

Lewis

Six Excerpts from the Autobiography
of Jonathan Spenser



Nexis Pas

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Comments are always appreciated. Please send them to

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With thanks to Zev for *A Comard's Noël* and for information about the theatre.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental. The events depicted in this story did not happen and are not based on my life. Please do not confuse me with my characters.

This one is for Murphy.

PART IV

Lewis

The jungle was very hot. Thick vines hung from the trees and wrapped me in their humid embrace. Murphy was purring. What was Murphy doing in the jungle? Why was he purring? That was the dream.

‘Oh good, you’re awake. I hope we didn’t wake you up. We’ve been trying to be very quiet, but your cat started making a lot of noise so we had to let it in.’ I was lying on my side in my bed and Lewis’s face was two inches from mine. He was stretched out beside me, his naked body against mine. Someone else was lying behind me, and his body (it was definitely a he), also nude, was pressed tightly against mine. Murphy was perched on my shoulder, purring loudly because the person behind me was petting him. There seemed to be an impossible number of limbs circling over my body. That was the reality.

‘Lewis, what are you doing here?’ I tried to push myself up, but Lewis held on even more tightly and Murphy protested at the disturbance.

‘We rang you several times but there was no answer, and your machine wasn’t on. So we got worried that something had happened to you. That you had done something foolish. We came by to check. Do you know that you left your front door unlocked? I didn’t even have to use my key. Anyone could have walked in and murdered you in your sleep.’

‘Who is we? And what do you mean by “done something foolish”? What did you think I was going to do?’

‘We is me—Harry.’ A hand squeezed my shoulder and Harry kissed the back of my neck. The identification was unnecessary since his voice gave him away. I groaned. I tried to shrink down under the covers, but I wasn’t able to move far. In any case, they were already under the covers.

‘Harry told me what happened, and we were worried that you might . . . do something foolish.’

‘What? That I might try to get a good night’s sleep?’

‘Lewis was very angry with me when he found out what I did yesterday. He insisted that I call you and apologise for my behaviour. And then when you didn’t answer, we got worried that you might have . . . fallen down the stairs and broken your neck or worse. And Murphy wouldn’t have been able to call 999 for help.’ Harry’s petting of Murphy was beginning to involve a lot of touching of my body.

‘Murphy knows how to dial 999. It’s explaining whether it’s a medical or a police emergency that gives him trouble. The operators can’t understand him when he speaks Miaowese.’ Lewis giggled nervously in my face.

‘Very funny, Lewis. As you can see, the only thing I am suffering from is a surfeit of visitors. Once you saw that I was fine, why did you stay?’

‘Well, Harry and I had a long talk last night, and we discovered that one of the things we have in common is that we both like you a lot. And then Harry told me he had tried to rape you yesterday afternoon—’

Harry and I both spoke at once. ‘Lewis, he didn’t try to rape me.’

‘Lewis, I just tried to kiss Jonathan. There wasn’t any rape.’

‘Well Jonathan was trying to defend our friendship. At least he knows what loyalty means.’ Lewis raised himself up and glared at Harry over my shoulder.

I did not want to be in the middle of a lovers’ quarrel. ‘Lewis, Harry, listen to me. I’m not going to be forced into being noble. I like both of you. I could like either or both of you much more than I do, especially if I were not sharing a bed with you. At the moment, however, I would prefer to contemplate such a relationship in the abstract and not in the flesh. Peter broke up with me

last evening. He was very emotional and nasty. I didn't want to talk with anyone or see anyone after he left. I turned the phone off. I forgot to lock the door. I went to bed and fell asleep. End of story. Now that you have the information you came for, you can leave!

'You broke up with Peter? That's good. I like Peter and all, but I've never liked the way he treats you. I never said anything, because I thought that was what you wanted.'

'Thank you, Lewis, for that encouraging expression of concern. Now, if you don't mind, could the two of you let me go back to sleep? And lock the door as you leave.'

'Don't be angry, Jonathan. And did you mean it when you said you could love both of us?' Harry sounded very hopeful.

'I didn't use the word "love," Harry. I said "like".'

'But you meant "love". This is just perfect.' Lewis gave me a satisfied smirk. I had never noticed before how the skin around his eyes wrinkled when he smirked. He *was* beginning to grow old.

'Lewis, I am not even going to ask what you mean by that. Now, if the two of you would get dressed and leave, that would be perfect.' My shouts alarmed Murphy and he leaped off me and tore out of the room. 'Murphy will show you out.'

'But we brought breakfast.'

'This is an intervention.'

'I'll eat the breakfast when I get up, and what the hell is an intervention? No, don't answer that. I don't want to know. Just leave.' I shut my eyes and willed both of them to be gone.

'But I have to cook the breakfast. You don't know how.'

'Then I'll make my usual two slices of toast. I can manage a toaster. One slice of bread in each slot. Push the lever down. Wait until toast pops up. Remove. Eat.'

'An intervention is when people see one of their friends becoming a danger to himself. So they get together and intervene to save him.'

‘Harry and I were talking, and we realised this is all my fault. You were so upset about my dating Harry that you’ve become . . . disturbed.’

