and more than once Morse had lapsed into silence, sunk into his own mind as he thought on the case or the way Inspector Thursday’s odd behavior haunted him, and he’d been roused by a squeeze of his knee under the table by the much more astute doctor. It was in one of those moments that he looked up to find Jim and Joan standing beside them and excusing themselves for the evening.

“I’m heading out,” Joan smiled.

“I’ll walk her back,” Jim said importantly with his hands stuffed into his jeans. Morse noticed one of the tattoos on his forearm looked like it had been touched up. Had that been a topic of conversation at some point? He distantly remembered something but had only been half-listening while his mind drifted back to the case again. Jim said, “With this Strangler about, you can’t take any chances.”

“You sound like dad,” Joan bemoaned.

Joyce popped up to hug her and to say goodbye, and when they were both gone, she set back down and cast them all eyes, “Are they a thing?”

“Not that I know of,” Morse said with mild disinterest as he drained the last of his pint, “Though they’ve always been a bit familiar.”

"A bit familiar," Joyce mocked playfully and chuckled.
“I think they’re cute,” Monica supported.

Morse set his empty glass down and his shifting sent prickles of numb along his back and bottom and he realized just how long he’d been stationary. He cast a glance around the table, the girls’ glasses half full and Max’s mostly empty, and pushed himself up to get another round. As he shifted Morse realized that Max’s hand still rested on his thigh, his fingers curled around in a soft and comfortable pressure to the divot behind his knee, but slid away when Morse finally stood. He felt suddenly warm, for not realizing and for the gesture itself, and there was an uncomfortable and upsetting moment of lost opportunity.

“Do you want another?” Morse swallowed. He definitely needed a new drink.

“No, thank you. I’m driving, remember?” Max’s lips pressed in a polite smile before he pushed himself up to stand, “I think I’ll use the Gents, actually.”

“Girls?” Morse asked out of manners but both declined. Monica’s eyes followed Max until he disappeared, cut to Morse, and then she smiled and put all her attention back to Joyce. He felt like he was supposed to be catching on to something that he was too sluggish to grasp. He could still feel the fingers on his thigh, pressed behind his knee like warm phantoms, as he made his way to the bar. Only as Morse leaned against the wood and watched the barman pour him a measure of whiskey did Monica’s pointed look sink in.

He drank down the whiskey faster than was wise and hissed lightly as it burned its way down into his belly. The alcoholic rush bloomed up through his chest and into his head and Morse had to stand still a moment for his bearings before he also headed towards the loo. The world was much gentler now, the crowd faded to mere background noise instead of an intimidating throng, and as the door of the men's room swung closed behind him there was blissful near silence that greeted him. Max stood alone at the sink, quietly washing his hands.

Their eyes met in the mirror and Morse couldn’t help the crooked smile that broke out on his face. Somehow when they were alone it was like all of his doubts were distant and his deep contemplations on the nature of his life and relationships were foolish afterthoughts, because he didn’t even think to doubt when he had Max with him. Morse approached with no hesitation and pressed the lean lines of himself to the doctor’s back. Max glanced around, clearly the more sober and careful of the pair, but couldn’t quite resist when Morse dipped his head to nuzzle at him and press a kiss behind his ear.

“You aren’t that drunk, are you?” Max murmured, turning off the faucet and reaching for a paper towel to dry his hands with his head tilted sideways and Morse’s face tucked against him.

“What exactly qualifies as ‘that drunk’?” Morse’s lips now ghosted over an ear and he heard Max sigh lightly.

Crumpling and tossing the towel, the doctor turned in Morse’s grasp. He was pinned between the detective and the sinks so his hands settled on the man’s hips, “Shenanigans in the loo level of drunk.”

“It’s hardly shenanigans,” Morse chuckled as he leaned in for a kiss. There was no reluctance or denial and Max returned it with as much of a craving for contact as Morse himself had. It was so easy to embrace the lovely warm unquestionable feelings between them like this, and sure the alcohol helped, but Morse’s worries over being discovered, of being questioned about his romantic life, of anyone knowing at all, were once again gone. Much like that early morning in front of Shrive Hill House when he’d wanted to grab Max’s hand and take him away, he thought that if anyone discovered them now, so be it. Having Max was vastly better than the alternative.
When they parted they were both smiling in their way, “You were the one touching me under the table.”

“A hand on the knee is hardly racy.”

“What *is* the divot behind one’s knee called?”

Max chuckled, “Popliteal fossa. Kneepit, like armpit.”

“My god,” Morse chuckled against Max’s lips as he stole another kiss, a slower one. He could taste gin and lime, “Kneepit is horrendous.”

Max leaned back then and watched his face. He smoothed his hands up Morse’s chest and shoulders and back down again before his next question, “You seemed agitated on the drive.”

“Bringing my sister to meet every idiot from my job-”

Max’s brows lifted.

“Not you,” Morse snorted, “Or Monica. But- Well-”

Max’s brows rose, “Were you nervous I was meeting your sister?”

“What about you? You were-” Morse searched for the word, “Terse. Were you nervous to meet my sister?”

“Have you ever once in our acquaintance known me to be nervous, Morse? *Really,*” Max snorted.

“The lady doth protest too much methinks,” Morse pursed his lips, thinking very much that he’d hit the nail on the head and there was a rush of giddy pleasure from it.

Max simply kissed him again to steer them once more away from the conversation and Morse couldn’t have been more fine with being shut up. Voices lifted outside the men’s room door, a rise and fall of laughter, and the pair of them broke apart a few inches. They didn’t entirely separate but the instinct to do so was sobering. Both men waited but the door stayed closed and the voices passed.

“Someone could come in, Morse,” Max didn’t immediately pull him back. The instinct to jump apart seemed to sink in with a bit more gravity for him.

“Strange left. Jakes is… MIA. Probably off with someone else,” Morse shrugged. He pressed close regardless, lips once more brushing the doctor’s graying temple and the shell of an ear so he could whisper, “Besides, I missed you.”

“You were at my house the other night. You say that too often and I won’t believe you,” Max held him loosely and dragged his nails across the other’s back through his shirt.

“I could do to be at your house tonight as well…”

“You’re welcome to stay if that’s what you want,” Max’s arms finally circled him in a tight hug.

Morse sighed in disappointment, “Not with the case.. And Joyce.”

“You mean just Joyce,” Because a case had never stopped him before.

Morse hummed, “It’s a bit rude to leave while I’m putting her up in my flat.”
Max chuckled. His hands slid up to cradle Morse’s face, “That’s the first time I’ve ever heard you concerned if something was rude or not. But you are correct. It would be rude.”

“Could just have you right here on the sinks,” Morse grinned devilishly and pressed their hips flush. He once more buried his face into Max’s neck, this time with a drag of teeth that sent a visible shiver through the doctor’s body. He smelled lovely, he always did. Now that he was familiar with Max’s routine, Morse knew it was nothing more than shaving product, hospital soap and hair pomade mixed with some specific smell that was his alone, but he still found it intoxicating. Morse inhaled and refreshed his memory of him.

“As much as the idea is more than tempting,” Max gripped his arse with a squeeze, his voice taken a wistful and breathy tone, “You know I hate to be rushed.” He then pushed Morse away with firm hands and peeled the other’s arms from around his waist, “We’ve already been in here much too long.”

Morse felt the well of endearment within him even as he was being pushed back. There were words he wanted to say but didn’t know how to because he couldn’t correctly discern them. He felt it all bubbling just under the surface, below his skin, threatening to spill out in some grandiose or impatient declaration. It was hardly the first time but he never trusted his own feelings enough to do anything about it. And now? Here? Was a men’s room in a pub the place for such things?

Morse brooded on it quietly and watched Max fuss and straighten his own clothing. He thought on Thursday telling him how good it was to have someone to come home to, to have someone to relax with, and the memory twinged now as he thought of his governor’s current predicament. Was a silver anniversary worth less or more if there were secrets in your relationship? Did Mrs. Thursday know about her husband’s service or about Mrs. Louisa Armstrong, whoever she was? Morse realized the inner workings of his governor’s marriage were none of his business and surely the intricacies of the layers of trust were beyond his own stunted sensibilities, but when looking towards his own future, were such flexible truths something he wanted to deal with? What did he really know about Max’s past when he hadn’t even shared his own? Was there a Louisa of his own lurking?

He’d fallen into his own trap, they both had, when he’d come back with apologies after the Blythe Mount case. He hadn’t wanted to fall into the same circle of intimacy with no discussion, and while they’d certainly found some sort of balance of work and extracurriculars, they were still no closer to true honesty. He found it to be a small miracle that they could both work together and see one another privately in the way they had, and if they had nothing else there was definitely an undeniable magnetism between them. The fact they hadn’t wrung one another’s necks was a revelation and the ways they did clash together were, dare he admit it, absolutely part of the attraction. Maybe it was time he did something about that. Take a step. Monica had told him once to make a grand gesture to show he was serious. Maybe that could be enough, a stepping stone to more, and to opening up.

“Come here,” Max curled a finger and Morse stepped towards him, just to have the doctor adjust his tie, smooth his lapels, and uncrumple the poppy pinned to his jacket. Max then lifted on his toes to press one final demure kiss to his cheek before he moved to the door, “Don’t be too long.”

The girls hadn’t even seemed to notice the absence and when Morse finally emerged from the toilets. Joyce was coming out of the ladies and gravitated towards him to sling her arm through his own.

“Your friends are nice,” She grinned and he sensed a wobble in her step.

“How much’ve you had?”
“Same as you!”

“You smell-” He leaned in, “like apple candy.”

“-with,” she held up a finger, “A few extra shots. Monica is a great time you know.”

Morse snorted as they finally arrived to the table, “I’m glad you’re having fun. But it’s probably
time for home.”

Max glanced up at him from a conversation he and Monica had been leaning in close for, “You are
all going to the same place. I’ll drive you. Between both Morses blood-alcohol levels we could
knock out a small regiment.”

Joyce snickered. Morse tilted his head coyly, "I've only had enough to make your cheek tolerable.”

“All men are made for each other,” Max quoted coyly, “Either then teach them or bear with them.”

Joyce held out a hand for Monica to stand and, as she also seemed a bit teetery, both of them ended
up on Morse’s arms as Max led their way out of the pub. The girls piled into the back seat and
Morse into the front and the ride home was filled with a mix of the pair of them in the back
nattering on about things Morse tuned out, talking so softly that he was sure they were falling
asleep, and then stretches of silence where it was likely they had. By the time they arrived in front
of the building, Monica and Joyce stirred with some mysterious reinvigoration and were out of the
car and halfway to the door before Morse had even gotten his safety belt off.

“Watch out for those two,” Max chuckled, “I’m starting to think your family may have a drinking
problem.”

Morse pursed his lips, “Maybe we drink to make other people more interesting.”

“The rose colored glasses of life,” Max tilted his head.

Morse leaned over to him, glanced to find the girls inside and gone, and reached for Max’s cheek.
The doctor leaned into it and met him in a goodnight kiss.

“You could still come home with me,” Max tempted.

“I’ve half a mind to with Joyce like this but-” Morse shook his head. “What are your plans on
bonfire night?”

“Work and home.”

“How about I meet you after work?”

Max looked only a little surprised before he nodded an agreement, “Text me.”

They kissed again, “Goodnight, Max.”

“Good luck,” Max smirked, “G’nite.”

Morse’s phone buzzed on his way up to his flat but he didn’t check it until he got to his door. Joyce
and Monica were nowhere to be seen as he let himself inside.

JM [ at monicas. dont wait up ]

Morse’s frustration was audible. His keys were dropped on the coffee table loudly, he kicked his
shoes off and halfway across the room, put on the stereo and played with the idea of pouring himself another drink. His buzz was fading and he didn’t like it.

Morse picked up his phone as he went for the whiskey and as The Ring Cycle began he thought about texting Max. The doctor was likely still driving but he couldn’t help himself. After pouring himself a couple of fingers of Glenfiddich he threw himself down into the futon.

He started to type-

_ do you ever feel like maybe you’re wrong inside_

No. He deleted it.

_ what would you say if i told you_

No.

_ I think I may_

Delete. He thought of Whitman. When in doubt..

_ I am to think of you when I sit alone or wake at night alone.  
_ I am to wait, I do not doubt I am to meet you again,  
_ I am to see to it that I do not lose you._

Morse sighed and once more deleted it all. He sipped his liquor, rubbed his head into his pillow a few times, and went with the safe bet.

[ should've gone to yours ]
[ i've been ditched ]

Morse dropped the phone onto the table and went about his nightly rituals. By the time he returned there were several messages waiting.

**MD** [ girls will be girls ]
[ too late now ]
[ what are you wearing ]

It took him a minute too long to realize that bit was a joke.

[ i hate you ]

**MD** [ :) ]
[ no sexting? ]
[ i cant believe i just saw the word sexting in my own phone with my own two eyes ]

**MD** [ it’s the little torments that really keep me going ]
[ your a monster ]

**MD** [ *you’re ]

At the very least, the exchange got him smiling. As he pondered a witty response, another message came through. It wasn’t from Max and instead, was from Inspector Thursday. It was far enough
past the old man’s usual bedtime that any communication from him was entirely unexpected.

FT [ CCTV came through. Green car was Joey Lisk.]
[ bringing him in tomorrow ]
[ need you in early ]

When Morse woke up, groggy and dragging, his sister was back and looking much too chipper for the early hour. He hadn’t heard her come in but she was there now, eating something noisily from a bowl again and listening to The Breakfast Show on the radio at a low volume. She certainly didn’t look like she’d been up half the night drinking, or whatever else she’d gotten up to with Monica, though she did look much too satisfied for this early in the morning.

He wasn’t going to ask.

Morse pulled himself through the daily motions while Joyce told him she’d made plans for bonfire night with Monica. He hadn’t the brain power or the energy to argue about it right now even if he’d thought they may do something together. Yes, he’d already asked Max out on the evening, but it didn’t stop him being irritated. Was she so bored of him already?

Coffee, toast, a large glass of water and a shower and he was out.

Thursday was quiet when he picked him up, quiet all the way to Joey Lisk’s door, and Morse noted that he looked tired. Had he been out all night? Joan had thought he was working on the case but Morse wasn’t so sure. Thankfully it didn’t alter his effectiveness when they came for Joey Lisk with a search warrant for his flat and a request he come down to the station for questioning.

By nine in the morning Lisk was sitting in an interrogation room, sweating it out and itching for a cigarette.

By ten they had a call for another murder.

Norman Parkis had been found stabbed to death in the stockroom at Burridge’s.

Chapter End Notes

Did Monica and Joyce hook up?
Do I ship Jim/Joan?
Does Joey Lisk wear axe body spray??

Yes. Hell yes.

Don’t @ me.

Maybe the Morses aren’t that different after all.

Also in true Morseverse style I have included a bathroom scene. Eat your heart out Colin Dexter.
Also I’ve yet to be satisfied with how I format text messages but it is what it is. Morse DOES NOT have an iPhone, yes I have thought about it. He uses android, so his texts
look a lot like my own phone, but getting that to look correct is a constant battle.
Chapter 8

Morse was fuming.

Incensed.

Enraged.

He refused to look at CS Bright and DI Thursday’s retreating backs as they left the crime scene and his superiors were hardly even out of earshot before he shook an angry trembling finger at Norman Parkis’s corpse and raised his voice at nobody in particular, “The man practically died on top of some of the only existing pairs of those stockings in Oxford!”

Max stood nearby with his hands clasped behind him. He’d witnessed the entire exchange, from Bright rejecting Morse’s theories on the stabbing, to the case being assigned to another DI when he deemed it unconnected to the serial stranglings. A few members of the SOCO team passed between them and the doctor directed them quietly in the removal of the body. When Morse’s rant paused, Max glanced at the door, and finding hide nor hair of the other officers in sight, he looked as if he may say something. Just as the body was picked up and carried out the door, Max took in a breath and opened his mouth to speak, but Morse cut him off before he could utter a single syllable.

“I questioned him not 24 hours ago, you know, and now he’s dead,” Morse began to pace, his fingers picking at themselves in agitation, “Yes, I know he’s a man and he’s been stabbed not strangled. But who’s to say our murderer didn’t break in here to get more stockings and was surprised in the act? Parkis was very protective of his work space. He didn’t even like the police being in here to make inquiries. I bet he didn’t take too kindly to someone pinching his stock. He was a big lad, a bruiser. Probably wanted a fight.”

Morse stalked around the outskirts of the room like a caged beast, well away from the bloody mark on the cement floor that the corpse was lifted from, and his face twisted in disgusted frustration as he continued, “This fired security guard theory of Jakes’ is stupid. Why would a fired employee come into the back stock room if they were robbing the place? There’s no money here and a solo thief wouldn’t be able to get any of the high priced electronics out without help. They didn’t jack the doors to take out goods. Cash, jewelry, safes of note, are all up front! I’ll bet, if we get a count, we find the only thing missing is those bloody stockings!”

Max’s mouth had closed again and Morse, giving him one more stormy look, reinforced that he wasn’t exactly seeking a two-sided conversation. Perhaps later, when he was less boiling, he’d appreciate Debryn’s silence during this vent session but for now all he could think about was how he would be questioning the employees. Again.

It made him want to spit.

"When’d you say he died?" More rubbed his forehead as if that may alleviate the burn of his frustration.

"Between eleven p.m. and one in the morning."

Morse hissed and dragged his hand down the entire length of his face before obscuring his mouth
and chin in thought. He muttered darkly, "And we didn't bring Lisk in until this morning."

The one saving grace in all of this was that he now had more free reign to question the employees of Burridge’s. If he was careful and asked the right questions, perhaps he could finally root out the deeper source of the connection between the store and the stranglings. What was circumstantial for these serial murders, may be essential in this new stabbing.

Morse frowned and spun for the door.

"Two o'clock, Morse," Debryn said loudly.

"What?" he snapped.

Max tilted his head and drawled with the usual dour frown of disappointment, "For the PM results."