‘Lewis, not everything that happens is your fault. And you might as well know the truth now rather than later. I’ve fallen for Harry. Yes, for Harry. I’m in love with that silver voice. The throbbing of his Adam’s apple when he sings. The sinews distending along his throat when he hits that high B flat. I want to bathe in that luxuriant sound. Resonate with his passion. IS THAT CLEAR ENOUGH? You’re old news. The greasy paper wrapped around yesterday’s chips. I’ve tossed you over. Discarded you. Shown you the door. Punched your ticket. So you can leave now. Oh, and take Harry with you. And will the two of you stop holding me so tight! I can’t breathe and it’s hot.’

‘Then Harry can love both of us, and I can love both of you, and you will learn to love both of us.’

‘It’s rather late in the day for you to declare your love, Lewis. You had years to do so and didn’t. Don’t start pretending now.’

‘Calm down, Jonathan. Lewis is just trying for a bit of comic relief.’ Harry backed away a bit and then put a hand on my shoulder and pushed me onto my back so that we could see each other. ‘Listen to me. I know I frightened you. I came on too strong. I’m sorry. But we, Lewis and me, we want to start over with you.’

‘No, it’s out of the question. I’m not even going to discuss this. Tell me, what do you think of Tottenham’s chances this Saturday? I want to place a bet today. The odds are 10–4 for a Manchester United win, but the Spurs have improved so much in the past few games that I’m thinking maybe they can pull off a win against United.’

‘Jonathan, you are not interested in football. And Tottenham isn’t playing United this weekend. You’re just mentioning names

you've heard. You don't know what you're talking about. And stop trying to change the subject.'

'I don't want to talk about this. Let me up.' I began to struggle out of their arms.

'This is why we're worried, Jonathan. Calm down. Talk to us. We'll let go if you promise to talk with us.'

'Lewis, a few weeks ago, you told me that you couldn't love me, that you couldn't be what I want you to be, whatever the hell that might mean. And now you lying here in my bed, trying to convince me that I should love not only you but Harry as well.'

'Yes. Well, I can't be what you want me to be. I've known that since that day I took you up to meet my family. You're just going to have to be satisfied with me. The real me, and not some character out of a movie you saw once. We take a walk in the woods. I'm expecting a romantic discussion. But you spend half an hour telling me how I remind you of a young Paul Deveraux in *Ciao, Cardiff*. How the hell do you think that made me feel? I'm standing right there in front of you, and you tell me you I resemble somebody else. I don't even like Paul Deveraux. What was I supposed to think, that you were complimenting me? You know, when you're not trying to fit us all into the mould of some actor you've seen in some play or movie, you can be a nice guy, a really super guy in fact. You're kind. You're considerate. You're a great talker. You're funny. And you're sexy. But just stop pretending I'm somebody else. Just let me be me, Lewis Quinn. Why the hell can't I be enough for you? I realise you had an unhappy childhood, and I'm sorry your parents were so nasty to you, but that's no reason for you to romanticise my family and make it into something it isn't. The only place it's all happy families is in your imagination. I had the same problems with my family that any child does. I can't take the responsibility of being who you want me to be. You'll have to take me as I am.'

Both Harry and I shrunk back from Lewis's tirade. During his outburst, he had put a hand on my chest with his fingers splayed out and was pushing down on me, as if to pin me in place. I had never seen an angry Lewis before. Before that moment, if anyone had asked, I would have said that he was incapable of anger. I certainly wouldn't have thought he had been harbouring so much resentment against my behaviour. I shifted a bit closer to him and put my hand over his. I began tracing each finger with my index finger. Up along the outside edge and around the curve at the top and then down to the webbing between the fingers. I didn't know what to say. I felt curiously happy and numb and alarmed all at the same time.

He laced his fingers with mine and buried his face against my neck. He was much calmer when he spoke. 'Jonathan, just give us a chance. We can make you happy. You and Harry will have your music to share, and I'll try to learn enough to appreciate it. I know it won't ever mean as much to me as it does to you, but I will love both of you enough to try. I really will. And neither of you is very practical, and I can contribute that. It won't take us long to find out if this will work, Jonathan. Just let us have a few weeks. Please.'

'Lewis?'

'What?'

'Lewis, dear heart, would you make Jonathan and me breakfast? I think we could discuss this better if we weren't in bed pressed together.'

'What's wrong with being pressed together?'

'Well, for one thing, both of your cocks are resting on my hips and that's very distracting. And there are some discussions you should have with your clothes on.'

Lewis looked at me sceptically. But he knew that he had gained a victory. He stared at me for a few seconds more and then looked at Harry. When Harry nodded his head yes, Lewis sighed

theatrically and tossed the covers off the three of us. ‘One thing you’re going to have to agree to is to heat this bloody mausoleum.’ He rolled over and out of bed and began pulling his clothes on. ‘Half the rooms in this house could serve as walk-in refrigerators.’

Over the next several hours, we had a long discussion, sometimes heated. Harry must have felt that he had been appointed peacekeeper at first. Lewis and I had a lot of history to get through and reinterpret. ‘I can’t believe that you would remember a thing like that. What ever gave you the idea that Michael was anything more than a friend? If I spent more time with him that with you that evening, it was because you were gossiping with Carter’ was a typical exchange. But eventually we worked our way up to the few weeks preceding this discussion, and Harry began to play a larger role, not the least because he had begun to see that Lewis had manoeuvred the two of us into the present situation. Lewis didn’t even bother to deny it.

‘Of course, I planned it. I knew right away that the two of you would like each other, and I like both of you, so why not? It will make all of us happy. It’s the perfect solution for all of us.’

And then he grinned at both of us, his head turning from me to Harry and then back again. Lewis was very pleased with himself. He even had concocted a list of rules for us. Until we knew how things would work out in practice, sex had to involve all three of us together. Except for brief moments, pairings weren’t allowed. He would do the cooking. We would continue to leave in separate places until we knew that all three of us could live together, and then we would consider moving into my house (both Lewis and Harry had small flats), but only if I agreed to let Lewis redecorate. There were further discussions of some of these points—Harry and I readily agreed to let Lewis do the cooking. Harry and I did get Lewis to agree to allow Harry to rehearse

with me after promising that we would not do anything more than that. 'Kissing on the piano bench' was out.

And that was the beginning of the most joyous month of my life. Oh, I've been happy since, but it's been a quieter happiness. I don't think that there has ever been another period in my life that generated so many memories, scenes that I revisit when I want to feel good and remind myself that it's ok to be happy, as Lewis once put it to me.

It wasn't that everything was suddenly perfect, that we shared one kiss and suddenly the angelic choirs were singing and we rode off into a sunset golden with happiness. Lewis didn't suddenly develop into a singer and a music lover. There were lots of problems and arguments and heated discussions. Even the simplest things like who got to be the first to shave and shower in the morning and who had to wait for the water to reheat had to be worked out.

And I still had my demons to confront. It was hard giving up familiar worries and substituting new anxieties about this queer relationship. I was sure that each argument would be the last. That Lewis and Harry would storm out of the house, leaving me alone again. Or that I would look up from my work one afternoon to find one of them standing there telling me that it wasn't working out and that he was leaving. I alternated between Lewis and Harry as the deserter. Our growing familiarity made me worry even more. Something unexpected had happened in my life, something wonderful and marvellous and incredible, and I knew for certain that the gods would pull the carpet out from beneath my feet and send me tumbling down into hell again. The closer we grew, the more anxious I became that it might end. Lewis remarked several years later that I like to imagine the worst as a means of forestalling it. Whatever happens, it won't be as awful as I had imagined, and then I can feel relieved that things didn't turn out as badly as I had anticipated. Perhaps he's right. He usually is.

It took me several months to get used to all three of us being together in bed. At first, I found it too hot, and there never seemed to be enough room. Someone's elbow was always jammed into one's side, or there was an arm beneath one's body that was beginning to make one's back ache. Lewis would eventually solve the problem by finding someone to construct a frame that held two king-size mattresses. It's strange because over time we have become used to being close, and even with all the extra width, we often end up lying right next to one another.

Some time in those first weeks together, however, I woke up in the middle of the night and felt stifled by being so close to Lewis and Harry. I eased myself out of bed without waking either of them and went downstairs. I got a glass of water and wandered around the rooms on the ground floor looking at them. It was odd how quickly they had ceased to be mine alone. The two of them hadn't moved in yet, but possessions of theirs had taken root in my house. Lewis's briefcase sat on the floor of the entrance hallway beside the stairs. Their coats were hanging next to mine on the row of pegs in the hall. Lewis had draped his hat over mine. Harry's music books and a couple of CDs that he had brought over to listen to lay on the seat of a chair where he had left them when we went to bed. Even Murphy had quickly grown accustomed to having three people in his house.

I wandered around in the grey light for about half an hour before climbing the stairs to the second floor again. When I walked into the bedroom, Lewis was lying on his back with Harry's face resting on his shoulder and his chest across Lewis's torso. One of Lewis's hands lay on the back of Harry's neck. The two of them were sleeping so peacefully. I sat down in the chair next to the bed and watched them for a long time. At one point, Harry's eyes drifted open, and he saw me sitting there. He smiled sleepily. His arm was stretched out across the bed, and his fingers briefly

beckoned at me before his eyes closed again and he fell back asleep. After a while, I became sleepy again and got into bed.

The next day, I was sitting on the sofa reading. Lewis passed behind me, and as he did so, he reached out and squeezed my shoulder. 'You were watching us last night.'

I turned my head and smiled at him. 'Mmm. I thought you were asleep. I was trying to be quiet.'

He stood behind me and put his arms over my shoulders and crossed them in front of my neck. He nuzzled the top of my head, burrowing his lips down through the hair until he could kiss my scalp. 'I felt you leave and then later I heard you come back. You sat there for an hour or so looking at me and Harry.'

'You should have said something.'

'No, that's precisely what I shouldn't have done. Are we getting too much in your hair?' He giggled when he said that and kissed the top of my head again, burying his nose in my hair.

'I don't know. I suppose I should say no, that I love having you and Harry here, but it all seems to be happening so fast. I haven't had time to adjust yet. Well, I suppose the two of you haven't had time yet either.'

'But we tend to be more in your space than in ours. It must feel as if we invaded. We shall have to figure out a way of giving each of us some privacy. I can get away to the office, but you work here, and Harry will probably begin to work here too if we move in. We will have to think about this.'

'I like the sound of that. Not the space problem or the privacy thing. I mean I like the sound of the future tense. "We shall, we will." I've never had a future with anyone before. I like the idea of planning a future together.' Lewis laughed, hugged me again, and then continued on his way. I sat there overcome by happiness.

Or there was the time we were lying in late one Saturday morning. The rain was beating against the windows. It sounded as if occa-

sionally there were gusts of sleet against the house. We were too comfortable to get up, especially me, since it was my turn to be in the middle. There is much to be said for being surrounded by male flesh. Finally Lewis groaned and pushed himself up far enough to be able to pull a curtain back and look out. The grey light that came into the room around the edges of the curtain hardly cut through the darkness. 'I should get breakfast started. What would you like this morning?'