"Lisk’s brought in a solicitor," Inspector Thursday sighed as he settled on the bench seat across from Morse, “So if we don’t get something more solid on him soon, he’ll be back out on the streets come morning.”

They’d worked straight through lunch, Morse with the stabbing inquiries and then the post mortem. On the matter of Parkis, most of the staff gave the same opinion as Mrs. Armstrong had the day before. He was surly, but mostly gentle and had no family anyone knew of. Most of the staff had alibis, with their spouses, or on dates or having late running pub trips. Mr. Huggins said that Norman Parkis had taken a shine to Mrs. Gloria Deeks from women’s wear and Mrs. Deeks, the pretty young blonde with the extended cigarette break from the other day, described him as ‘sweet’. She didn’t seem to mind his softer attention, more of a light crush she said, and admitted that with her husband serving a sentence at Woodhill that his notes and flowers here and there didn’t go entirely unappreciated. Their contact didn’t extend outside of work. There were the occasional nights out with the other staff but all she knew about him was that he grew up in a boy’s home out in Blenheim and currently lived alone.

Max’s autopsy results showed nothing besides a struggle and a none too professional stabbing job.

"He did put up a fight. Mr. Parkis and his attacker engaged one another face to face," Max related when Morse came round for the results, "Depending on the killer's strength, I'd say they had a bit of a time with him. But all it took was a few," Max mimed several sharp stabs, "Hello darkness my old friend."

"Any DNA?"

"There were fibres under his fingernails but they'll need analysis to ensure they aren't from anything he was just folding or moving in the course of work. He did work in a stock room after all."

When Morse returned to the station he passed the statements and autopsy results on to DI Gorman’s man and did his best to wash his hands of the disappointing and inconclusive information. That morning’s anger had abated after dealing with so many of Parkis’s weepy coworkers but simmered again when he finally began to go through the evidence pulled from Joey Lisk’s flat.
It amounted to very little.

“There was nothing in Lisk’s flat that would do us any good. We found the few gifts he’d described in his interrogations,” Morse admitted. He eyed the head on his pint distastefully as he settled in with his Inspector much later in the day than was usual, “But no wedding rings. There wasn’t even evidence that he’d had any of the women inside. No stockings. Not even packaging. There was a sample case in his car but that’s just used for sales. Not a full pack to be seen.”

“So all we’ve got him on is being a fancy man to the lot of them,” Thursday frowned, “And that’s certainly not illegal.”

“And not even a very noble one. He readily admits to it and as soon as the word murder was thrown in, he gave up all the women’s names without a second thought,” Morse frowned and decided against food, “He’s on half a dozen dating apps and some of the women he’d met through his work. All the gift giving seemed to be reciprocal as far as I can tell, no sign of money exchanging hands, so we can’t even stick him with prostitution as a threat to keep him in lock up.”

Thursday tutted and took a deep draught of his own drink.

“There were some interesting names on his list though,” Morse mentioned, “Some of the women who work at Burridge’s. Including Mrs. Armstrong.”

Thursday’s eyes cut to Morse sharply.

“Still not going to talk about it?”

“Leave it, Morse,” His governor near growled.

“I may have to go question her. Her and,” he glanced at his phone, “Gloria Deeks and a Mrs. Huggins. She’s on here too. Wife of one of their warehouse employees.”

Thursday drained his glass and was already reaching for his hat, “I’ll question Mrs. Armstrong.”

Morse rose to join him but the older man’s voice stopped him in his tracks.

“Alone.”

As Morse watched Thursday pull on his overcoat, his anger bubbled back. The only thing ‘alone’ meant between the two of them was that Thursday didn’t trust him. It felt like a blow.

“You should call it a night,” Thursday was obviously trying to soften things with professional leniency but the damage was already done, “Get some dinner. If we’re lucky they’ll give us another twelve hours with Lisk. If we aren’t, he’ll be out in the morning. I’ll take the car so don’t you worry about picking me up tomorrow. Get on with your inquiries from that list of women first thing.”

“Sir,” was Morse grunted. His phone buzzed as his boss left him. It was Joyce and she was hoping they could have dinner together.

Joyce met her brother at a Caribbean restaurant within walking distance of his flat. He’d been noticing that his sister demonstrated much more of an adventurous streak than he did in most
things, and in food that turned out to also be the case. She opted for the Daily Special of spicy curried goat while he ordered the fried chicken and sweet plantains. The choice in beers was restricted to Red Stripe and canned Budweiser so Morse went with water to his infinite disappointment.

As he sat down with his plate, he gave her a bit of guff, “You’ve deigned to suffer my company tonight?”

“Oh, come off it, Ender,” Joyce rolled her eyes and stuck her fork into her rice and beans, “I had a great time last night with you at the pub. I just had some more fun after… without you.” She smirked.

“I don’t want to know.”

“Oh, don’t be jealous.”

“I’m not jealous. Why, what did Monica say?”

“Nothing,” Her eyes widened seriously and she tilted her head, “Is there something I should know?”

“No. You just got a bit further with her than I did,” Morse stabbed rather severely into his food.

“One point to Joycie,” she laughed, “What I meant was that you could have, you know, gone off with someone else last night too. You don’t need to restrain yourself on account of me.”

Morse just hummed. He could have, which was likely part of his annoyance, but 'restraint' wasn't exactly the word he would choose. Last night he’d had as good a time as he ever did out with people, but his sister had no frame of reference to know that him being quiet or out of touch was simply the usual. The core of the matter was that he was currently projecting - disappoint with the case, unease about Thursday, concerns about his romantic life - onto any interaction or conversation he had.

As Joyce turned back to her food, Morse wondered if Monica had mentioned anything about Max and himself or if Joyce’s comments about him going off with someone were aimlessly intended. With her enjoyment of teasing him, he was sure she would have taken the piss if she'd known anything.

Morse began to mentally stutter through the thought process that could lead to him sharing with his sister, maybe vent to her about work or ask advice about Max. All he needed to do was open his mouth and say something. Something along the lines of ‘Well if you had told me your plans maybe I would have just gone to Max’s’. Straightforward, like it was nothing. A lead in, and she would fill in the missing pieces and ask for the dirt. Or maybe he could have teased her, hung the temptation of his own romantic gossip over her head for the fun of it, but as he flitted through a thousand options to open the channels of communication, the effort of telling the truth or asking for help suddenly became daunting. The sour day with Thursday and the case was overwhelming enough, adding on conversation that would involve even a modicum of emotional effort was too much to deal with.

This was stupid.

Thursday was off with his old flame, his own sister had hooked up with his neighbor, and he was poking some beans and rice and brooding over a lost booty call when he could have been doing more to solve a string of grisly murders. If Lisk wasn’t their killer (which was looking more and
more likely) than someone else was out on the streets right at that very moment plotting their next attack and they were all doing nothing about it.

Morse looked up to find Joyce watching him. Her brow furrowed when he offered a weak smile of reassurance that, yes, he was still there.

Morse saw something of his father in her expression. Not in the hazel eyes, his father’s had been pale blue similar to his own, but in the way her brows pulled together and the way the skin wrinkled between her eyes. It was strange to think of him now. He’d barely spared him a thought since returning to Oxford after his death but having Joyce here now, he found his mind drifting to the old man constantly.

“Do you like your job?” She finally asked.

“I like it well enough.”

“That’s not a very convincing answer.”

“I’m good at it,” Morse finished a piece of chicken without realizing exactly how hungry he’d been. As always, food was an afterthought and a means to an end.

“Don’t get me wrong, it seems interesting,” She replied, “And I’m sure you’re very good at solving things. You always were keen on puzzles. But murder and mayhem? It seems like a lot. Stressful.”

Morse could only shrug. He didn’t know how to explain to anyone that his life was merely a string of disappointments. It wasn’t that he had no passion, but more that he wasn’t equipped enough to follow them to their full extent. Being in the police was the first time he’d thought that maybe, even without having all those convenient social graces, that he could make something of himself.

After a few more bites of food, he took a drink, swallowed, and posited to her a question, “What do you think about the fact that every time there is a suspicious death, the family are the first suspects?”

Joyce sucked the inside of her cheek a moment, “Well, it’s the most logical, innit? People closest to the victim. People with strong emotions about them. Good or bad. People who might know their secrets?”

“Yes but,” Morse finished another piece and dabbed his mouth, “your family is supposed to love you more than anything. Your spouse - it’s supposed to be for better or worse - yeah?”

“Yeah,” She said while she waved her fork, “But in the case of a spouse or a lover- well, people do mad things for love. And sex. They are not mutually exclusive, Ender.”

“No, they aren’t are they,” He scratched at his temple and then pointed at her, “Look at you for example.”

“Oy!” She exclaimed lightly, “That’s not fair.”

His tone was even and unaccusing, stated fact more than a judgment, and he leaned back in his chair as he presented his thoughts, “But here you are away from home. You told me when you arrived you left behind a real nice chap who you were keen on,” He tilted his head, “But one pretty face in a pub-”

“It’s just a bit of holiday fun,” Joyce sighed, “But I suppose you have a point. He wouldn’t kill
someone over it though… at least I don’t think so. We aren’t that serious.”

“Well I hope not or I’d question your taste in men,” Morse chuckled, “But what about the secret of it now? You know you’ve done something that I assume he wouldn’t like and you did it knowingly. Do you tell him? Or do you just carry that with you?”

“Well,” Joyce huffed out a breath. The joviality seemed to be abandoning the conversation. It was hardly getting grave but she seemed to realize this was not so much about her and about him. She wasn’t wrong, “The way I go through people, I don’t think I will. If he were satisfying me, I wouldn’ta done it would I?”

“Would you?”

“I’d like to think I wouldn’t,” She took a sip of her drink with a bit of exasperation, “It’s not like I’m a serial cheater or anything! But sometimes it all gets so boring! When the right one comes along, I always hoped it would be a bit like lightning. Ya know?”

Morse had thought the same thing once and he felt her sentiments at the heart of himself. He knew too well about falling fast and hard and then falling out just as quickly. Most people were insubstantial past their visual appeal. Once the lust had exhausted itself, once you knew them well enough - or too well - there was no adventure anymore. Nothing more stimulating about them.

Strangely, that hadn’t yet happened with Max. It had been over a year since that fateful night they’d met in the pub and gone home together. Fateful. It was a dramatic sounding word but that didn’t make it any less accurate. Morse was sure his life had changed drastically on account of knowing the man, both with the ups and the downs that had hurtled them towards this inevitable romantic purgatory they currently inhabited. But for all they had grown closer, still having mysteries exist between them had its own appeal. Perhaps the prospect of knowing Max too well, or being known in return, was its own terror.

“I worry sometimes,” Joyce spoke up after another beat of silence in which she pushed rice around her plate, “that I’ll end up like Dad. I don’t mean the illness or any of that but- well-” she looked at him carefully, “you know he and my mum were messing about with each other before he divorced your mum, right?”

Morse nodded. Of course he knew. He’d figured it out rather quickly once he’d been sent to live with them. He could tell from their relationship, from Joycie’s age, from photos he’d seen scattered about their house. He hadn’t known as a child, hadn’t known at the time of the divorce, but he’d figured it out in time. The old anger was gone now, it was empty and useless and packed away in the place all the old things ended up in his mind, but he could still find pangs of the sting, of rejection and abandonment, if he dug deep, even long after the old man was dead and buried.

“I worry I’ll never find someone I’m totally happy with and even if I think I do and I finally settle down,” She shrugged, “What if someone comes along that offers me something different? Shakes things up? I’ll chase it. I know I will. And god knows by then I’ll be a couple kids deep or summat and then I’ll have up and abandoned them-”

Morse put his hand over hers, “You wouldn’t abandon your children.”

“No, maybe not. If I even have them.” She smiled lightly and turned her hand to squeeze his, “It’s just worries. And let’s just say I stay? I resist the temptation. Am I then punishing myself? Not.. pursuing something new that could make me happy? Sometimes I think he may have left us too, Pop, if mum wasn’t the type to hunt him down.”
Morse, for all he hated his step-mother, couldn’t help a laugh, “She does seem the type.”

Joyce smiled again, looking up at him, “She’s not all bad you know. She was always jealous of your mum for being the first. First love is something you can’t take away. And she was jealous that you existed. First Wife. First Born Son. All the firsts had been gone through by the time she got there.”

Morse just shrugged, “Can’t help being born.”

“Well, I’m glad you were,” Joyce smiled. She then poked him playfully, “It at least made it a bit easier on me.”

It was then that Morse’s phone buzzed, not with a text, but a call. While he was fishing it out of his jacket, Joyce took the cue to clean up and gathered their plates to dispose of.

There was a small moment of panic when he saw the ID.

“Mrs. Thursday-”

‘Hello Morse. I know you boys are working late on this case but Fred wasn’t answering and, if you could, please just make sure he picks up the shopping I texted him about before he comes home. You know how these things slip his mind when it comes to these late nights-’

Having to lie for his governor was easier than he expected and his oily reply took barely a thought, “Of course. I’ll make sure.”

‘Good lad. Thank you Morse. Sorry to disturb you.’

“No trouble. Have a good evening.”

Morse frowned deeply as he typed out a text of ‘wife looking for you. get the shopping before you go home. talk tomorrow’ and hit send.

As they made their way back to the flat together, both siblings walked with heads bowed. Morse, with his hands in his pockets, was lost in his own thoughts but Joyce was different. She was very present in the moment and engaged with the surroundings, looking at flowering weeds peeking out of cracks in the cement or funny discarded refuse that had somehow ended up in the gutter. She took pictures on her phone of the world around her, and of him too more often than he liked, and she recorded videos he didn't see much the point of but she seemed to get a big kick out of. Morse was a brisk walker, only looking up out of necessity, but Joyce was more playful. She balanced on her toes on the curbs like balance beams, ran her hands along every railing or wall, and was just as likely to step on every sidewalk crack - on account of her mother's back - as she was to step on none. She wasn't a child, but there was a streak of fun in her that Morse lacked, and she appreciated more around her than he was capable of in his constant ennui.

They walked in silence until the first stoplight when Joyce once more curled her arm through his and jarred Morse from his reverie. Each affection of hers came a bit easier and less of a surprise to him as their time together wore on and it certainly didn't startle him as much anymore when Joyce hugged or kissed or leaned on him with love and care. It wasn’t like he could stop her, so better he got used to it.

"Have you ever been cheated on?” He asked, as if the dozen or so minutes since their last exchange didn’t even exist.

"Once," Joyce looked up and down the street as the cars passed, "Why?"
"How did you find out?" The light changed and they resumed their stroll.

"Got suspicious. You know the typical symptoms: strange perfume on him, not answering his phone as much when he was out, many more nights out than he ever had before. He was suddenly all possessive of his phone too, yeah? So one day he went out in the evening 'with the lads' and I followed him."

"What happened?"

"Found him with another girl. She and I both went a bit mad. She didn't know about me either. At first I was so worked up at her in particular but when I thought about it, I didn't really know why. Then we both realized it was him who was the enemy," Joyce went quiet for a minute and as they reached the path to his building, she paused, "Do you ever talk about anything that isn't so serious?"

Morse blinked, gaped, and had no immediate response.

"When we get back upstairs I'm making you watch something fun. Not about murder or affairs or whatever it is that's bothering you right now," Joyce tugged him towards the flat before he could protest, "And no documentaries. Maybe something animated or with superheroes." There was a beat, "Musical?"

Morse groaned.

"Mrs. Shears," Morse breathed as he loitered in the front garden of the Shears home the next day. The sun was high and bright but the air was crisp and cold and he could see his breath come out in gentle puffs in front of him, "Debryn is in with her now."

"You found her?" Thursday had just arrived in Number Nine and tucked his hands into the pockets of his coat as a guard against the chill. They hadn't had their 'talk' today, Thursday hadn't even answered the text from the night before, but Morse had barely been in the office an hour this morning before he'd gone out on inquiries. Mrs. Shears had been the first.

"She was one of the names on my list who didn't answer the phone. I thought I'd pop round since she was closest to the station," Morse sighed and looked out at the gathered vehicles and milling SOCO team and uniformed officers, "Door was ajar like Mrs. Haldane. No sign of forced entry..."

"Stocking?"

Morse nodded.

"And Lisk was let out this morning," Thursday frowned.

"The neighbor across the street said they saw a man watching the house early, around the time the kids were off to school."

"Description of the lurker?"

"It was dark. He had a bag of some kind. Not much to go on," Morse's face quirked. He could feel his frustration with the case turning back into anger, "They looked away to do some washing, came
back and he was gone."

"Probably in the bloody house already," Thursday growled.

Morse didn't miss his boss’s annoyance, he mirrored it, but his own feelings were also fueled in part due to Thursday himself.

"Mrs. Shears has two children and she’s separated from her husband. The neighborhood chin waggars suspected affairs," Morse's voice dropped harshly and there was an unmistakable accusation in his tone, "And from what I can tell it may be on account of her secrets that she's dead now."

Thursday stared at him hard and the mood around the pair of them was charged in its silence, but it was broken, clipped straight through, by Max appearing in the doorway with his kit and cutting through with his usual clipped tone, "Had."

"What?"

"She had two children and a husband," Came the slightly aloof reply. The smaller man unzipped his powder blue coveralls halfway before he snapped off his gloves and gave Thursday a pursed lipped stare, "Good Morning, Inspector."

"Doctor," It took Thursday a moment to tear his eyes from Morse and Morse himself sunk into his own shoulders as he retreated from his own gathering storm.

Max carried on as if he noticed nothing, "You let him loose for five minutes, Inspector, and he’s bringing back corpses like gifts from a roving housecat."

"Must you?" Morse exasperated.

The doctor cleaned his glasses coolly, his eyes much more blue while unobstructed. He nearly cooed, "Well, you do always bring me the nicest presents."

Morse snorted and turned his face away from Max's shrewd gaze, "Well then, don't say I've never given you anything."

Max slipped his glasses back on and took another step out, this time down onto the path. His cheek quirked in the usual droll disappointment and he bounced on his toes, "I will say your theme is getting a tad repetitive. A girl could get bored."

Thursday cleared his throat. The tension had adequately been broken and both he and Morse were now paces away from one another and their standoff had been delayed.

"It’s a full on Lynda van der Klok, just like the others," The clueless look from both policemen had Max sighing, "Strangled from behind. Of course Mrs. Shears put up a bit more of a fight than your others," Max mimed reaching behind him, over his shoulder, in example, "She scratched at her attacker. There were fibers and skin scrapings under her nails that need analysing. She died in the early morning hours. Nothing else definitive until I dig around a bit."

"I don’t want to do this with you Morse," Thursday leaned back in his office chair and plucked at
his keyboard as Morse slipped into his office and closed the door.

“Well, unfortunately Mrs. Armstrong is on my list and as you’ve banned me from speaking with her-”

“Oh, that’s rather drastic,” Thursday huffed.

Morse settled into the chair opposite the older man. He wasn’t to be moved until he got his information. Thursday didn’t need to gush about his deep dark secrets but he at least needed to know what would be relevant to the case, “Well then? What’d she say about Lisk?”

"Just what he did. She met him through work. He flirted. Took her out for drinks and-" Thursday was very adamantly staring at his computer monitor. When his eyes did jump to Morse he was as grave as ever, "She's a widow. No harm in getting herself some company. She said he's a bit of a brute sometimes but she knew what she was in for."

The information was enough to stand Morse down. Whatever his issues with Thursday and his secrets, the case was more pressing and finding out who was doing it and who might be next was more important.

"If the evidence points to Lisk, but it can't actually be Lisk, that means someone led us in that direction the whole time. Lisk is our common element."

"Jealous spouse?"

"The easy assumption. I'll go through my list again but not all of them are married. Mrs. Shears was separated and Jakes has gone to question her husband already. But now he's now got 2 kids to watch over on his own and it seemed he was keen on reconciling with her. You’ll remember that Mr. Merchant had already been in custody on account of DI Chard."

"We can't just go flinging accusations at this rate either Morse. We need this monster caught but without a shred of-"

"I know!" Morse dragged his hand through his hair, "I'll go over everything again. Cross reference the lists…"

"If we let this go another night, we may be looking at another body."

“‘It’s Huggins,” Morse rushed out of his flat that evening with his phone clenched between his shoulder and ear. He’d called Inspector Thursday, got no answer, then texted him ‘I know who it is’ which was enough to lurch his governor out of whatever he’d been doing. The return call came quickly.

‘You’ve got an address?’

“‘Yes.’

‘I’ll pick you up in a mo’”

He’d been so stupid and so blind. The entire group of them had been so fixated on nailing Lisk, so revolted by him and so wrapped up in their own personal shit, that they hadn’t used the most
simple strings of logic to put two and two together. Mrs. Shears, at the very least, may still be alive if they had looked at the bare bones of the thing more clearly and while the others may not have thought about it or realized it, Morse was sure he’d never forget that they could have saved her.

He’d poured over the evidence and the report data all evening while Joyce watched TV and eventually, in her boredom, went round to Monica's once again. His thoughts on his sister’s frivolous romantic adventures had shifted somewhat when he realized that he'd rather she fall in with someone he knew and liked than with some stranger. A male stranger would have been worse.

Their recent conversations about fidelity had called some things into question and Morse realized he was missing something rather large and looming and obvious. As he removed Lisk as a suspect, he asked himself why it had been Lisk that had been set up for the murders. He was vile, yes, and with easy connection between all the women, but it couldn’t be random. The elaborate lengths gone to to implicate him were very poignant and personal.

Who were Lisk's enemies? Likely everyone who had ever crossed paths with him.

Who had the most reason to want to kill him? A jealous spouse - just as Thursday said.

But they'd been looking only at the dead women.

There was actually one woman that Morse had reached out to question hadn't been able to get through to. That same woman was one who had a solid irrefutable connection to Burridge’s.

Morse told all of this to Inspector Thursday on the way to the Huggins home.

"So you reckon Mrs. Huggins is dead too," Thursday sped them there within the safest limits of the law.

"She was probably the first. Her husband found out about her and Lisk and decided to bring him down. He had access to all their addresses through Burridge’s database, and I double checked, each had some sort of large delivery to their home in the past eight months."

"So he was recognizable. Likely in his work clothes when he showed up. All it would take was a clipboard to get him in the door. They likely wouldn’t think to fight him," Thursday cut his eyes to Morse beside him, "What about the missing rings?"

"Man kills his own wife, snaps and goes on a spree. I imagine he just went full on psycho. He’s probably collected them. Trophies, like we assumed."

Which they learned, minutes later when both of them were wrestling Huggins to his living room floor, was exactly what had happened. He’d been dressed like he was ready to go out again, wearing a workman’s jumpsuit, wearing gloves, and carrying a bag. When searched they found the stockings and a collection of cleaning supplies tucked away in the duffel, and in his bedroom, the dead women’s cell phones and wedding bands.

What followed was a long night at the station full interrogation and organizing the search of Huggins home and any other hideaways he may have had. There was evidence that needed going over and eventually the very necessary matter of finding out where he'd hidden his wife's body so she could be exhumed, examined and put to rest properly.

By the time Morse slumped into a chair in Inspector Thursday’s office, the late night was turning into early morning and they both were too drained for much more than sneaking in a drink. Alcohol in the office was frowned upon but Thursday pulled a small bottle out of his bottom drawer as Morse pulled the blinds and closed the door. Both men groaned equally when their tired
bones hit the seat cushions.

“Good work on this one, Morse. You kept focused and didn’t overlook anything,” Thursday slid a glass across to him.

Morse closed his spindly fingers around it. Hunger and exhaustion gnawed at him but he was still buzzing too hard and still winding down from the arrest. The evening was full of more highs and lows for Morse than he was used to and time to rest was what he really needed in order to settle.

“If I’d figured it out a day sooner, Mrs. Shears might still be alive. And maybe even Norman Parkis,” Morse sipped gratefully and let the burn of the liquid down his throat shock him a bit to life. He was still angry with Mr. Bright on account of the Parkis matter but it would be tasteless to say I told you so. He’d been right all along about the circumstances of his murder. Huggins had gone in to pinch more stockings and Parkis had found him, simple as that. Parkis was an unfortunate casualty of Huggins personal war and he’d owned up to it quickly, and regretfully, once he was on the other side of an interrogation table.

“You can’t think like that. You’ll never forgive yourself if you hold on to every ‘What If’” Thursday sighed, “That’s no way to live.”

“And what about you?” Morse said it aloud before he really thought it through but it was glaringly obvious what he meant. The past few nights Thursday had been MIA, working late to his family, but Morse knew otherwise. It hadn’t been said, but he knew he’d been visiting Louisa Armstrong.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Fred sighed again and that stubborn streak in him that had shored up his defenses in the days previous seemed to crumble away. The battle had left him, “You’d think I spat on your mother’s grave or something.”

“Well, what am I supposed to think you’ve been doing the past week? Working late? I lied to your wife last night about,” Morse waved a hand in disgust at the triviality, “the shopping.”

“And I appreciate that! But you were supposed to be worrying on the case and not on my where’s and what’s!” Fred fired back with a bit of the old bite, but it abated as he drained his glass and pushed it away. Now he railed against the desire for more, “Nothing untoward happened, Morse. We just talked.”

Thursday fished in his jacket and produced an envelope. It was addressed to ‘Fredo’ but was unopened. He tossed it down in front of Morse.

“She was gone when I got there tonight. Door unlocked. No clothes or bags or anything left. Not a stitch. All that was waiting for me was that.”

Morse looked at the envelope which was entirely nondescript besides the politely looped handwriting. It was sealed, not too fat or too thin, and there was no sign of anything hefty inside the envelope. She certainly hadn’t written him a novel or included love tokens or knick-knacks. There wasn’t even a fanciful whiff of ladies perfume.

"You haven't opened it," Morse leaned forward and picked it up to turn over in his hands before shooting Thursday another glance.

"Not sure that I want to. I don’t think I want to know what she has to say about all this. Why she thought it was something worth running from. Something worth keeping secret-“ Fred eyed the bottle one more time. He was clearly playing with the idea of another drink but won against the demon once more, "I thought she was dead, you see. Gone down in a bombing. We were-“ Morse
could see the struggle in Thursday’s face to admit it, “something to each other. It was only a few weeks but it was intense and dangerous and then like that,” his fingers snapped, “she was a casualty. I think, no matter what that letter says, I’d like her to stay that way,” He tapped his temple, "Up here."

“Does Mrs. Thursday know?” Morse shouldn’t have asked. It was none of his business, but the words slipped out again before he could stop himself.

“Yes,” Fred frowned, “When I came back from Ireland I told her all about it. It was something we put behind us. I don’t know, Morse. I’ve probably been a stubborn arse these few days but I just wanted to hear her side of it. I know what she told me and I also know that now she’s gone. Says volumes, doesn’t it? That’ll do well enough for me.”

Morse let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding, some sort of relief to know that his internal image of his mentor had not been sullied. If anything, Thursday felt more human to him than he ever had before. He knew well enough the confusions of love and how things from the past could sneak up on you. He knew how tempting it could be to lapse back into old habits and how difficult the struggle was to not cave in to every desire and chase every fantastical eventuality. He was more than grateful that Thursday had spoken about it at all and felt, for once, that they had more in common than he’d ever realized before.

Morse drove him home afterward, having been promised the car while his sister was in town and the case now wrapped. The letter weighed heavily inside of his jacket pocket. He could have just popped it in the shredder on the way out the door but instead he’d kept it. Perhaps it was some ingrained responsibility towards the effort of Louisa Armstrong to impart some leaving words but it was also because Thursday had given it to him, as if he were his secret keeper, and like all duties (explicitly stated or implied) Morse took those responsibilities very seriously.

Joyce was still asleep when he got in and Morse did nothing more than strip out of his suit and crawl into the swaddle of blanket on the futon as the sun began to rise. He stared at the letter in his hand a long while before gingerly slicing it open, and as he finally read it, the birds were already starting their morning songs. He read about Louisa’s betrayal all those years ago. She said that she had never fully been honest with Thursday. That some level of their entanglement had all been for the cause, but that she had loved him, had fallen for him, in those weeks together. She detailed being the mole they’d been searching for, the rat who had brought in the bomber that had supposedly killed her, and how once it was over with, she’d fled. She took a different name. Married a different man. Started a new life.

She had genuinely loved him but he didn’t love her. Not the real her. He’d never known the real her. It was a fantasy, and now she had to leave now because knowing he was close was too much for the both of them. Thursday didn’t deserve it and neither did his wife.

They couldn’t see each other again. Not deliberately and not even by accident.

It was never too late in life, she said, to start fresh.

Morse’s chest ached as he finished reading and his eyes burned and felt heavy behind his lids. He wasn’t sure if he felt sorry for Louisa or for Thursday but he was sure that neither of them would want or expect his pity. He’d never be able to understand the sort of thing they had been through together but he knew he’d keep their secret.

Strangely the case hadn’t felt finished until he was setting the letter aflame the next day, once he’d slept on it, and had disjointed dreams about bombs and whiskey and blood and longing. There hadn’t been closure until he'd known and processed all the facts, all the details, and felt every bit of
the pain and yearning that had been offered up. Mrs. Armstrong had given him insight into the minds of those women who had gone with Joey Lisk. The women who lacked love in their lives and went to the first brute who made them feel beautiful again. Companionship. Filling a hole. Perhaps even being so unhappy with themselves because of what the world had done to them, that they believed such a man was what they deserved. Morse understood better now what would be ruined in his governor's mind to know the truth. 

Better to live with their fleeting love intact and real, long dead, than to know that it had been a lie or even to hope that his life could have been different.

Chapter End Notes

I struggled a bit with this.. I hope no one minds. The case should be neatly wrapped up and I hope I didn't do too wrongly by any characters. Suicide seems very cheap for a woman like Louisa Armstrong. I also know I didn't focus a ton on Thursday/Louisa but this is very restrained to Morse's POV so that sideplot had to take a bit of a sideline.

I learned a bit, I think, tackling case details while also trying to tell a story. I hope it wasn't too boring.

As you can tell this chunk of story was a bit more about Morse's family issues than about his love life.
Morse, an infinite well of issues and a never ending source of hypocrisy.

I promise we are on the home stretch and shippy stuff will be abundant in the final couple of chapters!
“And where is your lovely sister this evening?” Max’s brows lifted as he took a sip from the over complicated looking drink in his hand. The Plough was a mainstay for a having a good pint, but they had embraced the holiday theme for the evening and were offering specialty cocktails. Whatever Max had ordered was bright pink, looked like something a college girl or middle-class mum would order, and had a punny name that Morse had blacked out of his mind in embarrassment as soon as Max said it aloud. The doctor seemed to be enjoying the concoction quite a bit and the tips of his ears had gone pink after only two. Morse was positive he’d only ordered it because it was about as far opposite from his no frills pint of bitter as was possible.

“She and Monica made plans,” Morse tilted his head as he hunched over his nearly empty plate and plucked up one of the last crispy bits of chip to munch on. He scanned the crowd out of habit and finding it devoid of interest, his eyes locked back on Max.

“They’ve gotten rather fond of one another, hm?” Max smirked. His foot bobbed under the table against Morse’s own, something that had become a habit to garner his attention and keep Morse from drifting. The detective just shook his head.

He’d gone to meet Max at the hospital after work and they’d decided on The Plough because of the advertised barbeque and fireworks view over Port Meadow. Everything had been calm enough when they arrived and they’d even managed to grab a table before it began to fill up, but minute by minute more patrons crammed in or spilled out onto the lawn, and so they decided that after a quick bite and a few drinks, they would shuffle off.

It was a wise choice. By the time their food was finished, the pub had become stifling. Even Max, who was less bothered by crowds than Morse was, had already made a few choice comments about legal fire occupancy.

“You know, Joyce’s got a boyfriend back home. Told me all about him,” Morse’s lips curled distastefully before he took a long draught of his beer, “Ted or something.”

“Open relationship?”

“She implied not,” Morse shrugged, “But she says if he was satisfying her than she wouldn’t have been tempted off. I just think she’s not taking it seriously. Apparently, she goes through them like Kleenex.”

Max seemed sympathetic, “She’s young. Do you want her to settle down already?”

“No, of course not,” Morse huffed, “Just… well… she needs to be careful is all.”

Max actually let out a ‘Hah!’ and leaned back, his glass now empty. As the waitress passed, he caught her eye and flagged for their bill.

“What was that?” Morse scowled a bit in his confusion.


Max had the check in his hand before Morse could intervene so he did the graceful thing and didn’t
mention it. He never fought too hard if someone else volunteered to pay. Instead, he drained his pint.

“Are you implying I’m not careful?” Morse’s brows raised now.

“You certainly don’t do much looking before leaping. And sometimes the leaping is literal.”

Morse sucked his cheek and leaned in, his voice dropping, “Well, the only questionable person I’ve gone home with in recent memory is you.”

Max actually cracked a smile at that. He leaned forward and dropped his voice as well, “And I could have been a serial killer! You had no idea. In fact, I’m probably over qualified to be a serial killer,” One of Max’s hands snaked out to brush across Morse’s forearm and his voice dropped even lower as he scratched a nail slowly along the freckled skin. He was clearly getting great enjoyment out of teasing him, “I am rather good with a scalpel. I could have brought you back home and filleted you like a fish.”

Morse rolled his eyes but the contact combined with that tone of voice lifted the hairs on the back of his neck and prickled hot pins and needles under his skin. Something warm and needy yawned lazily inside of him. It had been nearly a week now since they’d had some alone time together but it felt like longer. He felt like the Strangler case had sunk into his bones, the loneliness that permeated the thing, that he’d been on the edge of rupturing like so many of the relationships around him.

Morse turned his arm over and brushed their fingers together. He needed this, and perhaps for the first time, didn't spare a single stray thought to who could or might see them.

“After I’d had my way with you, obviously,” Max tickled his fingers across Morse’s palm before they stilled and their hands rested together. His eyes widened and he whispered playfully, “Maybe I am a serial killer.”

Morse huffed a beleaguered laugh, “Do you always have to be so morbid?”

Their fingers wove together on the table top and didn’t move again until Max’s credit card and the receipt were being given back to him and they finally made their way out of the crowded pub and onto the road.

Most of the pedestrians were carting chairs and blankets and heading over to Port Meadow but Max and Morse instead set off down the path towards the water. They were not alone, but it wasn't nearly as crowded along the canal and under the canopy of the trees as it would be elsewhere. The sun was setting and the sky was as ablaze as the bonfires that were springing up across the city. There was a lingering and ever present smoky aroma to the air and they could hear pops and cracks in the distance as Oxford’s denizens began to set almost anything they could on fire as soon as they were permitted.

They walked side by side, elbows nearly brushing as they fell into step on the towpath. Morse had gotten out of working tonight on account of Joyce’s visit but he knew he should have been out there like Strange, straight from a murder inquiry and right into walking a beat or sporting plain clothes and keeping a close eye on rabble-rousers. This break of his was lucky and he didn't want to squander it. Thankfully, after a full meal and a pint, even with the overwhelming crowds, Morse was the most relaxed he’d been in days.

"Are you going to the Thursday's anniversary do?” Morse had followed a scattered chain of thoughts that began somewhere around ‘make small talk’ and ended at ‘don’t talk about work’. 
Somehow he successfully managed 'work adjacent' instead.

"Wasn't invited," Max glanced at him, "We've worked together for a while but I wouldn't say we are particularly close. How many years have they been married?"

"Twenty five."

"That's a long time."

“It’s an entirely alien concept to me,” Morse admitted. His brow furrowed and in his pocket his hand played with his keys to ease his antsy fingers. He could already feel his brain racing towards something that Max likely had no idea he was being set up for. Worse, he couldn’t stop himself, "My father was a philanderer and my parents divorced. My stepmother and he were never very warm either." And what? He and his sister inherited their father's wandering eye? Or was it a libido thing? Perhaps just a weakness to beauty.

Oversharing, Morse. You'll ruin everything.