'You know what I like, not for today but some Saturday, I mean.' Both Lewis and I turned to look at Harry. 'During the winter, my mum used to boil extra potatoes on Friday night. Then on Saturday morning she would get up and fry up some bacon. Then in the fat she would cook onions. You'd wake up in the morning to the smell of frying bacon and frying onions. Then she would slice the potatoes and add them and cook them slowly until they were all brown and crisp. It was wonderful. The smell just went through the entire house, and when you woke up, you could lie there in bed for a while, just knowing that breakfast would be good and the whole day would be good because it had started out special. And I could snuggle down into the covers and listen to the sounds coming up from the kitchen, the radio with the news and the pans grating against the stove and the thunks of dishes being put on the table. Oh, and the smell of coffee. And when I came downstairs, Dad would be sitting at the table reading the newspaper. Even the dog would be waiting beside the table, hoping that someone would feed him a piece of bacon or that he would get the scrapings from the pan. That breakfast always make me think of home.'

'Oh, I love that. My mother made that occasionally. Then she would make lots of toast, and fry eggs until the white was just cooked and the yellow was still runny. She would put your eggs on top of your potatoes, and when you broke the yolk, it ran all over the potatoes. I wish you hadn't mentioned that. Now I'm

hungry for that. I don't have the stuff to make that this morning. I'll do it tomorrow.' Lewis looked very excited at the prospect.

'You're joking, right? No one actually eats that much grease and starch and food for breakfast, do they?'

Both of them stared at me. 'But it's great,' said Harry.

'It's wonderful,' said Lewis.

'You're always on about healthy food. How could you eat something like that? All that cholesterol and fat. It sounds awful.'

'Well you wouldn't want it every day, but now and then it's a treat. Wait until tomorrow. You'll like it.'

'I think I'll just have my two slices of toast.'

'We have so much to teach him. This is going to take much more time than I anticipated.'

'He had a deprived childhood. For years, the nurse brought him two slices of toast each morning and a carton of orange juice with a straw.'

'There is much to be said for toast and orange juice in cartons.'

'Oh, we have our work cut out for us. It's going to take the rest of our lives to train him up right.' Lewis sighed with contentment and smiled at the both of us.

'Lewis, you don't have to start breakfast right away, do you?'

'No, Harry, it can wait.'

'Oh good, because, you know, since we're all awake and here together, I thought maybe we could . . .' Harry left his thought dangling. He pushed the covers down exposing my chest. 'I like Jonathan's chest better now that his hair is starting to grow back, don't you?'

'Mmmm, his hair is so soft and silky. As long as it doesn't cover his nipples, it will be fine. They're so easy to lick and suck when there's no hair.' Lewis hummed as he began doing just that.

'And Jonathan has one for each of us. It's very convenient.' Harry joined him in humming.

‘Ohhmmm.’ The last part of Harry’s remark was drowned out by my moan of pleasure as the two of them began licking me. ‘I’ll keep the hair around my nipples trimmed, ounh . . . I promise.’

We’ve done a lot of humming over the years. Even Lewis found that he can produce a decent hum, usually wobbling between the G and the F sharp above middle C, perhaps closer to the F sharp, although the pitch occasionally rockets upward toward the D just above high C. He’s a tenor when he’s in bed, although his ‘street’ voice tends more toward the baritone. As a singer, Harry is, of course, a tenor, but as a lover he has a range of several octaves, from basso profundo to countertenor in altissimo. Someday I will write a quartet for three voices and bed springs. It will be centred around Harry’s bedroom burlesque of ‘Nessun dorma’. Night tends to dissolve when he’s around, the stars traverse their courses quickly, and he does rather triumph at dawn. But then the same is true of Lewis. And of me.

That month seems to have been filled with rain, at least in my memories. It didn’t matter. Nature wasn’t mirroring our mood. I was returning to my house late one afternoon, walking through a heavy, cold rain with my umbrella up. I was clutching my briefcase to my chest to keep it dry. The wind was blowing in sharp gusts, catching the leading edge of the umbrella and lifting it up. It was a constant struggle to keep it over my head and prevent it from being sprung upwards. The gutters and the pavements were filled with water. My shoes and socks and the bottoms of my trousers were soaked. With each step, my feet squeezed more water into my shoes. I was surrounded by rain. It poured off the umbrella on all sides. I was keeping my head down and had the umbrella pulled low. I didn’t see the other person until I was about three feet from him. I jumped to the side to avoid a collision and started apologising. The other person did the same.

It was Harry. Both of us laughed. I lifted my umbrella and looked around. We were the only two people on the street. The day was so dark that the streetlights had already come on. 'It could be the end of the world. We're the only men left on earth. Everyone else has disappeared. Been sucked into the vacuum. What will we do now?'

'Sing. I will sing for you, you, the only other man left in the world. A rain song.' Harry closed his umbrella. He was soaked in a minute, the rain running down his face and flattening his hair to his forehead. And he stood there in the rain and threw open his arms and sang. At full volume, his voice cascading up and down, over the full extent of his range. 'Perché sei amore. Soltanto tu. Soltanto tu. Weil du Liebe bist. Nur du. Nur du. Parce que tu es amour. Seulement tu. Seulement tu.' And he twirled around and started walking away, backwards, singing for me. 'Because you are love. Only you. Only you.'