Max was looking at him quizzically, and while the information wasn't entirely new, Morse was aware that he never talked about his family beyond Joyce. For ease, he moved the conversation back to the task at hand, “What do you bring to an anniversary do anyway? Am I supposed to give a gift?”

“Well wishes and yourself, I believe, is the only proper etiquette,” Max nodded, “I’m sure a decent bottle of wine wouldn’t go amiss if you wanted to play it safe. It would be a bit awkward giving your own boss money for successfully navigating a quarter of a century of marriage."

“More like for Mrs. Thursday for putting up with him,” Morse snorted wryly, knowing more of it than he could possibly let on but Max seemed to agree just the same.

A pair of teens with entwined arms and hands were heading towards them and Max and Morse parted to make way, everyone nodding politely to one another as they passed, and Morse cast them a lingering glance after they’d gone by before he and Max resumed their stroll. This time he reached for the other. Morse’s fingers found and curled around his arm, trailed over the familiar tattoo, caressed down to his wrist and finally found his hand and linked it with his own.

Max said nothing. Neither did he.

They were rather good at not saying things.

Morse knew that those lovestruck teens had no idea just how fleeting things were at that age. He remembered though, the intensity of every emotion, like being apart from that particular person may kill you. Like if you couldn’t touch them you may very nearly die, and then when you did, that there was no possible way that it was enough.

Until the next thing happened. The next person. The next trend. The death of interest. And then the thought of touching that person died too. The desire died. Like a switch had been flipped. You’d rather run than let them touch you again. Overnight you could change. Something in you simply moves on. The world does too. Always moving on.

Like Joyce did.

Like he had always.

Transience was swiftly losing its appeal.
When the first firework exploded in the distance, flaring and blooming in the sky through a gap in the trees, Morse was actually startled into a pause. The last time he’d seen fireworks had been New Year’s Eve and he’d been hiding in his room getting drunk trying not to think about gun smoke and Mrs. Coke-Norris and nearly dying. He’d called Max then, though the other probably didn’t realize it, to help him through it. And he had. Now, hand-in-hand, strolling under an exploding sky, Morse was sure he would find fireworks and Max Debryn inextricably linked in his mind for time immemorial.

He could only imagine what the call-out to the Coke-Norris home had been like for Max, to be told there were bodies, to be told there was a policeman down and one of them was Morse. They’d only had a few entanglements at that point but Morse knew that Max had to have given a damn. Shot and stitched and then swept right away with no explanation. If Morse had died from sepsis because of his own neglect, Max would have blamed himself. He hadn’t thought about it much since, but he realized how much he’d put the other man through then. Afterwards he hadn’t talked to him for months except to ask a favor. Then of course when he returned, he was a mess. Max had tried with him, to help, to show he cared, and if Morse looked between the lines, it was all there, Max calling him to check up while he broke down, always being available to him even under duress. Morse couldn’t help but remember what the other had said months and months ago and he was sure that Max had been correct about one thing - Morse could be a fucking horror.

Max was looking up now, the rainbow lights dancing in the lenses of his glasses, his perfectly bowed lips curled only slightly away from their usual disappointed frown. It was enough for Morse to know that he was enjoying himself. He looked lovely, he always did, but especially now. Morse wasn’t sure if the other man just got better looking over time or if he had really fallen so hard for him. He thought he may be able to exist right here and stare at him forever.

Max seemed to sense the eyes on him and cast Morse a glance, a purse of the lips and a quizzical arch of the brows, and Morse couldn’t help a rather stupid grin from breaking out on his face. He pulled Max close and kissed him, full and long, and let it wash through him, let it fill up the cracks and plaster over all the shallow wounds left by the case. It soothed his bruised confidences and made it much easier to pack the lingering discomfort away. Loneliness could be a certain sort of reliable companion, but like people, it became familiar and boring.

Loneliness was empty and this was anything but.

They only broke apart when they were startled from it. Neither man had noticed a boat drifting past until it’s occupants let out a rousing (and slightly drunken) cheer. One man even wolf-whistled and yodeled out something along the lines of ‘There’s fireworks fer ya!’

It was impossible not to laugh, though Morse hid his face behind his hand, and they gave a wave to the boat as it lazily passed them by. Only when they were looking at the tail end of the thing, did Morse turn back to Max with a serious look, “I want that.”

“A boat?” Max sounded astounded.

“What?” Morse made a face, “No!”

“I don’t follow, Morse,” Max shook his head.

He was beginning to feel foolish. Morse realized he’d gone a bit too much into his head again. He’d both jumped forward and hung back in old conversations simultaneously. He waved a rolling hand, “The other- the- We were talking about the Thursdays.”

“A twenty five year marriage?” Max’s eyes widened comically, “I’m flattered, Morse, really but
“A relationship!” Morse blurted finally, “With you.”

Max’s brow furrowed, his eyes narrowed a bit in thought, and Morse started to worry from the look he was being given about what may have been going on in the other man’s head. In moments like these it became so obvious to Morse that Max gave very little away. Not real things. Not outside of when idiocy at a crime scene got his blood pumping. Or when he and Morse were both too boneless from a shag to have walls up, clinging to one another post-coital, or too tired in the morning or evening to be taciturn. Or when they had a row. Max never made the move when it came to feelings - personal or professional - his care came in quiet acts and reading between the lines.

“I hate to break it to you like this, Morse,” Max said carefully, “But we have, in fact, been dating for months.”

Morse actually gaped at him. He knew that, obviously, but it hadn’t been explicitly stated. Once there had been the word ‘something’ between them and more often than not there were the usual little compliments or affections when either of them were particularly amorous, and of course their outings that were likely what people would call dates- but to Morse there was something tentative that hung over it all. Perhaps because of work or perhaps because of the nature of their meeting. A one night stand. A hook up.

There had, admittedly, been Alice that once and then he’d tried it on with Monica. They'd not spoken much for a spat of months and then there had been arguing… but he couldn’t forget the sight of Max coming into the pub with Jerome, how his stomach had hit his shoes. It wasn’t entirely due to the bad terms they were on at the time. It was pure jealousy. What they'd been doing since had been comfortable and casual but Morse realised he couldn’t bear the thought that at any moment Max, not thinking this was a commitment between them, may find someone else in a pub or end up on someone else’s arm. Even for a night. Even for a fling.

“Thank you. Yes,” Morse wanted to throttle the man a bit, in all honesty. He knew he was teasing him again. He was trying to be genuine and Max was taking the piss. Pressing his buttons as always, “I had noticed.”

Max stepped close again, lifted an inch or two and pressed another soft kiss to Morse’s lips, “It’s not Grease, my dear. You don’t need to pin me or announce officially that we’re,” he enunciated cheekily, “going steady.”

“I’ve actually seen Grease!” Morse wagged a finger and exclaimed, “Fucking Joyce!”

Max burst out laughing and Morse turned an interesting rosy shade, “I just want to be sure there was no one else. That you aren’t - looking for someone else. Because I’m not.”

“Come along now,” The doctor squeezed his hand and tugged it, pulling Morse lightly until he started to walk back, this time the way they had come, “There’s no one else. I told you before that I don’t date.”

Morse opened his mouth to protest that Max had just said they were dating when he caught on. His mouth clapped shut and he flushed with a warmth that made him want to squirm. Max didn’t date... but he was doing it for him.

Max looked a bit smug and patronizing when he looked at Morse again, “Do you need to be placated with a title like boyfriend or something equally horrendous?”
“Christ, no,” Morse actually looked disgusted, “I just wanted to hear you say it. You never say things. We both- we’re bad at saying things.”

Max didn’t reply to that at all and Morse wasn’t sure if he was making some sort of point or if the nail had been hit right on the head. The doctor just snorted and then after another long moment he sounded thoughtful, “You know, may have been on to something with that boat idea. There is nothing — absolutely nothing — half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.”

Morse rolled his eyes with exasperation, “I’m going to throw you in the bloody canal.”

Morse practically oozed onto the sofa in Max’s front room when they finally returned to his house. He wasn’t particularly tired but after a workday, a meal and a stroll it was a relief to stretch out somewhere. Despite most people thinking he was restless, it was more of a mental state than anything else. Given the chance to settle, he’d often rather not move at all. If his brain couldn’t shut off, his body certainly should. Sleep was rather nice when he could get it and even if he couldn’t nap, a nice lounge was ideal for reading or puzzling or listening to music. When he used to take those long bike rides in the country to escape his father’s house, he’d often imagine himself as some idle rich lord, lounging in front of a massive window, contemplating life’s mysteries as music played and he sipped tea and stared out into his garden.

“Don’t tell me you’re tired already?” Max checked his phone as he passed the sofa and trailed his fingers through Morse’s hair to muss it as he passed, “It’s not very late.”

Morse turned his head to watch him head into the kitchen, “It’s nice to be horizontal at the end of a long day.”

Max got himself a glass of water and Morse rolled onto his belly to continue watching him with his head on top of his arms. He was actually debating another beer or maybe wine as they often did, though even with Max right there, a tiny Debryn voice in the back of his mind told him to drink some water.

“We can sit out in the garden and watch the sky,” Max offered as he set the glass down half-empty, “There are probably more fireworks to be had.”

“You don’t have a garden,” Morse snorted.

“Yet,” Max corrected, “Dotty was whinging on New Years Eve that going out there for a smoke was too Soviet.”

Morse tilted his head like a quizzical dog.

“Stark and cold and oppressed,” Max’s explained dryly, “I figure if I start to call it a garden, maybe I’ll actually get around to making it one eventually.”

Morse smirked and hummed his amusement as he rested his chin on his arms. Now that he was lying down he didn’t much feel like getting up again. Instead he watched Max, who took the lack of answer correctly as a rejection of the outdoors, and made his way back over when he’d drained his glass.

Max dragged his eyes over the length of Morse on the sofa, frowned, and made like he was going
to sit square on top of him. Morse, in response, made an indignant sound, wrapped his arms around
the man’s waist, and dragged him ungracefully down. A struggle ensued, with quite a bit of
grappling, writhing against one another, a bit of pinching, Max complaining about Morse’s bony
elbows, and concluded with them gripped tight together face to face in a tangle of limbs.

Max had to fix his glasses which had gone askew in the wrestling, “Was all that really necessary?”

“You were going to sit on me.”

“Only because you’re stretched over the entire sofa like the Queen of bloody Sheba.”

“I think it worked out just fine,” Morse smirked, running his hands across Max’s waist and finally
up under his shirt to touch his skin, “So yes. Absolutely necessary.”

“You, sir, are a layabout,” Max relaxed into him. Despite his complaints, the doctor let out a breath
that sounded very much like relief and he finally leaned in to punctuate his statement with a kiss.

Morse laughed against the doctors lips. He could feel the tension melting out of Max's body with
every moment that passed and each caress of his hands across his skin. When their kiss broke he
squeezed the other man's soft waist, "Everyone else tells me I need to calm down. Slow down.
Take a break, Morse. Rest. But you call me a layabout."

Max adjusted his head on the not-very-comfortable sofa pillow (there was a reason he used the
upstairs study instead) and blinked coolly, "No one else has you clambering and draping all over
their furniture like an oversized house cat."

“No,” Morse felt something lovely trickle through his veins, the fresh realization that Max was
entirely correct and just how much he enjoyed that, “No one else does.”

Max watched him carefully and reached up to brush his fingers through Morse's hair and down his
cheek. He’d noticed that Max had a habit of tracing the lines of his bones, tracing his skull, across
his cheekbones or his nose. Morse found it endearing. There was always something worshipful
about it, like those moments Max devoured him with his eyes. He’d never felt so appreciated by
anyone else.

"You’re rather relaxed tonight,” Max murmured, “What’s got into my dour detective?"

Morse caught the hand and brought it to his lips. He kissed Max's fingertips, one by one, and let
that sentence sink in. His detective. And Max was his doctor. It wouldn’t be the first time the other
man struck him so soundly that he was left devoid of words. Did he realize yet that poetry was the
only way Morse knew to translate his own feelings? The theft of other’s words and emotions to
scribble poorly around his own?

He curled Max's hand around his own and kissed the back of his knuckles before murmuring
against his skin, “O how your fingers drowse me.”

Max inhaled and Morse could feel it against his chest. He leaned in to kiss him, only a teasing
brush of their lips against each other, “Your breath falls around me like dew.”

It was Max who chased the kiss this time but Morse’s lips moved down to press against the side of
Max’s chin and then down further his neck where he could feel the other’s heartbeat jump under
his lips, “Your pulse lulls the tympanas of my ears.”

Morse nuzzled there into the crook of Max’s neck. There was no bow-tie tonight which meant an
exposed neck and collar that he’d been eyeing all evening. He felt so very Victorian, riled over the
most minimal bits of exposed skin. He pressed in close and breathed deep of him before he rolled Max onto his back, “I feel immersed from head to foot.”

And then he found that spot on Max’s neck, his favorite spot, the one that made the other hitch and gasp, and he parted his lips and nipped him before soothing it over with his tongue. The desired result was immediate and Max shuddered underneath him and shifted their hips together. Morse nearly purred to feel Max’s arousal growing against his own. Clothes were frustrating but for now the tease of restraint was welcome, “Delicious.”

“Enough,” Max half groaned and half growled. It was both an end to the quotation and a suitable punctuation to Morse’s teasing. The doctor pulled him up and kissed him deeply. It was unhurried and heated and Morse felt it to his toes which curled around Max’s legs and hooked.

Morse writhed in his growing need, hips rocking downward into Max, and he was so lost in his own thoughts that it took him a few moments to realize that Max was gripping his arse and encouraging him.

Morse licked his lips when their kiss broke and he could still taste that fruity drink from the early evening. Max was sweet, why was he always sweet? A mouth that could be so cutting, so edgy, so sharp, always with a tinge of sweet. Morse had murmured Max’s name before he even realized, nothing more than a needy whisper, but he could feel Max sigh in response to hearing it.

Morse attempted to pull his knees up, to straddle Max’s hips. He wanted to look him in the eye, peel his clothes off, leave him disheveled and wrecked against the cushions, but his knee slipped too close to the edge and instead of propping himself up, he slipped and thumped down very ungracefully into Max’s chest.

“This sofa isn’t meant for this-” Morse chuckled awkwardly as Max braced him in the tight grip of his arms.

“It wasn’t exactly what I had in mind when I bought it, no,” Max murmured breathily, “Are you staying the night?”

They hadn’t set any boundaries on this date of theirs. There had been no discussion, with Joyce staying, where they would end up or how long it may last. Morse asking Max out for bonfire night had been a relatively impulsive decision when it happened, alcohol and hormone fueled, but the real truth was that only another murder could have kept him out of Max’s bed for the night. He’d begun craving their time together like a drug. Sitting around the flat alone was only nice for a few days before it got boring and lonely. Having a whole bed to himself was comfortable, but cold. Waking up wrapped in the other man and being able to roll over and watch him sleep, relaxed and silent and unguarded, were gifts he didn’t take for granted. Morse was addicted.

“Yes,” Morse ducked his head again to kiss Max’s neck and the other lifted his chin and craned to give better access, gasping again when Morse’s lips sucked lightly on his skin. Morse plucked Max’s top shirt button open, then another, and then another until his hands were smoothing over the man’s chest and through his chest hair and he could drop down low enough to straddle his thigh without falling off of the sofa and tumbling to the floor.

They were both painfully hard and their limited movement was becoming infuriating.

“Morse,” Max gasped as Morse dipped lower and his tongue circled a nipple before he plucked it with his lips, “Upstairs.”

Max trembled underneath him and Morse grinned and went for the other nipple as well. He
pinched lightly, plucked, and when Max gasped aloud something buzzed between them - a hot tingle - a vibration - and it rocketed up Morse’s spine.

“Morse-” Max gasped again and another tremble vibrated between them.

Morse couldn’t help a desperate sort of sound when Max’s hand tangled in his hair and he tugged him up. There was a pull and sting but he enjoyed it quite a bit. But that vibration happened again and this time it became obvious that it wasn’t their bodies or the pounding of his blood through his veins. It was artificial, out of time, and it didn’t sync at all with what was happening.

“Morse!” Max, given a moment to breathe, finally stopped him. His hand slipped from his hair and smoothed along Morse’s cheek. He brushed a thumb across his lips, “It’s your phone. Your phone’s ringing.”

“What?” Morse blinked and propped himself up on a palm next to Max’s head. Max looked, just as he’d said in the poem, delicious. Kiss-pinked lips and open shirt, breathing just that much heavier than usual, and looking at him with that devouring admiring stare that Morse craved seeing. He was so close to his goal, dismantling Max with his mouth before they went upstairs and found other ways to destroy one another completely.

The vibration came again and his lust-clouded brain finally clicked it all together.

*His phone was ringing.*

He’d jinxed it. When he’d thought that only a murder could keep him from staying, he hadn’t been requesting one! The phone buzzed again and now that he was conscious of it, it became the least sensual thing that could have happened. Morse nearly fell off of the sofa scrambling up to answer, to fish it from his pocket, and Max shot up as well to grab onto him so he didn’t fall and crack his head on the coffee table. Morse ended up on the floor with his back pressed to the sofa and Max propped up on an elbow peering over his shoulder.

If it was a murder it would be of interest to him as well.

At least they’d both be prompt to the scene.

But when Morse checked the caller ID he found the name JOYCE blinking back at him.

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Morse wasn’t sure he’d ever felt this very peculiar mix of emotions before. First it was worry: Joyce sounded wasted on the phone. Positively thrashed. She was alone - calm but alone - and she needed a ride.

“Sorry, Ender~” She’d slurred with the sort of earnest desperation that could only be mustered by the truly obliterated, “-dunwant’a be trouble.”

Next came the humiliation: sitting on Max’s floor with a swiftly dying hard-on and asking him for a ride.

“I’m sorry,” Morse rubbed his face and felt the heat of embarrassment burning under his skin, “You can take us back to my flat and I’ll deal with her.”
He was humiliated. Utterly mortified. He was on pins and needles, but not the lusty itchy satisfying sort that made him want to rip his clothes off. This was a feeling that made him want to crawl out of his own skin, slough it off until he was someone else and simply disappear. Morse was sure he was red as a beet but as he moved to jump up, to scramble for the door, to run to the car or maybe even run off entirely, he felt Max’s hand clamp down onto his shoulder to hold him in place.

Max actually leaned over, pressed his warm weight to Morse’s back, and kissed his hair.

“No sorry necessary,” He didn’t let Morse move until he could feel the tension release from his back and shoulders and Morse was sure he didn’t quite deserve how good Max was being about this - or anything really.

“I’m probably better equipped to deal with her here at the house, Morse. And we can both keep an eye on her tonight.”

“No, we couldn’t-”

“Yes. I insist.”

The drive was very quiet. Max had buttoned himself back up and grabbed his keys and Morse, who had tried several more times to deny the help the man was offering, had finally given up. Now he was getting a sinking feeling, a hollow pit of anxiety in his stomach.

He’d called Joyce back. She didn’t answer.

He felt he may be sick, so he was silent as they drove to the bus stop that Joyce had identified in her first slurry phone call.

The next wave was relief: Joyce was on a bench, limp and leaning, but in the company of an older woman who wouldn’t allow him to take her away until he’d identified himself as her brother and flashed his police identification. Joyce had roused from her stupor by then, blinked her glassy eyes, and enthusiastically greeted him as if nothing at all were wrong in the world.


How did this happen? Where was Monica? What was Joyce thinking?

His sister barely even registered getting in to the Rover until she had flopped sideways, petted the leather seats, and noticed Max behind the wheel.

"Hi Max," She smiled crookedly before laying her face down on the leather and closing her eyes.

Morse texted Monica in a fury 'WHERE R U' - no, he hadn't even bothered with proper spelling or grammar - but the minutes ticked by and she didn't answer and he began to stew.

Max's hand settled on Morse’s knee and stayed there for the rest of the ride, "Joyce will be fine. She's safe and sound now. You can do the detective bits later."

Morse didn’t answer.

Max looked at him in the mirror, "You hear me, Morse? Her health and welfare is first. The when and where and why can come later."

It was both reassuring and infuriating all at the same time. He’d never done this before. In college when someone got themselves wasted, or he did, it was always someone else's job to do the
nursemaid duty. He wondered, if for Max, that had always been him.

Joyce made some concerning sounds in the back seat as they drove, gurgles and murmurs, and Morse worried suddenly that she’d be sick all over Max’s car. It would be just what he needed, another embarrassment on top of many. He fairly hovered, watching her in the mirrors, until they all arrived back at the house without notable incident.

"C'mon Joycie-" Morse offered his arms when he hopped out and opened her door, "We're here."

"Where?" She blinked again from where she lay across the seats.

"Max's house."

"Oh!" Joyce seemed excited for all of a split-second until she started to move. She caught her foot while stepping out of the vehicle, stumbled into her brother's arms and when she was righted again, took a few steps towards the door before she promptly lurched over and was sick in the bushes.

_Humiliated._

Morse stared at the sky, took a few deep breaths, and tried not to let it get to him. He felt Max's hand settle on his back in support.

"It's just a drunk girl, Morse, not the end of the world."

Morse sighed, glanced down at Joyce, and sighed again. At this point he may have been leaning a bit into his own dramatics.

"Hold her hair, for god's sake," Max tutted before he beeped his vehicle lock with finality and went to open the house for them.

Morse did as he was told. He waited with his sister through her ills, rubbed her back and pushed her hair out of her face. It didn't end up being nearly as foul as he first suspected and after a few minutes Joyce finally whipped herself upwards and wobbled in place. She didn't look like she had been sick at all. What sort of twenty-something party girl magic was that? Her makeup was even still intact.

"I'm fine. I'm fine," She slurred gently and when he attempted to help her, she pushed off of him with some renewed vigor. As she stepped in the front door she repeated again, "I'm fine, Ender. I'm fine."

"Not fine enough to get home. Or not be sick. Or walk straight, for Christ's sake."

"I'm fine!"

Max watched them calmly from where he leaned on the kitchen counter, "Well, anything you say five times is obviously true."

Both Morses, blue and hazel eyed, turned to glare at him. Max merely sucked his cheek and pursed his lips.

"I should-" Joyce realized that Max had a bottle of water and paracetamol in front of him and her drunken irritation at both of the men seemed to ripple away in an instantaneous drunken mood swing.

"Loo?" She looked a little green in the gills again.
"Upstairs," Max nodded.

"I'll show-" Morse started.

"Room with the toilet in it, Ender. M'sure I can find it-" Joyce blurted out quickly and took off up the stairs. Her shoes and handbag tumbled down in her wake and they heard the door slam and muffled sounds of retching once again.

“So the charm is also a family trait?” Max smiled benignly.

“Oh, shut it,” Morse snapped. He dragged a hand through his hair and stepped forward to lean on the island opposite to Max. He couldn’t help but feel that the roller coaster of the evening wasn’t entirely at its end. He still worried if Joyce was alright, even with her here and no danger of anything happening. What if someone had tried to drug her while she’d been out? Where was Monica? Had something happened??

There was also the fact that, of course, he and Max’s evening had been crashed.

“Drink?” Max offered quietly.

“Not sure I should…” Not with Joyce upstairs heaving, though the sounds had stopped.

“She’s not dying. And judging from her reactions, she’s not detrimentally intoxicated,” Max pushed the pill bottle and the water together, near at hand, “So why don’t you look into what happened with Monica, and after a few minutes, I’ll go check on Joyce.”

Morse sighed and straightened. He was feeling the exhaustion creep in again. The worry ebbed away bit by bit, but the annoyance was real and now it was extending a bit towards Max for making so much bloody sense. He really didn’t want to hear that he was being unreasonable or paranoid or harsh with his sister. Max hadn’t said it but he was waiting. The doctor’s cool and calm manner felt patronizing but, as per usual, he couldn’t actually discern if it actually was.

“You don’t have to look at me like that,” Morse frowned, “Like I can’t handle all of this.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Max moved around the island and joined Morse, “But your bedside manner is even worse than my own and I get the feeling you aren’t very happy with your sister right now.”

Morse did have a few choice words for her.

“I think she may respond better to someone who isn’t going to lecture her… and is a doctor,” Max stood beside him, and hearing only a distant cough from the upstairs, slid his arm around Morse’s waist, “And then I’ll put her up in the guest bedroom and we’ll be done with it.”

“Oh, so now she’s staying..?” Morse moaned.

“Well you’re still staying,” Max said definitely but then he paused in a rare moment of doubt, “You are- aren’t you?”

Staying had been all he could think about for days but in that scenario it was just the two of them and relaxation, wine and lounging in the study, and enjoying the bed together and a warm morning in before he had to head back home. Now it was was a drunk-sitting situation and taking care of Joyce. It was his sister suddenly insinuated into the center of their relationship. It was revealing to her - willfully - a portion of his life that he’d been keeping to himself. Monica knew, of course, but one person could keep a secret much more easily. Two was just trouble waiting to happen. Things
like that multiplied exponentially which meant it was only a matter of time before his and Max’s relationship began to get around.

But that possibility had been there all along hadn’t it? The moments when he was able to let go of the worry of discovery were freeing, and now more often than ever, he found that he didn’t much care what people might say or think. There was, of course, a worry of work and how the association may be skewed, but when his heart and his head finally came into agreement and said good riddance to everyone it was powerful beyond words.

“Yes,” Morse replied with a nod, “Obviously, I’m staying.”

Max smiled at him in that closed lip way that brought out his dimples and he knew it was completely genuine when he saw the man’s shoulders settle with a barely noticeable relief, “So come upstairs with me and while I’m checking on her, you grab her something to wear and make sure the guest room is livable, will you?”

“So long as you don’t interrupt if I try and get the story out of her.”

Max snorted, pushed away from him, and gave his behind a short whack, “Interrogate her all you want… *after* she’s done being sick and I’ve got her settled in for the night.”

By the time Morse stomped back down the stairs, Max had dimmed all the lights but the under cabinet glow in the kitchen and was sitting on a stool at the island with two small glasses of whiskey in front of him. Morse ditched bits of his clothing as he went, shoes first and then belt, and he fished his phone out of his pocket and tossed it on the counter, out of sight and out of reach.

“No answer from Monica, but Joyce managed to finally tell me that she’d been called back to work. She just decided to stay out on her own and-,” Morse went straight for the doctor this time, wrapping his arms around him from behind and hooking his chin over his shoulder, “*voluntary madness.*”

“That would explain why Monica hasn’t answered yet. I imagine she’ll be concerned when she gets your, I’m sure, *very reasonable* messages.” Max lifted a glass for Morse and waggled it enough to get the amber liquid to glint in the dim golden accent lights.

Morse winced, knowing how agitated he’d been and how poorly he’d channeled it earlier in the evening, “I’ll text her again. Not now. Honestly, if the phone goes off now, mass murder included, I’m not bloody answering it.”

Morse plucked up the glass and straightened to drink. He was still pressed to Max’s back, but had shifted a bit to the side so he could take a sip and savor the warm burn.

“I’m sorry,” He finally murmured, “About all of this.”

“Histrionics, Morse,” Max smirked and Morse, unexpectedly, began to chuckle. Christ, sometimes it did seem a bit like a show, didn’t it?

Only when his round of manic amusement passed did Morse sag and rest his chin on Max’s shoulder again, “She’s going to know now. About you and I.”
“If she didn’t know already,” Max supplied.

Morse hummed. Max didn’t seem bothered by it but even when he was upset it often didn’t translate. Morse hadn’t learned to read him fully yet, but it was an ongoing education that he was happy to continue.

“Morse,” Max’s tone had gone serious, like he had when he’d warned him off getting stabbed under the Bodleian nearly a year ago. This was his voice of gravity and thought. From his spot on the stool he turned to meet Morse’s eyes, “I know you’re uneasy about this. With us.”

“I’m not-”

“Don’t interrupt me,” Max was firm and clipped and Morse shut up immediately. He admired Max’s ability to demand respect. It was like he’d been designed to be in charge, “I want you to know that I’m not ignorant of it. And I’ve also had my reservations. Not about us-”

Morse hovered somewhere on that use of the word ‘us’. Max had taken his wrist in hand, was rubbing his fingers soothingly over the skin, massaging down into his palm, and holding it in his own.

“But more about work. What people could say or think,” Max’s brow furrowed. He seemed to be concentrating on his precise wording, “So I don’t want you to think that I don’t understand or I’m not worried about it. It’s difficult to balance work and-”

Morse could see it then, that same feeling he’d had dozens of times over, that struggle to find the right words. He could see Max selecting in his head, shifting through his options, and somehow knowing that he shared the struggle meant more to Morse than waiting to see if he would settle on the right verbiage.

Morse kissed him, he saved him from his emotional toil, but he felt the unsaid admissions, swallowed them, and Max sighed against his lips and curled his arm around his neck. Morse could feel the pins and needles of pleasure again, this time starting in his whiskey-warm belly and prickling slowly outward in pulses that matched the tempo of his heartbeat. His body remembered where they had left off on the sofa hours before and it didn’t take long for the rest of him to also catch up.

Only Max could do this so effectively to him. He was amazing. He was much more than that, actually, and his life had changed due to this man being in it.

Which, of course, was why Morse found himself blurting out something impulsive and idiotic, “I think I may be in love with you.”

Max frowned at the measure of awe in Morse’s voice, “Don’t say that.”

“Why not?”

“Because ‘maybes’ and ‘might bes’ and ‘thinking abouts’ should never be mixed with love,” Max, to his credit, didn’t look upset. He wasn’t pulling away. He merely looked a bit sad, “Almost only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades.”

It stung. Of course. But Max wasn’t wrong. Morse's admission extended only as far as the fact that he wasn’t sure and that was hardly a commitment to anything. Logically he hadn't been rejected. It was merely a request for surety. It was a reminder not to take Max's feelings - either of their feelings - lightly.
“Well it can’t be unsaid now.”

"No, but it has been noted," Max seemed to be trying to lighten things. His lips twitched in an attempt at a smile.

"And I suppose you haven’t been scared off either," Soldier on. Disappointment or not, he was still with him. It didn’t explode into a row. It didn’t turn into a dramatic relationship conversation. For Morse to have expected some sort of half-formed pseudo-admission of love in return was selfish, considering. Max wasn’t someone who would lay out anything on the table unless he was sure of it.

The doctor smiled small again, melting the sad expression away, and Morse felt nominally better, “Your drunk sister is upstairs and I’ve seen you stabbed and shot and drunk and flown off in rages…”

“Alright, alright!” Morse huffed and half-laughed and felt a bit of the tension escape his body with it. There was some relief in having said what he did aloud, even if not well received, to have tried and let the other man know how he felt. He could let it pass.

“You know, all I wanted tonight was a meal and a night in,” He sagged, but then glanced up under his lashes at Max in the dim lighting, “And you on that sofa.”

“Well,” Max stepped down from the stool and pulled Morse’s arms back around him. The house was dark and even the pair of them disappeared into the shadows of the kitchen where they stood, but Max still looked out on the first floor spread out ahead of them and held Morse against his back, "It’s still not entirely out of the question.”

Morse squeezed him and dipped his head to brush his lips against an ear, “Joyce is upstairs.”

“And we are downstairs,” Max turned his head to kiss Morse’s jaw.

“That sofa is very uncomfortable-” Morse wasn’t sure why he was complaining, only that he liked Max’s lips drifting across his face and if being difficult got him some more coaxing kisses than he was going to continue.

“Then not the sofa,” Max found his ear and sucked an earlobe before he pinched it in his teeth, “I remember someone in a pub washroom saying something about having me against the sinks.”

Morse made a sound in the back of his throat when he felt Max’s hips press back against his own and grind against his hardening cock in a slow tease.

“Doesn’t have to be the sink either,” Max, still holding one of Morse’s wrists, guided his hand down until he was pressing it to the front of his trousers. Morse could feel Max's body responding as enthusiastically as his own, “Can be right here.”

“In the kitchen?” Morse didn’t quite believe what he was hearing but he couldn’t tear himself away. At this point Max could have led him off a cliff with some whispers and a hand down the front of his trousers. Morse squeezed Max’s length through the fabric and rubbed him slowly as he rocked his hips back against him.

Max exhaled audibly and his head leaned back against Morse, “The choice is twenty feet from your sister or a whole floor?”

“You have a very convincing-” Morse made a noise as Max reached around, gripped his hip, and ground himself back into him with a bit more power. Morse exhaled, “-argument.”
Max finally turned and kissed him with a measure of haste and insistence. His hands were already at work on Morse's fly and for a man who, by his own admission, hated to be rushed, he seemed to be very impatient right now. Morse didn’t fight it, in fact he was also working on Max’s buttons and their kiss only broke when each of them gasped into one another’s mouths when they wrapped their hands around each others cocks. Morse shuddered gently against Max’s lips and cursed slightly under his breath for how good it felt. After they’d been interrupted earlier, it seemed their bodies were greedier than ever. Max circled his thumb over the head of Morse’s cock, slid back the foreskin and moistened him before his hand glided up and down in a root to tip stroke. Morse shuddered in satisfaction when Morse stuttered against his lips again and twitched eagerly in his hand.

“C’mon then,” Max lifted on his toes to kiss him hard. He bit his lips and pulled them with his teeth. It sent bolts of heat straight to Morse's bollocks, “Right here.”

Morse groaned, released Max, and turned him. The doctor braced himself on the counter with a palm but Morse wrapped an arm around his middle and pulled him back against him again. Max peeled his waistbands down his hips until his trousers and briefs both pooled around his ankles and their bodies pressed together with delicious friction. Morse rocked himself indulgently against the cleft of Max's arse and he could feel the doctor wrap his hand around his own cock and hold tight in an attempt to restrain himself and maintain some sort of pace.

Morse wasn’t immediately thinking about them being in the kitchen anymore or about Joyce being upstairs but there was added heat, frisson, in the possibility of being discovered. There was something heightened and hasty to it. Hot. Hurried. They needed satisfaction, completion, they needed one another but at the same time they needed to keep touching and keep holding and keep together as long as possible.

Max was the more impatient this evening. All of Morse's infuriating rocking and the counter movement of his own hips were clearly not enough. He glanced back over his shoulder and used his unbraced hand to press his nails into the arm around his waist.

The pinpricks of pain got Morse’s attention and he huffed a 'Sorry' with a smile as he leaned forward and pressed a kiss to the back of Max's neck. Without a formal selection of proper supplies at hand, he had to make do and soon a spit-slicked thumb was circling Max’s entrance until the doctor growled his name with further impatience and he finally pressed it inside. There was something infinitely sexy about Max directing him and barking orders. It was all he could do at a crime scene to ignore the twinges of pleasure when Max snapped on an inept policeman or, more problematic yet, when he turned that sharp tongue on him. He wasn’t keen on being spoken down to, but it never felt like that with Max. The man simply held him to a certain standard and knew exactly what he wanted.

Right now, what he wanted was to be taken from behind against the kitchen island post-haste.

It was slow when Morse was finally pressing into Max’s body without much to smooth the way, but the tightness and friction only took his breath away that much more. Both of them had gone silent with bated breath, their bodies battling both their trembling rigidity and the need to relax. Morse let out an audible exhale when he was finally pressed deep, and he had to pause for them both to get their bearings.

“Max,” Morse folded over his back again and pressed his face to the man’s shoulder while still being careful not to be too loud with Joyce just upstairs.

Max himself finally took a deep breath and shifted his legs, pushed himself up a bit higher, and pulled Morse’s hand up to press his lips to the back of it.
There was some sense of immediacy to this when they both began to move, of burning need and desperation, and different from when they were simply greedy for one another after a few days or when it was morning and one or the both of them had to be somewhere on a schedule. This was a resumption of something longer simmering that had finally come to a boil. This was more than picking up where they left off earlier in the evening. This was days worth of waiting - a moment put on hold - the two of them with whiskey lips after sneaking touches under a pub table. This was truly them against the sinks, people outside the door who could walk in at any moment, and it was needy and rough and necessary.