I rushed to catch up with him and pulled him under my umbrella. He put an arm around my shoulder and continued singing, more softly. 'Because you are love. Only you. Only you.'

'You're going to catch your death of cold. And your voice. You shouldn't be singing outside in this rain and the cold. You'll damage your voice.' I was laughing so hard from happiness that I could barely speak, my words so far from my real thoughts that they had no meaning. I wanted Harry to sing, to sing for me, to go on singing forever and ever.

Harry turned to face me and folded me into an embrace. My briefcase and the handle of the umbrella were caught between us. He pressed up against me and held me tighter, still singing. 'Soltanto tu, soltanto tu, soltanto tu. Only you. You will keep me dry and warm and safe. Soltanto tu. And Lewis. And me. Perché siamo amore. Because we are love.' He took the umbrella from me and closed it. Then he kissed me. The water cascaded down the two of us, entering our mouths. A baptism in a cold February

rain off the Channel. He grabbed me by the hand, and the two of us ran back to my house, our house. We stumbled up the steps. I was trying to find the key in my wet pocket and open the door. I could hardly get my hand in the pocket because my trousers were so wet. Harry stood there on the steps, facing the street, and sang for the entire neighbourhood. 'Because we are love. Love. We are love.' I finally got the door open and turned around to pull Harry in. He chose that moment for a grand crescendo of sound. 'Perché siamo amore. Amore. Siamo amore.' Several of the neighbours stood at their windows, watching him and listening to him singing. 'We are love.' He ended on a ringing high note at full volume.

I dragged him into the entranceway and closed the door. Harry threw open the inner door with an imperious gesture and strode into the hall as if commandeering the most important stage in the world. Lewis came rushing out from the kitchen, a white towel wrapped around his waist and holding a spoon. Harry grabbed Lewis and me and with his arms around our shoulders continued singing. 'Because we are love. Love. We are love.'

An uncertain smile played about Lewis's lips. He didn't know what had occasioned this outburst. I've never seen him look so nonplussed. Lewis hadn't yet become accustomed to people expressing their emotions by singing. From his point of view, it must have seemed as if two demented men had burst into his clean hallway and were dripping water over the rug. 'The two of you need to get out of those wet clothes and take a hot shower. Put on some dry clothes, and I'll fix you a hot toddy to warm you up.'

'Because we are love, Lewis. Love. We are love.' Harry never stopped singing. He began undressing, draping each sodden garment around Lewis as he removed it, until Lewis was almost as wet as the two of us. Then he undressed me. Lewis was disappearing under a pile of clothes. Finally Harry stopped singing. 'Ok, Lewis's plan is for Jonathan and me to take a hot shower.'

Excellent thinking, Lewis, most excellent. But I don't see why we should get dressed again, since we are going to get in bed. You, Lewis, are overdressed for the occasion. And you should get out of those wet clothes before you catch pneumonia.' Harry took me by the hand and led me up the stairs. 'Because we are love. Love. We are love.' Harry has always been better at handling Lewis than I have.

After that, the neighbours couldn't help but notice that I was no longer living alone. Mrs Lavesly, who had occupied the house next door for over sixty years, stopped me in the street a few days later. She spoke so tremulously that I had to bend over to hear her. We stood so close that the netting on her hat brushed my face two or three times. 'Mr Spenser, I am so glad to see some life around your house again. It's hasn't been as lively since your father died. And the music—that Harry—he certainly has a beautiful voice. And Lewis is such a pleasant young man. He helped me carry my packages from the shops the other day. He and I had a nice chat over a cup of tea. Such a polite young man. He even replaced the light bulbs in the hallway for me. The ceiling is so high there, well, you know, it's just like your father's hallway, and I'm not steady enough any more to climb up a stepladder. I didn't even have to ask. Lewis saw that the bulbs had burned out and asked me if he could change them for me.'

'Lewis is very helpful. He enjoys it so much. You mustn't hesitate to ask him for help if you have anything that needs doing.' That, I thought—mistakenly as it turned out—would discourage Lewis from fraternising with the neighbours. 'But I hope you weren't disturbed by our resident singer's concert during the rain two days ago. He was just very happy. I'm afraid he tends to express himself in song.'

'Of course, he is happy, Mr Spenser. He has you and Lewis. Lewis told me all about it. I'm sure you'll all be very happy to-

gether. I had a cousin who lived with his special friend for almost fifty years. I always enjoyed visiting with them so much. They were such amusing people. And rather naughty. I'm sure I wasn't supposed to know what they were talking about sometimes. And now Kilsyth Terrace has you and your friends. We're all looking forward so much to visits from Lewis and Harry's fellow musicians. It used to be so exciting when your father had his colleagues over. I could leave the windows open and hear those wonderful free concerts. Your father even invited me over every time Dame Edith Preston visited. He knew she was my favourite singer. Of course, I didn't want to intrude. I know that must get tiring for people in the public view all the time. So I would just sit there quietly and listen while she sang. She even spoke with me a few times. Dame Edith was such a nice person. Not at all what I expected an opera singer to be like. She was from Bradford, you know, and she was just like an ordinary person. She told me she got so tired sometimes of being on the stage and just wanted to put her feet up and have a cup of tea and a good gossip with the neighbours. Lewis has already told me that he will arrange for Harry to give a recital for everyone on the terrace.' Mrs Lavesly beamed shyly at me.

'I'm sure Lewis is looking forward to it as well. I know he doesn't like to brag about his abilities, but he is a terrific cook. I'm certain he will prepare something very special for Harry's recital for the neighbours. Be sure to let him know your favourites.' I was hoping that she and the other neighbours would give Lewis a long list of foods to fix—preferably something incredibly complicated.

'No, he didn't tell me that, Mr Spenser. Well, one wouldn't expect a gentleman like Lewis to boast.'

I nodded my agreement and reached for my hat to doff it as I took my leave. I wasn't wearing a hat, but it seemed the right gesture for that conversation. Lewis had been busier than I thought.

In the four years that I had lived in the house, that was the longest conversation with Mrs Lavesly that I ever had.

And then there was the time I was working in the room that I used as my office before Lewis and Harry moved in. It was directly over the living room. The room didn't have a fireplace, and in the 1890s, when the house had been built it would have had no direct source of heat. The builders had installed a metal grate in the floor just above the fireplace in the living room to allow some heat into the room. But even with the fire lit in the living room and the grate open, the room was never warm—during the winter I always wore a sweater and heavy socks when I worked in that room. It also meant that any conversation in the living room was audible in the room.

Harry was sitting before the fire in the room below me. From time to time, I could hear him turn a sheet in the newspaper he was reading. I wasn't paying much attention. At first I didn't even register the sound of the front door opening and closing except as background noise.

'Hello. What are you doing here by yourself? Where's Jonathan?'

'He's upstairs working. How did your day go?'

'It went. That's about the best you can say for it.' There was a sound of kissing. 'Mmm. It's much better now. I'm going to pour myself a glass of wine. Do you want some?'

'No, I'm fine.'

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing. Why did you say that?'

'Something's the matter. You look so downhearted.'

'It's nothing, Lewis, just nerves. Go get your glass of wine. Maybe Jonathan would like one. You should go upstairs and say hello to him.'

‘I will in a while. Right now, I’m going to sit beside you. I just had a frightening encounter, and I need you to give me a hug. To protect me and chase away the demon.’

‘Oh my god, Lewis, what happened?’

Lewis’s voiced quavered in dramatic tones of fear. ‘I came home, opened the door, walked into our living room, and discovered that some alien had taken over my lover’s body and mind. The brave Mr Harry Castlemain has gone missing. I shall call the police and report this abduction.’

Harry chuckled. I smiled to myself.

‘Now tell me. What’s behind all of this? Are you worried about this concert?’

‘Yes, a bit. Well, more than a bit. The closer the day comes, the worse my fears become. I don’t know whatever possessed me to think I could get up in front of one of the most sophisticated audiences in the world and sing one of the most difficult pieces of music ever written.’

‘I do. You wanted to torture me. You wanted to make me purchase a suit of evening clothes and then sit through an interminable bout of screeching and screaming in foreign languages nobody understands and pretend to enjoy it. And not just me. Jonathan too. Well, Jonathan likes that sort of thing. It’s this plot between the two of you. Me and all your relatives and all the citizens of Burnham-by-the-Sea and Burnham Undermere and Really Soggy Burnham in the Marshes and Upper Burnham and Lower Burnham and Burnham Market and Burnham the Birthplace of Nelson will have to endure this evening of Art and Music so that you and Jonathan can have a giggle about how you’re pulling the wool over our eyes and you’re really an awful singer with no talent who’s out to steal our hearts and take them back to Arcturus Three, where you and all the other Arcturians shall feast on our flesh. And it’s all so unnecessary. You don’t need to sing to steal my heart. You’ve already stolen it. And I don’t want it back.’

‘Not ever? A heart can be useful sometimes.’

‘That is true. It makes a great gift.’

‘A bit messy.’

‘Hmmm.’ There was a long pause in the conversation. ‘Hmmm. Such nice lips. It must be all that singing you do. Makes them so firm and flexible. So tell me about your fears. Did something happen today?’

‘I had a dream last night. I was standing in front of the audience, and it came time for me to sing my first solo and no sound would come out. And I’m afraid that will happen. Or the sound will be so horrible that everyone will start laughing.’

‘Ah ha, the Loueeeeee Quinn school of singing. You owe this all to me. I knew I would be a good influence on you. You see how smart you were to take up with me. Were you naked? That would give your performance a lot of interest. No one would notice that you weren’t singing if you were naked.’

‘I will suggest that to Esterhazy.’

‘What makes you think he will listen to an incompetent wretch like you? You’re going to maul his Mahler. He will skewer you through the throat with that little pointer stick thingy he waves about.’

‘No, he won’t. I’m going to be terrific. Stunning! Superb! Wow-wow-wow-wow-wow-wish, unbelievable-ish!’

‘Yes, you are.’

‘Yes, I am. For you. And for my parents and relatives. And for all the inhabitants of Burnham-by-the-Sea, etc.’

‘But you forgot the most important person.’

‘Oh, and for Jonathan, too.’

‘No, not Jonathan.’

‘Then who?’

‘Harry Castlemain. No matter how well you sing, it’s not going to matter if Harry isn’t satisfied.’

There was a very long pause this time. Eventually Harry spoke very quietly. ‘I love you.’