They bit back their usual sounds. Their breathing came labored and loud and they did their damndest to hold their moans behind their lips when the panting and huffing reached a volume louder than that of their own pulses in their ears. Max's usual dirty encouragements came half as often and in husky whispers, and Morse nearly choked on his own pleasure when their pace reached a frenzied and fevered pitch. They were possessed and wild things until Max finally stuttered and writhed against Morse’s cock in his final throes. A visible ripple ran down his spine and paralyzed him as he came into his own fist and pressed himself desperately back into Morse’s thrusting. Morse did the best he could not to yelp over the pressure of Max’s tightening body as he finally shuddered and groaned, louder than he should have, and tumbled over the precipice as well.

They rode out orgasm slumped against one another, against the counter, and sticky with both sweat and their own sex. Max had his head cradled on top of one arm as he panted through recovery, and Morse lay across his back, face against his shoulder blades and damp from exertion in all the places their bodies met.

From the upstairs there was a sudden noise of feet.

They froze. The panting stopped. The moving stopped. They remained slumped and silent, too afraid to move, but the stress of being discovered sent a rush of panic through the pair of them. Any energy either man had retained now sizzled away second by second in paranoia.

The feet padded towards the washroom, then out of it, then to the landing and down the stairs.

No. No. No.

Joyce’s bare feet were visible first, heavy with sleep, and down down down the stairs until she stopped at the bottom. Her hair already looked a rat’s nest after less than an hour in bed, Morse noticed, but she didn’t venture far from the bottom step. Nor did she look around.

She made a humming noise of confirmation, scooped up her discarded handbag from where Max had hung it on the railing end, and then turned around and went back up the stairs.

Only when the sound of the guest room door closing was heard, did they both let out a deep sigh of relief and then, a moment or so later, they started to laugh.

“That was-” Morse pressed his face, now on fire, into Max’s back.

“Unhygienic?” Max chuckled helplessly.

“No!” Morse laughed and gave his behind a light whack, “Well yes, sorry about that.”

Max squirmed from the light slap and shuddered, still feeling sensitive from their shenanigans, before he finally pushed himself up and they stepped away from one another. Both were now soft and pliant, with trousers around their ankles and looking thoroughly debauched, “A bit of help cleaning up wouldn’t be out of the question, would it?”
“Didn’t think about that bit, did you?” Morse had never been more grateful to have running water within arms reach.

“Admittedly, no,” Max’s laugh bubbled back as if it surprised him.

Morse couldn’t help himself, even looking a mess and with his ankles tangled awkwardly in half of his clothing, he laughed and kissed Max again.

It was half past six in the morning when Max’s phone went off. The sleepy silence being ripped to shreds had both men jolting from sleep before they really absorbed what was going on. It wasn’t the alarm, that wasn’t for another hour, but the shrill crowing of his work-assigned ringtone. Someone needed him at the hospital or at some suspicious death that hadn’t yet dictated the need for police.

Morse rolled towards Max and pressed his face into the man’s shoulder after Max had grabbed his phone and rolled onto his back. He tossed an arm across his eyes and answered with a sleep-rough, “Dr. Debryn.”

Morse could hear the garbled voice on the line. Something about several overnight hospital deaths, some sort of fever they were concerned about, and Morse stopped listening when his brain registered that it wasn’t a murder.

“Yes, alright,” Max muttered, “Give me an hour.” And he hung up and put his mobile back on the bed stand.

Morse began to crawl over his chest like a human blanket, like some sort of restraint or barrier to keep him in bed instead of going off into the outside world.

Max groaned, “Morse- please,” and rolled him off again. Except when he’d got Morse flat on his back, Max himself rested his head on the man, against his lower ribs and the soft rise of his warm belly, and he wrapped an arm tight around Morse’s waist and locked in place. Max held him and used him as a pillow, and after what Morse was sure was a solid five minutes he ran his hands through the other’s mussed waves and murmured his name, “Max. You fell asleep again. You’ve got work.”

“Mmm,” Max inhaled sharply through his nose and lifted his head in protest, “Didn’t.”

He didn’t stick around this time. He hauled himself from bed with a grimace and a few agitated morning groans and toddled off to the shower.

Morse had fallen back to sleep but he distantly remembered a freshly shaved and showered face leaning in to kiss him before it was gone and then, possibly, distant sounds of talking, but he didn’t really wake up until the clock was showing double digits. His body was sore in interesting places, not used to buggering upright, and he felt like he was covered in a fine film that he needed desperately to wash off. Bonfire smoke hair, dried sweat skin, and the discomfort of the rest of him that had been hastily wiped clean at best. He was in an empty bed but he could hear the sound of a telly from somewhere in the house.

“Joyce?” He called out the bedroom door.
“Yea.”

So she was awake and operational.

And just hanging out in Max’s house for however many hours.

While Morse very obviously slept in his bed.

“I’m grabbing a shower, alright?” He needed to wake up before he could deal with this.

She grunted.

Morse spent the entirety of the shower stewing over how the confrontation with his sister may go. He still wanted to give her a piece of his mind about her life choices but at the same time he knew she wouldn’t let it slide that he and Max were together. His overactive mind tumbled over every possible iteration of the conversation to be had, from the most minor grunting of acknowledgement (acceptable but not ideal) to the possibility of a full blown row, and his thoughts spiraled out of control somewhere around the point that he was out of the shower and shaving in the above-sink mirror.

By the time he pulled on a fresh set of clothes, some spare things that had just ended up in Max's laundry rotation by coincidence, he’d decided that at the very least he needed to just accept dealing with the relationship angle of things. When it came to the other bits, about him lecturing her about her behaviour, the idea of a confrontation wasn’t feeling very appealing.

When Morse finally made his way downstairs, washed and shaved and alert, he found Joyce looked leagues better than the night before. She was still in the loose pyjamas he'd given her but she’d tied her hair up in a messy bun and there was an open pack of biscuits and both an empty teacup and a full cup of coffee in front of her.

“Feeling better?”

“Mmm hmmm,” She looked away from her phone, glanced at him, and slowly smiled.

“Please don’t-” Morse sighed.

“You could have just said from the beginning. I mean, I knew already after the pub the other night but-”

Morse sighed and marched into the kitchen. The sight of the island made him pause before he went for the coffee and poured himself a cup, “It doesn’t need to be a discussion. And no one else knows.”

“Monica knows.”

“Besides you and Monica.”

She rolled her eyes a bit and looked back at the telly.

After a solid several minutes, in her most patronizing voice, she piped up again, “You know I had the strangest dream last night that I went looking for my handbag-”

Morse choked, coughed and sprayed his coffee all over the island counter.

Joyce laughed, “I didn’t see anything! Honestly. I was terrified to come down here until it got quiet..”
Humiliated.

“Last thing I need is seeing my brother and his boyfriend-”

Morse choked again.

“-buggering on a sofa.” She had the decency, at least, to look appropriately disgusted.

Morse’s choking this time was due to a laugh. He decided, for once, that when it came to his sister propriety could be pushed to the wayside. If only to torture and ruin her hangover with mental images she couldn’t unsee, “Wasn’t on the sofa.”

“Where was it?” She blinked at him then shook her head, “No! I don’t want to know.”

Morse smirked, met her eyes, and slowed his cleaning of the counter top.

She stared.

He looked down at the counter and then back at her.

“No! Ender, you didn’t!” She gasped and almost fell over into the sofa cushions, “I made a snack there earlier!”

“His choice, not mine,” He very firmly provided with a half-grin, “We cleaned up afterward!”

Joyce made exaggerated gagging noises and shook her head, “You’re both foul.”

Morse shrugged smugly. He’d accept that.

“Oh, he left a key by the way. I woke up early when I heard him in the shower. He left a key in case we needed to leave. Said to tell you to just hold on to it.”

Morse warmed, enough to crack a grin, which he then suppressed immediately.

Joyce had caught it and smiled herself, “You’re disgusting, but cute,” She shook her head and went back to her mobile again, “I hate it. Stop.”

The Morse siblings laid off of the alcohol on the night of the Thursday’s anniversary do. Joyce brought a bottle of wine and, as suggested, Morse brought only his charming self. It was a good time, as much of a good time as Morse could possibly have in a room full of strangers, but the food was sufficient and there was enough alcohol and music that the guests were good enough fodder for people watching. Morse realized sometime after the speeches ended that he’d been the only person from his immediate social circle at work who was invited. That unexpected feeling of belonging, of undeserved kindness and privilege, washed over him and it meant more than he could say that the Thursday family had included he and Joyce at all.

Mr. and Mrs. Thursday were happy and unfettered and in love and Morse had almost forgotten the drama with Louisa Armstrong as he watched them dance around their sitting room in the later hours of the evening when they’d had only their nearest and dearest back to the house. He thought of Mrs. Armstrong as they swayed, Win’s head on her husband’s shoulder, about how easy she had taken off for a new life, how easily she could have stayed and thrown a wrench into the workings
of this marriage, and how she had consciously chosen a different path for herself. It was a path that resulted in the least amount of harm all around. Morse had barely spoken to the woman and hardly knew her at all except from her letter, but he was proud of her, of her bravery, and satisfied with his governor’s strength and even more impressed when he remembered Mrs. Thursday’s forgiveness.

And the next morning, with her few bags in-tow, he dropped Joyce at the train station. When she emerged from the Jaguar she nearly hugged the thing until he cut her a dirty look and instead she hugged him and planted a kiss onto his cheek and squeezed him until he was forced to squeeze her back, at which point she finally released him.

“Thanks,” Joyce fished earphones from her jacket pocket as she prepared to embark, “For having me. And I am genuinely sorry... For all the trouble. I really tossed myself headfirst into the deep end of your life, didn’t I?”

“You said you wanted to see how I lived,” Morse shrugged, “I hope it wasn’t too much or too boring.”

“Too... boring?” Joyce laughed and he couldn’t help mirroring her smile as his eyes fell to his shoes.

Joyce lunged at him again after checking the time, hugged him tightly one more time and murmured into his ear, “I am happy for you. For your job and for Max.”

When she pulled away Morse was rubbing at the back of his neck.

“It just seems all very good for you,” She nudged him and wiggled her brows, “He’s certainly good for you. A doctor?”

“Get on with you,” Morse didn’t like to drag these things out. The longer they spoke, the poorer he felt about her going.

“Allright, alright,” She squeezed his hand and finally backed away, “Bye then. Tell Max goodbye as well, alright?”

He didn’t answer that bit, “Text me when you get home.”

“Yeah, yeah,” She wagged a hand, “Tell the beautiful girl I said goodbye also.”

“Monica?”

“Oh, her too,” Joyce grinned, “I meant the car.”

Morse snorted, “You’re crazy.”

“Love you, Ender.”

He smiled, nodded and waved to her weakly. Something difficult and sad had suddenly risen up in him and froze him from answering but Joyce didn’t seem to mind. She disappeared into the station and Morse meandered back to the car, sunk into the driver's seat and sat.

There was suddenly an emptiness where Joyce had been for a week. It hadn’t existed before, before they had this new and more open understanding of each other. He’d always felt like he had a duty to her as a brother, and he was sure that he still did, but now he also thought maybe she just might also be a very good friend. Someone he could talk to. Tell things to.
He lamented the years he hadn’t known it and now he lamented that she was gone.

Morse palmed the keys and shook them out to put in the ignition. There, next to the car key, was a new one. It was Max’s, left to him out of ease of course, but after everything he couldn’t help but think it meant something more.

Morse took out his phone after he turned the key, and as the car idled he flipped through his contacts. Joyce had gotten into it and he’d found a whole section of his phone’s gallery had been filled with pictures she’d taken over her visit. She’d admitted it to him on that morning at Max’s, that she’d messed about in his mobile while he was asleep because he’d left it out on the counter. At first he’d been irritated until he’d seen the sheer volume of the photos, and what an expansive breadth of her trip had been covered. His contacts were filled out with the faces of his friends and acquaintances, including herself, and now when he brought up Max’s number and dialed, the doctor’s closed lipped smile looked back at him from the confines of it’s tiny circular frame. He was in the kitchen in his work clothes and Morse knew she must have taken it that same morning while he had been sleeping in.

Cheeky.
‘Debryn.’

“It’s Morse,” As if both of them didn’t already know both of those things, “Are you working?”

‘Yes,’ Max had on his detached-and-thinking voice, ‘This fever at the hospital.’

It had become a minor epidemic from what he’d learned from Monica when she’d finally gotten back to him. They were handling it but it was chaos there at the moment and Max had more bodies on his hands than he was comfortable with from within their own four walls.

“Well, how about when you’re off we have a night in.”

‘Joyce on her way home?’

“Yes. She said goodbye,” Morse put his phone on speaker and dropped it into a cup holder so he could pull out of his parking spot.

‘Have anything particular in mind?’

“No. We can figure it out though. Wine? A meal? Whatever you want.”

‘I want to not have to figure out what’s for dinner, that’s for bloody sure.’

“Alright,” Morse chuckled, “I’ll take care of dinner.”

He paused a moment, and his smile held with a thought, “I’ll be at the house when you get in.”

Morse could also hear the sudden smile in Max’s voice and it warmed him through again, ‘See you then.’

Chapter End Notes

Bonus Gif:
I genuinely hope you enjoyed Joyce. I definitely had fun writing her and shaking up Morse's life for a bit. This is pretty much the informal end of the story arc for this fic - but there will be an epilogue chapter coming soon ;D
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

When Max was a child, his favorite book was *Where The Wild Things Are*.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to The Squad for listening to me complain, especially greenapricot who is lovely enough to read things over for me on request.
Thanks to all the readers who have stuck around this far and left me kudos and comments and little notes on tumblr (bryndeavour) because, honestly, knowing people like it has kept me going when productivity was low <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind and another*

*his mother called him “WILD THING!”*

*and Max said “I’LL EAT YOU UP!”*

*so he was sent to bed without eating anything.*

Max was four years old when he'd found a bird in the garden that the housecat had killed and left as a gift. As his sisters played tea-party, he crouched behind some oversized flower pots and examined it. Nothing about the lifeless thing bothered him in the least. On the contrary, Max was fascinated. He noticed that the ants had started to pay interest, going for the soft bits like the eyes and inside of the parted beak, and a fly buzzed and settled on the dark feathers unperturbed. The feathers themselves still gave all the appearance of life, still soft and ruffling lightly in the breeze and showing a sheen of iridescence in the light, but when he ventured a poke at the bird with a stick, the body wasn’t as firm as it should have been and a few feathers lost purchase from the flesh and dislodged and blew away in the next gust of wind. That was when his eldest sister Sarah came calling and asked to see what he was looking at. He'd shifted the dead bird towards her with the stick and she’d shrieked out something about how disgusting it was and called for their mother.

As any good brother would, he’d flicked it at her with a cackle.

The next year their cat had a litter of kittens and one of them had been stillborn. His sisters had cried and named it something trite like Angel, but Max, not really understanding that it was inappropriate, had asked if he could have it. If it was dead no one else would want it, right? He was only curious about it, about why it hadn’t lived, about what could have possibly been so wrong with it, but his mother didn't much appreciate that level of strangeness in his curiosities. Max was as normal a boy as any other, he liked to read and watch the telly and listen to music and play games, but he did have a tendency to say odd things and already had a reputation for being in possession of a sass mouth. It was his father who took the kitten, brought Max along with him, and
had him help bury it in the garden. Dad told him that bodies were buried so they could go back into the earth, that life was a cycle, and things died so that others could be born. He offered, and Max agreed, that they plant something near there in memory, so on their next free weekend they took a drive to the home and garden center and brought home some rose bushes. When it came time for them to bloom they would be pink and white he was told, but Max had been young and relatively uninterested in the details. His father was the gardener in their house, and the roses were more for him than anyone else, but Max always accompanied him when he tended the yard. He learned about pruning and weeding, about particularly damaging insects, and about seasonal care. Max never took to it as well as he should have, not as a boy, but going out to the garden with his father had meant free roaming privilege in the confines of their outdoor space. He had a knack for finding bugs and holes and all manner of small dead things while his father toiled away with the flower beds, so while Dad made attempts to teach him about the curation of life, Max still found himself much more interested in death.

He was eight when he and Billy Walker had kissed one another behind those same rose bushes. It wasn't a real kiss. At that age, the concept of love and crushes was very limited to holding hands with someone you thought you fancied and being very unfamiliar with all the new little tingles and twinges and what they meant. The boys were convinced that ‘real love’ was what they had seen on the telly or read about in books and Billy’s mum watched a lot of old movies where handsome leading men swooped well dressed women into dramatic, powerful snogs. Billy’s mum would press her spread hand against her throat and bite her lip and sometimes sigh and the boys wanted to know just what the big deal was all about. The movie kisses never looked like anything their parents did, so they sat on their grubby knees in the turf and tried it on, tilting their heads this way and that, and eventually trying to dip one another and failing. They ended up not doing much more than laughing and rolling about in the lawn but Max’s other sister Anne had seen them, and she’d thought it would be rather fun to get Max in trouble for kissing a boy. What she didn’t realize was how their mother would react.

That was the summer that his mum decided Max should spend his holidays away at his grandfather’s house.

Fortunately, that suited him just fine. Unfortunately, he wasn’t allowed to play with Billy much anymore after that.

\[ That very night in Max's room a forest grew \]
\[ and grew \]
\[ and grew until his ceiling hung with vines \]
\[ and the walls became the world all around \]

Max’s grandfather had been his hero. He hadn’t know him very well until those summer trips began but he quickly skyrocketed to the top of Max’s ‘favorite relations’ list, right above Great Aunt Gertrude who sent him cash in a card on every holiday but whom he’d never actually met. He was Dad’s father, but it was Mum who always complained about him. She said he worked too much and that he’d drop dead before he retired, and in the end that ended up being entirely true, but while he was alive Max came to adore him.