‘I know. And your love’s the only important thing in my life.’ There was another long pause before Lewis spoke again. ‘Are you warm enough sitting here?’ Lewis sighed heavily. ‘I am going to tackle Jonathan soon about modernising the heating system in this place. It’s on my list, my long list, of things to talk with him about.’

That night, I asked Lewis to help me move the contents of my office to the room on the third floor that my father had used as his office. I told him that he needed an office for himself and that I wanted a place closer to the piano. And besides climbing all those stairs would be good exercise, and I needed exercise more than he did. In truth, I didn’t want to be in a position to eavesdrop on the two of them ever again or to overhear confidences. Magicians should be able to conceal how they work their magic from the rest of us—otherwise it wouldn’t be magic—and lovers deserve their privacy. And there were things I didn’t want to know.

I don’t mean to give the impression that all was immediately well. That one kiss from Lewis swept me off my lily pad and changed me into a fairy tale prince charming. Prince Charming was Lewis’s role, after all. And Harry was the boy who found the magic ring and the pot of gold and the singing harp at the top of the beanstalk, and the lamp with the genie and an endless supply of wishes, and the bowl of oatmeal that was just right. I was, well I was the little boy sitting in the garden with his cat, reading his book of fairy tales and dreaming that maybe one day Prince Charming would show up on my doorstep. But for now the garden was sunny and warm, it was green and all the flowers were in bloom, and the cat was purring in contentment. And I was beginning to think that maybe, just maybe, at least one Prince

Charming had already shown up and to hope that Lewis and Harry and I would pull this off.

It meant different things to the three of us, of course. Harry was happy and hence satisfied. Lewis was satisfied and hence happy. And I, well, I was beginning to understand that it was all right to be happy.

Our idyll lasted a few days over three weeks. Harry had to go to London to rehearse. After he finished, he was going on to Norfolk to talk with his parents. He had decided it was time for that ‘Mom, Dad, you’re never going to have grandchildren’ talk. He and Lewis even practiced it, Lewis giving him pointers from his experiences with his parents.

‘Mum, Dad, I’ve got something important to tell you. I know it’s not what you would choose for me, but it’s what I am, and I love you so much that I don’t want to go on deceiving you.’

‘Right, that’s a good start. Make sure they have something to drink. Your parents drink, don’t they?’

‘Dad drinks beer. Mum has a gin and tonic when she’s down at the pub.’

‘Good. Stop at a store and buy beer and gin so that you don’t have to go out to a pub. You can’t have a discussion like this when they’re surrounded by the neighbours.’

‘No, none of the Lord Nelsons would be a good place for this discussion.’

‘The Lord Nelsons?’

‘Every pub in the Burnhams is named after Nelson.’

‘Oh, ok. Anyway, back to your parents. After I got mine all primed, I just went ahead and told them. It turned out they already knew, which was something of an anticlimax. Mother just told me to be careful. And Dad said he hoped I remembered always to use precautions, that they loved me too much to lose me.’

‘I don’t think my parents suspect I’m gay. Mum will cry, and I’ll be lucky if Dad doesn’t start in about “no son of mine”. And then when I tell them I’ve met the two wonderful men and am going to move in with them, he’ll explode and march out. Prob-

bly run off to the Lord Nelson, leaving me and my Mum there trying to talk.’

‘Should I come up?’

‘Not right away, Lewis. It would be better to hold off on that for a while until they get used to the idea.’

Lewis turned to me. ‘How did your parents react when you told them.’

‘I never told my father directly. Nothing was ever said, but he knew. I’m sure he knew. I think he even tried to introduce me to what he considered a promising candidate for son-in-law. I did tell mother. Since one of the few things she and I share is an appreciation of handsome young men, I thought it only fair to warn her that if I brought a young man home, he was mine. She was not to chase him.’

Both Lewis and Harry looked startled by that announcement. They still hadn’t gotten used to the venom with which I regarded my mother. Lewis looked at me rather speculatively. I have come to recognise that as his ‘here is another problem for me to solve’ look. At the time, I misinterpreted it and thought it simply curiosity.

I also had to leave, in my case for two week’s worth of final rehearsals and the opening of *A Coward’s Noël* in Birmingham. I wouldn’t even be able to come back on the weekend. Since I was already almost a third of the way north, I had decided long before to drive up to Edinburgh on Friday and had made arrangements to spend the weekend there to discuss my next job. I left the same day as Harry, the Tuesday of that week, but later, since I had to wait for a delivery. I was expecting a videotape with auditions by various singers for the Edinburgh production of *Coward*. I was on the phone with Lewis when the postman knocked at the door. I had to put the phone down to answer the door and sign for the packages.

'I'm sorry, Lewis. The packages came. They sent two videotapes. I thought they said there was only one. I hope the second one is short. I had to arrange with the hotel to put a video recorder in my room, but they can only let me have it Thursday night. It's been reserved the other nights. Some sort of sales convention, I gather. Listen, I'd better get going. I want to miss the heavy traffic outside London during the rush. I'll call. Every night. Lewis, ah, I'm sorry to leave you alone. I love you. I'll miss you. I'll be back as soon as I can. You and Harry don't have to honour your pledge not to have sex without me. We'll survive that. Just don't enjoy it too much, ok?'

'We shall be miserable without you. We shall do nothing but complain about your desertion.'

'I should go, Lewis.'

'Yes, you should, Jonathan. Mr Atkinson is beginning to look pointedly at the clock. I had better get back to work. Take care. Drive carefully.'