Things were different out in the country where his grandfather lived. Everything was brighter and slower and felt very old fashioned, like it ran a few decades behind the rest of the world, like they were all stuck in some rural village period drama. His grandfather filled several roles within the
insulated town where he lived and as the only physician in the area he was both the local GP and the police surgeon and, only when absolutely necessary, an impromptu veterinarian or midwife. Granddad was personable, dry and funny, and very engaged with the community. Every person he met seemed to respect him quite a bit and Max hoped to one day achieve that in his own life. To be a Boss.

In such a small place, Granddad was always on duty, so while Max was staying with him he accompanied him out to all of his calls. He encouraged Max’s curiosities. He explained things to him. He pressed his intelligence and asked questions and seemed to admire that his grandson never flinched at what made most adults squeamish and uncomfortable. Only once had he ever suggested that the boy look away and that was when a man had passed out drunk in a field and was half run over by a combine harvester. It wasn’t like there were many murders in the country, usually just accidents, and once - when Max was 13 - a suicide. He’d even seen a baby born one summer when the temperatures had soared beyond acceptable comfort levels and the midwife was called away for a personal emergency. He’d helped mop his grandfather's brow and fetched towels and got fresh water because the ambulance was too far out and the baby was coming right at that moment. When the pink squirming bundle was safe as houses in the mother’s arms, she’d asked if Max wanted to hold it. He had very politely declined.

He was sure he might drop it.

His grandmother had died young, long before Max was born, and his grandfather hadn’t anyone close but his personal assistant who worked in the office and surgery attached to the back of the house. His name was Peter and he wore small round copper rimmed glasses that looked very old fashioned to young Max. He’d once asked about them, since his own were children’s specs and plastic and rather boring, and Peter had let him try them on. He’d told Max that he looked rather dashing in vintage frames and Max had somehow never forgotten that particular compliment. It was only after his grandfather died some years later that he’d come to the realization that Peter was his grandfather’s partner in all aspects of his life. They didn’t share the house, at least not when Max was there, but he got the impression it was a sort of open secret in their town and among the family.

When grandfather died Peter had been left the house but Max was given his medical books and kit, a battered leather case in the old style, and Peter had personally given him a very neatly packed box of bow-ties and a pair of his grandfather's glasses - winged and thick rimmed - sixties throwbacks - and delightfully vintage.

He still had and wore them.

When Max realized that his mother had sent him to his grandfather’s place as some sort of exile, he discovered his anger. When he was old enough to put together the pieces and work out that it was also why his mother never invited Granddad and Peter to their home, he grew even angrier. His mother’s ignorance had willfully kept him from better knowing his grandfather through the early years of his childhood and almost completely denied the privilege to his sisters. He was just as angry at his dad for his complacency, for treating his own father with such distance, and allowing his mother’s stubbornness to win out.

That was when he realized he needed to leave home.

Max had been left money by his grandfather in addition to the rest. It was enough money to flee his mother’s conservatism as his older sisters had already done. His eyes had been opened. He was a big fish in a small pond. The back garden held no more childlike wonder or discovery for him and not even his father’s comforting gardening or relatively reasonable world view felt safe. No ally
was to be found within the four walls of his parent’s home. The neighbors were talking, he was
told. He was too odd. He had an attitude problem. Anger issues. His ‘lifestyle’ would kill him, his
mother said during their last big blow up before he left home.

“So be it,” Max had bristled, red-faced, “At least I’ll die on my own terms.”

He didn’t die, obviously, but he did use his grandfather’s money and go to university.

and an ocean tumbled by with a private boat for Max
and he sailed off through night and day
and in and out of weeks
and almost over a year
to where the wild things are.

There was a very good reason why most doctors seemed to have all their most interesting stories
take place in and around the vague time period known as ‘medical school’ and it was due to the
simple fact that there was just so much of it. By the time a doctor was official and finished (not that
they were ever really finished) they’d spent about as much time in various hospitals and university
programs as they had growing up at home with their families. It was what could make or break a
prospective physician, and for Max, it had been life defining. School was stressful but it was
welcome and invigorating and Max thrived when he could finally stretch his mental muscles and
focus on his very particular interests and talents. He spent a lot of those early years dabbling in a
variety of disciplines before he settled, because with the breadth of medicine and science spread
out in front of him, it was like a smorgasbord for his mind.

More than being able to pursue his interests without judgement, it was a whirlwind of self
discovery. There was no overhanging threat of his mother’s opinion or his sisters’ gossip. No
worry about what may get back to the wrong person. No expectation beyond his own that he meet
some sort of specific societal standard. Eat what he wanted. Dress how he wanted. Talk how he
wanted. Mostly, it was about finding his people. People who were just as happy as he was to be on
their own. People who wanted to talk about science and literature and were invigorated by
discovery. People who were also seeking other kindred souls.

And he found them.

They formed a small dysfunctional band that meshed together well enough to ride out their
undergrad years together. They shared music and television and books. They drank. They bed
hopped. They exploited the joys of being emancipated from their families, each of them a bit odd
in their own right and fueled by their own specific motivations and desires. Their numbers grew
and shrank as the years passed but there was never anything too serious in it, no danger or
irresponsibility beyond the normal free-from-the-nest shenanigans. Max always remained a bit of
an outlier. Always a bit on his own. What he discovered in those early years was that no one was
quite like him. When he had tried to change himself for other people it made him miserable and
when he tried to engage too much, he burned out. It wasn’t always easy to accept that he was
different, but as the years passed and it sunk in that his friends accepted him as he was, Max began
to accept it himself. He settled into his oddities comfortably, like an old beloved sweater, and by
the time the blur of undergrad was coming to an end he felt that, at least among his friends, he was
respected for being genuine to himself.

“To being junior doctors!” Kyra Browning was their de facto leader, a quirky blonde who longed
to be a country doctor and had her heart set on pediatrics. She was the most social and easy going, but like the rest of them had little tolerance for stupidity and ignorance. She’d arranged the get together that marked their final parting. They were all to be scattered to the four winds and Max to a particularly competitive hospital stint that would likely determine where he spent the rest of his career.

“We should get tattoos,” Deacon Marshall was a dark, twiggy man with a bit of a lisp who was headed off to an obstetrics spot in Manchester.

Max, rolled his eyes, “And get blood poisoning from some dolt who fancies himself an artist?”

“Yes!” Kyra laughed and swigged down a shot of tequila.

“Don’t be a wet blanket, Max!” Their final member chimed in, Gina Tranh, usually quiet but possibly the most acerbic and least social of them all. She was already teetering a bit in her chair.

“They aren’t supposed to tattoo or pierce you if you’re intoxicated-” Max huffed and shot back his own tequila with a hiss and an ‘AH!’.

“You just have to know where to go,” Gina smirked as she slowly listed to the side.

Despite Max’s complaints, an eventual search for munchies turned into a blurry wandering of the streets. Max woke up the next morning face down in his bed with a splitting headache and had to peel himself away from the bedsheets with a pained hiss. There, on a smoothly shaved patch of his chest, was a freshly tattooed Vitruvian Man.

And when he came to the place where the wild things are
they roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth
and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws

The first time Max experienced any real hurdle outside of himself was at the time he least needed one. The hurdle’s name was Andrew Bartlett and everything about him, besides his career choice and stubbornness, were things that Max was not.

Andrew was tall and fit, better at socializing, popular with instructors and other doctors, from a Known Family with a Reputation, and complete with the superiority complex that accompanied that like pre-loaded software. He got under Max’s skin. Even strangers liked Andrew without trying, while at best Max was the sort of man that people had to work hard to get to know. He should have gone into general practice, or something like surgery, but instead he’d chosen forensic pathology and put himself right in Max’s path.

Max required a certain standard from those he engaged with. Yes, he understood that this didn’t agree with most people. Yes, he had been told on many occasions that he was intimidating or rough. He could be distant and he needed to work on his bedside manner. Yes, he knew he was terse at best, but it wasn’t always necessary in morgues and labs to be polite. Still, it was a constant work-in-progress for Max. Cordiality didn’t come naturally to him and he struggled to find the appeal in false appearances. Wasn’t honesty important above all things?

It put them at odds immediately and Max and Bartlett quickly became rivals. They were competitive in every discernible way, but when the trappings were stripped away and the brass tacks of knowledge and skill came into play, Max was simply better. It didn't stop Bartlett. Nothing
could quash the smug and unearned sense of entitlement that carried him effortlessly through his life. Max became a project for him. An adversary. A target. He found a way to always be the one Max was working against and for every barrier Max would break through, Andrew bloody Bartlett would be there waiting once again on the other side.

Smug. Satisfied. Teasing.

Yes, he got a lot of joy out of teasing. And nicknames.

Napoleon Debryn. Il Duce. The Little Dictator.

Max hated nicknames.

till Max said “BE STILL!” and tamed with the magic trick of staring into all their yellow eyes without blinking once and they were frightened and called him the most wild thing of all and made him king of all wild things.

A few drinks too many one pub night, a few choice words and a stare down later, and Max had Andrew bloody Bartlett pinned to a wall - putty in his hands and at the mercy of his mouth in much more satisfying ways than was usual.

Six months later, their evaluations still placed Max at the top of the heap with Bartlett nipping close at his heels. Max was ecstatic, in his understated way, proud of himself for the sheer grind it had been to prove himself. He’d called home for the first time in a while to tell his parents. Dad was happy for him if his tone had anything to say about it and maybe even proud (not that he’d quite say so). Max asked him about the garden, about the neighborhood, about Dad’s darts league and Mum’s best wishes were passed on by proxy.

A week later, too soon to be anything good, a call came from his parent’s house from his sister Sarah. Dad had died unexpectedly of an aneurysm in the night.

Max was on a train back home, still in the grip of frustration and grief when he got an emailed confirmation that he was to spend the final leg of his educational journey at Barts. It was expected, and had been his goal all along, but he had a hard time being happy about it under the circumstances. He’d never really reconciled his father’s complacency to his mother. He’d never felt fully accepted by him after he’d moved out. They’d never even really talked about it. He didn’t much know how to feel and no matter how he tried, he was still angry.

Max barely remembered the funeral except for both of his sisters bleary eyed, but it was odd the details he did remember. Even years later remembered exactly what everyone wore - he in one of granddads ties and his vintage specs. It was a statement to his mother maybe, maybe not, but it felt right to have a bit of Granddad at his son’s final rest. Sarah was in a cool navy pant suit and Anne in a floral and black a-line dress. She was looking a bit round, full, and he knew a pregnancy when he saw one, but she didn’t tell him until the day after. Everything had been a bit of a blur, but Mum - he remembered clearly - was a weeping mess. She wore a sweeping, body swaddling widow’s black. She looked very pale in it. Thin. Like a ghost.

“And now,” cried Max, “let the wild rumpus start!”
When Max returned to London he threw himself into the deep end.

At Barts with him was Andrew Bartlett, always in competition, but this time it was hands on. After their first tussle, the tension had snapped. Yes, they were still contentious. Yes, their relationship torrid. But within a few months the pair of them were living together in a closet of a flat spending every scrap of free time bickering, in bed or reciting Housman to one another like the sort of sickening lovebirds Max had mocked less than a year before.

He’d even gotten it tattooed on himself, of his own volition, with no alcohol or otherwise outside influence. On a whim.

Max had never been the type to follow whims before.

“I think I love you,” He’d said breathlessly too few months along than most would find sensible or healthy. He was likely a little drunk, because he usually was when he was in the flat, but the truth was that somewhere along the line the boundaries of his personal walls had shifted, or perhaps collapsed, or maybe he was just too tired to maintain them and Andrew bloody Bartlett had insinuated himself inside. Andrew had laughed and kissed Max and said nothing at all in response, just lifted him off of his feet and tumbled them back over into bed and Max had been too distracted to think about how that wasn’t the answer he’d wanted to hear.

It was all a bit of a mess.

The world that had felt so huge several years before had narrowed very quickly. His core friend group had been reduced to only distant correspondence. His family had become scattered and uncommunicative and his daily routine had shrunken into a repetitive loop with only a few pit stops along the way.

Hospital. Flat. Bed. Repeat.

The flat wasn’t even really a home to him, just a place to rest or eat. He felt like a transient. A wanderer. He slept as much at the hospital as he did in his own bed and Max was rarely anywhere long enough to actually relax. Keeping moving was all he had. Snatches of emotion were all he could settle for, quick spouts of laughter or lust or anger. If he had stopped, paused to put more than a few moments of thought into his life, he may very well have broken down.

But there was Andrew with him. Andrew was desirable - desired by many - and Max knew people didn’t understand what they had together. Max wasn’t wholly sure that he did either. The man still made his blood boil, made him feel like he was on eggshells sometimes when they were alone, and made him feel desired and not good enough in equal measure. He was secretive where Max was often transparent and with increasing frequency Max began to think that Andrew was riding along on his coattails when it came to their hospital program.

But he loved him. Or at least he thought he did. If he’d proclaimed it once, it must’ve been true, so he did a rather effective job of not thinking about it too much. It wasn’t like he had the time for relationship ruminations. He had to worry about the hospital. About studying. About evaluations. About personal research. About where he was going when his time at Barts ended. By the time the work day was over he was too exhausted to worry about anything else. There was someone lovely in the bed at night. Someone also needing relief. He could drown in that.

Work, study, fuck, sleep.
Repeat.

If he drowned, at least he wouldn’t drown alone.

“Now stop!” Max said and sent the wild things off to bed without their supper. And Max the king of all wild things was lonely and wanted to be where someone loved him best of all.

Max’s mother died in the beginning of his final year. It had been strange and sad if only in the way of sheer obligation to the memory of those ephemeral and untouchable ‘good times’ of his youth before he was really even a fully realized person. He had been so detached from her in those later years that the few days that he’d been back for the funeral all he could think about was what he was missing in London. He’d thought about the work more than Andrew (he would realize that afterward) but he stayed to help his sisters through the full extent of the required social rigmarole. As the eldest, Sarah was burdened with the execution of the estate but they all chipped in. Anne was managing little Margaret who hadn’t quite mastered standing still at that point so Max served as part-time baby sitter and part-time anything else they needed.

The night before he left, Sarah had come out as a lesbian to her siblings. They were having dinner and drinks when she finally found the courage to share. She’d been living in Peter and Granddad’s old house since Peter died the year before. All three of them had extended a hand to him after their grandfather’s death and she’d gone to stay with him the last few years when he’d become infirm. She’d planted a few apple trees. She’d met a woman.

She’d been terrified to tell their mother. Their mother who had not told any of them about her cancer until she was on her deathbed. Mum who had avoided Max’s ‘innate sin’ like the plague, out of sight and out of mind. She’d not wanted her mother to think badly of her at the end. She was ashamed of herself for keeping the secret so long, longer than she was willing to admit, and she was sorry that Max had to suffer the brunt of their mother’s lifelong disappointment. Sarah apologized to him. She told Max that she’d always admired him for being so openly himself.

He didn’t tell her that he’d never felt further from himself than he did then. He didn’t know how to admit that his world felt like something that would fall apart if he stood still for a moment too long. That if he acted too much like himself, he might lose everything he worked for. But he had, in those confessional moments, admitted it to himself finally. They all grew closer that night. Blood-relation was no guarantee of friendship but for the Debryn siblings it took their mother dying, a few drinks and a few confessions to knit themselves tighter than ever.

When Max arrived back in London all he’d been looking forward to was a glass of wine and maybe a cuddle before he jumped back on the horse. Something typical. Routine. Settle back into his familiar loop and ride it out until the end. He could take a breath when it was over. Take that time to find himself again. He just needed to keep his eye on the prize and hands on the wheel and Andrew could ride his coat tails all he wanted so long as Max survived to the end - and so long as he was the one driving.

Instead he came home to find Andrew in bed, in flagrante delicto, with some nurse from the hospital. He hadn’t even been early or arrived unexpectedly. Andrew had just forgotten and hadn’t even cared enough to hide it.

It hurt too much at the time to think that every bit of their relationship had been entirely and
deliberately a lie. His first real heartbreak, misguided as it may have been, was the last thing he needed on top of a dead mother and the final stretch of his education. He’d never felt anything quite like it before, the violation of trust, the abuse of his intimacies. It very well could have been the ruin of him, and maybe that’s what Andrew had intended all along, but he’d never know.

Instead of collapsing, Max had shut it down. Like a prison on lockdown, every shutter had fallen. He didn’t yell or scream or throw a fit, he simply gathered his things and left the flat to take up a spare room at his sister Anne’s. The commute wasn’t terrible, but it was hardly ideal, and he hadn’t really told her much about what happened until a week later. She had a new boyfriend and he didn’t seem keen on having a ragged looking man with his belongings thrown into a few bags showing up on their doorstep like a vagabond. Anne herself had been a bit shell shocked to have her little brother, usually so together and responsible, finally implode over a pint of ice cream and a glass of wine at her kitchen table, but they were good to him in the long run and he was a mindful roommate when he was there. He stayed with them until the end of term (and little Margie had thought it quite the treat to have her Uncle Max around) but he was able to stay on his feet and stay on routine. He was back into the loop again.


Rumors had circulated quickly at the hospital and Andrew had his hand in the version that most people heard. His little nurse as well. Max, for his part said nothing, but it made every bit of free time in the hospital awkward and uncomfortable. He could feel people’s looks on his back and hear them whispering. He wondered what sort of monster he’d been made out to be, or perhaps as some sort of weepy emotional sod. It was the only time in his life that he’d found the circulation of gossip to be distasteful. He was a hypocrite of course, he usually loved a bit of chin wagging, but to be on the receiving end felt foul. The talk didn’t die down for a month and by then he was sure that it had gotten around to even those higher up. Reputations were very tangible things and Max’s, already tenuous, was sullied.

It was Andrew who had confronted him finally. There were two open positions they had been vying for: one in London - the more desirable salary - the metropolitan allure - the ego fulfilling social climbing with promise of a seat on a board somewhere eventually. It would be a future of doing very little work for very many benefits.

The other opening was in Oxford.

Andrew, despite his best efforts, had heard that Max was still the prime candidate. He would have his choice of positions anywhere in the country if he wanted because his work spoke for itself. It turned out that most hospitals didn’t much care if their pathologists were personable or who they’d slept with. When working with the police, a soft touch wasn’t really preferable. What they wanted were results. They wanted solutions. Max would bring them.

Andrew threatened him. He cornered Max and told him under no uncertain terms that if he knew what was good for him he’d fuck off to Oxford, fuck off to anywhere really, so long as he left him the London gig. He told him whatever they had together had been a means to an end, that it was nothing more than a preoccupation for both of them. He’d laughed at him a bit and patted Max on the shoulder in a way that made Max sick. Bartlett coddled him in a disgusting sort of way and told Max not to worry, he’d never really believed he was in love with him anyway.

By the time he was left alone, with his anger rediscovered and barely restrained by the confines of his physical form, Max found himself wanting that London job more than he’d ever wanted anything else in his entire life.
Then all around from far away across the world
he smelled good things to eat
so he gave up being king of where the wild things are.

“You look like shit, Max,” Kyra was passing through and called him for a spot of lunch together. She’s been completely unaware of his situation until he flippantly, like it was nothing but a tidbit of gossip, let it all slip. It was hardly a torrential wave of emotion, but his exhaustion made open secrets hard to keep. He told her about Andrew, about his mother dying, about everything. He told her that his decision had been made and if he could have nothing, he’d have the London job.

He’d win.

“It’s just getting into the crunch now. I’ll survive,” He faked a smile. He was tired and felt awful which was expected when chain smoking and living off of caffeine, “I always do.”

Max existed in some physical state of near-sickness. It was like being on the edge of an illness, like one missed nap or forgotten meal would send him teetering into a full on flu, but the bug never came. He liked to think his bitterness, his anger, his determination and spite kept him going, but he couldn’t see the forest for the trees because he was focused only on the end of the line and what would get him there.

“I’m surprised about London though,” Kyra probed, “I thought you had mentioned Oxford before?”

Max hummed and sipped his coffee. Even now, at a lunch date with a friend, he was pouring over the screen of a laptop. The croissant in front of him, one of his favorites, should have been paid some measure of admiration but Max hadn’t even acknowledged the quality of the bake, the buttery crust or the chewy inside. It may have well been a stale bag of crisps from a waiting room vending machine for all he paid attention to it.

“For what it’s worth, I think you should let him have London,” She said.

Max stared at her.

Kyra’s head circled on her shoulders and her voice dropped with an edge of annoyance, “If you take the London job, aren’t you just making the conscious decision to let Andrew fucking Bartlett dictate your life choices?”

She’d always hated Bartlett. Max knew it. He also knew she’d had the right instincts about him all along, but it didn’t make it less infuriating or easier to hear.

“What?”

“If you stay here in London,” She said very plainly, “Aren’t you only doing it to take the piss out of him? What about what you want?”

Max blinked and snarled, “I want to snatch the bloody London job out from under his fucking gob.”

“You know, he never gave a flying fuck about you,” She’d become rather blue in adult company since she’d started working with children full time, “and now because you’re so focused on stealing this from him, you’re ignoring where you may actually want to be for the rest of your life.”
Max’s croissant may as well have been ashes in his mouth. He did, for once, actually hear her. He’d been treating this thing like a trophy to be won, something he could wave about in triumph at the end. But it wasn’t. He’d been so focused on spite that he hadn’t bothered with the reality that in a few months this decision would be his permanent state of life. The corrosive London atmosphere, the oppressive stress, the constant competition. He would be making the choice to never break free of it.

He could instead make the choice to leave. He could be liberated. This was all the grand culmination of him taking his grandfather’s money to find his place in the world, leaving somewhere that was no longer his home to make a new one.

He could go anywhere.

But it was frustrating to leave the job open for Bartlett. He was hardly even qualified for it but likely would pull strings to snag the placement. After his threatening and his entitlement, Max was sure he’d think he’d won some personal war against him. It was hard for him to abandon his own pride. After all Max had done to put himself on top, to prove he was above the smug pandering. To prove that all it took in the end was hard work and brains…

Kyra waved for the waitress to top them up, “London’s disgusting. It’s corrupt, Max. You know it and I know it. You’d hate it.”

He watched his coffee refilled, still silent.

“Oxford’s beautiful,” She said with a sigh, “And no one knows you there. It can be a fresh start.”

Max sipped the fresh coffee and it burned his tongue. He hissed. The truth, it seemed, did hurt.

*But the wild things cried, “Oh please don’t go we’ll eat you up—we love you so!”*  
And Max said, “No!”

*The wild things roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth  
and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws  
but Max stepped into his private boat and waved good-bye*

Once Max was confirmed for the Oxford job, it was like the skies had cleared and a weight had been lifted. He hadn’t realized how much everything had been bearing down on him down until it was all said and done. The shackle of his London years had been loosed and his future actually felt promising. He was off to the morgues and labs of the Radcliffe, working directly under Dr. Perkins the head of forensic pathology. He’d already visited, met and interviewed with her, and was confident that they would get on. Hers was the job he wanted for his own eventually, and she implied that when her own retirement came, if things went well, that he would be in the right position to take it.

Oxford was beautiful. It was cultural. It was refined and it spoke to him. The city was soft and golden, old and much quieter than London, and to Max walking the streets felt very much like those summers at his grandfather’s house in the country. There was a longevity that he found encouraging, that even with the wheels of progress ever turning, that some things always remained the same.
Once Max had made his final decision he knew it had been the correct one.

Bartlett contacted him a week before he was slated to leave and asked him out to coffee. He wasn’t sure why, but he’d agreed, and made sure that when he showed up he was calm and cool and put together. His anger was back, but tempered by his reason, and enough nights of good sleep for him to be reasonable.

Andrew was predictably the same. He was the same as when Max had first met him, smug and blithe. It was as if he were ignoring the time they’d spent together, the chaotic whirlwind of their relationship and the nastiness that followed, as if they were simply misunderstood school chums who needed to talk it out. He retained that superior air of his that Max despised, and it was hard now to imagine that he’d ever thought himself in love with the man.

But he had. He’d fallen for it, hook line and sinker.

Bartlett was full of pedantic small talk about how he’d been and how Max was and his pleasantries about how glad he was that they both ended up where they wanted to be. Unfortunately, Max was not feeling very pleasant. He was feeling very bored. He wanted to get to the point of all this, because it certainly wasn’t about their jobs and the way the man was acting, it was also not about their relationship. It was no surprise to find out he and the little nurse hadn’t worked out though he was a bit peeved not to have some of his books returned. No, that would be admitting that they’d broken up which would also be admitting they were together, and clearly such information wasn’t convenient or useful for Andrew now. He had to maintain his appearances.

Max recognized him for all that he was now, an illusion. Bartlett’s entire identity revolved around what others thought of him and it was very shoddy armor to protect him from his own inadequacies.

“Listen, Max,” Half an hour in it finally came, longer than Max would have liked to listen to him prattle on, “I don’t want us to part ways as enemies. We were friends once, I’d like to think we could be again.”

Max started laughing. He didn’t often find himself brought so quickly to barking amusement, and he’d never once found that Andrew Bartlett had a genuinely humorous bone in his body, but there Max was, laughing, “We were never friends.”

Andrew’s face dropped, his smug little smile dissolved, and he turned an interesting shade of mauve.

“We were many things, Bartlett,” Max took the last drink of his coffee and savoured the final bite of muffin in front of him. He chewed, he swallowed, and he dabbed his mouth as Bartlett turned another 3 separate gradations of flush and waited for him to finish, “But friends was never one of them. I refuse to give you the satisfaction of thinking you’ve gotten away with anything when it comes to our relationship.”

Bartlett coughed at the word but Max had used it on purpose. Whatever it had been, it had happened, and for this moment he wanted the man to have to writhe uncomfortably in that reality. He wanted it spoken aloud.

“The only reason you even have your much desired position is because it was my throw away. My garbage. The only reason you even qualified for it or were noticed at all, was by cruising along in my wake. Everything you have, you have because of me,” Max informed him, “Do not contact me again. Do not reach out for assistance in the future. We aren’t old colleagues or school chums and we were never, ever friends.”
And those were the last words they ever spoke to one another.

And sailed back over a year
and in and out of weeks
and through a day

His life in Oxford came about very organically, one step at a time, one foot in front of the other, and finally Max’s life settled into a comfortable and manageable place. Perhaps this what they told children ‘growing up’ was, but time did truly pass quicker than Max had the ability to really comprehend and leaving his parents home and going to school and funerals and breakups and large and small victories all sort of ran together in his mind like a cartoonish flipbook of his life instead of the grueling decade or so that had played out in real time. Even as his Oxford life flourished, things falling into place as reliably as the tolling of the bells, everything still seemed to speed by. He’d got a flat first, then a vehicle, and before he knew it he was supervising scene teams away from Dr. Perkins watchful eye. Like a blink of an eye she was retired to a village outside of Causton and Max had started to go grey, like some sign of authority, and had stepped into her position seamlessly.

Max congratulated himself on the promotion with a gift, a very big gift, a house. Some would call it cheating that he’d known about it’s impending vacancy because he’d been the one called in at the time of the occupants death, but he’d call it capitalizing on an ideal opportunity. The house was in slight disrepair and in dire need of landscaping having been owned by an elderly woman with no family, but homes in Oxford with good logistics were expensive and hard to come by. Max had plenty of family to help him and there was a move-in weekend where his sisters and their spouses came down to tame the yard and move in his things, and even little Margie, who wasn’t so little anymore, helped him paint and pick out some thrifted furniture. When they all finally vacated in a wave of kissed cheeks and tight hugs, Max watched them all go and looked out at his naked yard. The trellis above the door was stripped of the old withered vines that had previously covered it, the bushes were trimmed down to a manageable size, and what lawn remained was mowed to a reasonable height. Max thought of Dad and his roses and wondered how much of his precious gardening knowledge he’d absorbed via osmosis, because after everything, it would be lovely to have a hobby.

It had taken nearly twenty years but Max had finally found himself a home. He gathered himself. He nested and once more he settled comfortably into his own oddity, his own distance, his own imperturbable stability, his own old and comfy sweater of self.

Anne’s engagement dinner was his first hosted event at the house. In lieu of gardening, he’d found he had a knack for entertaining. Anne ended up so pleased with the thing in fact, that she decided to get married in Oxford. She’d gone the whole nine yards with disgustingly typical wedding photos in front of the Radcliffe Camera, the Bridge of Sighs, kissing in front of ancient doorways and embracing against aged stone walls. Max found them kitschy and banal but she and her husband, a man who raised Margie like his own, were stupidly in love and Max was horrendously happy for them even if he’d been stuck wearing mint green as a member of the wedding party. It wasn’t his color.

Sarah started sending apples later that same year. Her trees had become more abundant than she’d expected and Max started to bake more than he’d ever baked in his entire life.

Then there was Christmas with the family followed by his first annual New Year’s Eve Party and
Kyra and Regina and Deacon all came to town to see him and take part.

It became a cascade. Months sliding into years. He’d been appointed to several local medical councils. He joined and quit a variety of clubs and groups. He’d met and bonded with a local reporter who years later - when he still hadn’t started his garden - would tell him that his back patio was like the Russian tundra. He went to concerts and befriended college dons and nurses and policemen and at work he became what some would call an Authority on particular things.

He had become, like his grandfather before him, a Boss.

And one night in a pub Max decided that he’d been very well behaved for a very long time. It had been a while since he treated himself to anything special and he was a bit overdue for a spot of indulgence. A gift. Nothing so grand as a house this time, just some slouching bony shoulders, striking blue eyes, and very enticing freckles all wrapped up in unremarkable ill-fitting clothing and hunched over on a bar stool.

So he called him a snob, and he took him home.

and into the night of his very own room
where he found his supper waiting for him

Max stepped down the path to home, keys jangling in one hand and kit in the other, only to be stopped by the sight of Morse on his stoop. He was in a plain sky-blue tee that looked a size too small and one of his more battered pairs of jeans that were likely one too big. Max hated those jeans and their weird acid wash from a previous decade, but their saving grace was the way they slung low on Morse’s hips and sagged tantalizingly off of his hipbones when he stretched.

Morse hadn’t noticed him yet because he was engrossed in his phone, scrolling slowly with one hand and playing with his own copper curls in the other. Max may have mentioned off hand that he liked Morse’s longer hair and the detective seemed to have taken it to heart. He hadn’t said so, but there had been a noticeable lack of haircuts. In the right lighting his profile was that of something by Michelangelo, ringlets and the straight line of his nose and gazing, hooded eyes, but the real appeal was that Max had been listened to.

It was rather nice.

Max noticed at Morse’s feet there were two small pots with twiggy greens sticking out of them, some gardening gloves, and a hand trowel.

“What’s all this then?” Max spun his keys again and made himself known.

Morse’s head shot up, wide eyed as always. He almost looked like he’d been caught doing something he shouldn’t, but Max knew it was nothing more than his own genuine surprise. Morse had been lost in his head again, absorbed in whatever he was looking at more than he could be bothered to pay attention to the outside world.

His eyes matched his shirt and Max actually found himself holding his breath. Morse really had no idea how he looked to him, did he? Morse was open blue sky and burnished copper, rose and cream and gold and Max knew he often failed at masking his open admiration. Morse didn’t blush as much anymore when he noticed, a pity really, but he did flash that quick smile of his, small and slight, and there was that awkward twitch of sheepishness to him. Morse scratched his hand
through his hair as he finally stopped carding his fingers through it and this particular tell revealed that he was second guessing himself.

This was some gesture of his, these plants and whatever was on his phone. This was something Morse had done based on a very small amount of information and followed through on with a disproportionately large amount of impulse.

“Roses,” Morse said. Just that one single word, as if that were explanation enough.

Max knew he’d made a face, a concerned and difficult furrow of brow, “Generally one receives those in bouquet form.”

Morse unfolded and stood to his full height when Max finally got closer. Somewhere along the line in this relationship of theirs, Morse had become the confident one. He didn’t look around anymore to see if anyone spotted them. He didn’t balk from going out together or taking car rides. He didn’t hesitate at all, if they were alone, to embrace him. His arms slid around Max’s waist and he leaned in for a kiss of greeting. It was Max who still had the instinct to look around, who fought the desire to hide themselves away in private for fear of what it could do to their reputations. It wasn’t Morse, he knew that. It was just him. Old scars.

Perhaps it was about time he stopped worrying about it. Perhaps it was time to let go of a few things he’d been holding out on, things that hung him up, because Morse was smiling when he kissed him and it made his insides do bloody somersaults because no one, really, had ever looked at him like that.

“It’s been a year, you know,” Morse finally said, “Since we met in the pub.”

“Longer than a year,” Max could have pretended he didn’t remember but he did. Even with all the trouble, even with Morse’s dramatics and unpredictability, he wasn’t sure he’d ever forget that night.

“My point being that you still haven’t planted your garden. I was out doing inquiries, half of robbery has the flu apparently, and I saw these and couldn’t resist,” Morse’s hand flipped back towards the rose bushes, each with a little photo tag that Max couldn’t make out from this distance.

“And we're planting them here?”

“Oh, they’re climbing roses and your trellis is rather bare,” Morse finally moved away, one hand into one of his saggy pockets and pulling those jeans down just a centimeter lower, enough to show a sliver of skin. Max didn’t look but he knew it was there, “When I saw the name of them, I had to get them.”

Max was intrigued but refused to guess. Instead he lifted his brows and waited to be told, or at least given a hint.

Morse smirked, his eyes drifted in thought, and then he stepped back and teetered a second on his heels, “This long and sure-set liking, this boundless will to please - Oh, you should live for ever if there were help in these.”

Housman. It sent a ripple down Max’s spine and stirred something hot inside him, “Shropshire Lad?”

Morse nodded with that solemn intelligent approval of his, “Yes. That’s the uh- breed? Variety? Anyway, they’ll eventually bloom pink and white. I’ve done the research-” He waggled his phone, “And I know you said you wanted a tree for the back but I wasn’t sure if you had something in
mind already - a hawthorn maybe? - I did google these though. They should be rather easy to take care of. And hearty.”

Max felt himself flush and he fought his own smile from the foolish flutter of adoration that he was losing against more and more each and every day.

“You know, I actually asked you to get dinner. Not roses.”

Morse’s face twitched with a flash of irritation, but even that sent another fresh rush of affection through him. The detective scoffed lightly, “Did that too, you ungrateful prick.”

That actually made Max smile wide. “Lovely. I’m starving.” He spun his keys again and nodded to the rose bushes, “Dinner first. Then we can deal with these Lads.”

Morse’s annoyance disappeared. He nodded and made for the door but Max reached out and caught him by one of his belt loops. He knew he should say something more. Something grateful. When Morse turned with a quizzical look, he pulled him close for another kiss. It was slower and warmer than their greeting and Morse looked a bit confused when they finally parted.

“Thank you for the roses,” Max said when he let him go, “They were actually my father’s favorite. I used to help him with them when I was boy. It’ll be nice to have some of my own.”

Morse, he realised, had never heard him speak about his father before. Maybe he’d tell him about him when they finally got to the planting. Max moved past it, “And thank you for getting dinner. I’d eat a horse at this point.”

“It’s just take-away,” Morse shrugged dismissively and huffed at the thanks, “and it’s been sitting a bit, so horse may actually be preferable if its lukewarm.”

Max’s stomach grumbled and he finally pushed Morse ahead of him through the door, “You know, horse has been a very important protein source for many cultures throughout history...”

Morse hissed and grimaced and even though Max couldn’t see his face, he knew he was disgusted, “Max, please.”

and it was still hot.

Chapter End Notes

Where the Wild Things Are belongs to Maurice Sendak.

This was a journey and a learning experience and I’m very happy with this little universe I have made. I hope this doesn’t seem too out of place, but it was a bit of story I really wanted to tell.

Don’t worry... there is more to come, but I think we can let them be happy for a little while.

Neverland and Ride are waiting after all. >:3;
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