The trip went fairly smoothly until just past Bunbury. The M40 slowed to a halt there for about an hour. Then just as suddenly traffic opened up and I was able to get to my hotel in Birmingham. But because of the delay it was already after 8:00. I tried calling Lewis but there was no answer. I called Harry in London, and we chatted for a bit. He hadn't been able to reach Lewis either. We joked about what our partner was up to. I think both of us were still at the stage in the relationship when we weren't quite sure it would last and were using jokes to cover up our anxieties about it.

Harry was incredibly chuffed about the rehearsals for Mahler's Eighth. Esterhazy had come over for two days to work with him and the other soloists and with the chorus. Harry wouldn't repeat what Esterhazy had said about him, but I could tell the remarks had left him elated. We lingered over the conversation long after we had given each an account of our activities since our last

meeting. This preceded the widespread adoption of mobile phones by several years, and I had made the call from my hotel room. Finally Harry laughed and said that he would close by quoting his mother's usual sign-off: 'Well, we had better ring off. This is costing you money.' Even so, it took another five minutes for us to say good-bye. It would be the last time we could talk for several days. Harry was taking the train to King's Lynn after rehearsals finished the next day to visit his parents, and I would be busy with my own rehearsals and then watching the videotapes of the Edinburgh auditions. I tried to reach Lewis again, but he still wasn't answering. I left a message on his machine, and then went out to find something to eat. There was no message from him when I returned about 11:00, and so I went to bed. Nor was I able to reach him on Wednesday evening. I began to wonder if something had happened. I called Christopher and Bobbie, but neither of them had seen or heard from Lewis.

The rehearsals Thursday took longer than I had expected, and then I went out for drinks and dinner with the stage manager and several of the actors and crew. I didn't get back to the hotel until 9:00 or so. Lewis had phoned the hotel earlier that day and left a message for me. It made no sense to me: 'I'm taking care of things. Don't worry. I'll be out of touch for a few days. Call me on Sunday night after you get back from Edinburgh.' I shrugged it off as Lewis's attempt to be dramatic. I was too tired to pay much attention to it or give it much weight.

The hotel had attached the video tape player to the television set in my room, and I spent the next hour watching the auditions and making notes on the performers. When I pulled the mailer with the second tape out of my briefcase, I noticed that there was no return address on the package but that it had been posted in Brighton. I almost didn't open it then. I wanted to go right to sleep, but decided I had better open the package and make sure

that it wasn't work and something that I had to look at while I had the use of the video recorder.

There was no letter with the tape, but it had a typed label reading 'Jonathan's Greatest Hits'. I was more curious about it than alarmed. The mysterious label did get my attention, which I suppose was what it was intended to do. I popped it into the machine and pressed the play button. It began with a series of professionally produced title cards: Jonathan's Greatest Hits, Starring Jonathan Spencer, With Special Guest Appearances by Lewis Quinn and Harry Castlemain. The screen went black for several seconds. The only sound was a rhythmic tapping sound. My initial thought that Lewis and Harry had put together a tape of themselves for me. I was rather touched by their thoughtfulness.

All of that turned to despair when the first scene slowly faded into view. I was lying naked, face down, on the bed in Peter's playroom, shackled to the bedposts at my wrists and ankles. Peter was not visible, but a riding crop slashed across my buttocks every few seconds. This was followed by a paddle and then a whip. There were no sounds other than the sound of my flesh being struck and my moans. I fastforwarded through the succeeding scenes, all of which featured me being beaten or used by Peter. The last scene was the most shocking. It had been taped in my bedroom. Lewis, Harry, and I were making love. The lighting and sound were poor but there was no doubt that it was the three of us. I had no idea when or how Peter had gained access to my bedroom to install the cameras. There definitely was more than one camera, since the shots were taken from different angles.

At the end, Peter appeared on the tape for the first time. He was seated in an armchair in his sitting room, smoking a cigarette and sipping a glass of whiskey. His legs were crossed and throughout his subsequent speech, he kept moving the leg that lay atop the other, swinging the calf and foot in a short arc up and down. A half-empty bottle of whiskey stood on the table be-

side the chair, and a fire was burning in the fireplace. The flickering of the flames lent an uneven texture to the light. Flares of red and orange and blue lit up the glass Peter was holding. 'Jonathan, I do hope you enjoyed the tape. Frankly I've been very disappointed with your behaviour. I had expected you to contact me. Perhaps your new chums have been keeping you so busy that you haven't had a moment to spare to keep me informed about your doings. I have had to resort to these dramatic means of getting your attention.

'Fortunately I long ago took steps to ensure that I would be able to keep myself informed about your activities. I may have misled you during our last conversation into thinking that I needed to install the cameras. As you can see, the cameras were already installed. I simply had to wait for a night when the three of you were together in your house. It was rather cold in the van, waiting for you to turn out the lights and go upstairs to bed. But things soon heated up. It's obvious the three of you are getting to know one another quite well.

'I thought I should do my part and help Harry and Lewis become better acquainted with you. I sent each of them a copy of this tape too. I wonder what the two of them will think of you now. Well I had better let you go. I'm sure you and Lewis and Harry have lots to talk about now. And there's no need to thank me, Jonathan. Knowing that I have contributed to your relationship is reward enough for me. Be seeing you. Oh, and don't try to remove the cameras. That will just make me angry, and I might have to take further steps.'

I ripped the cassette out of the machine and broke it open. I tore the tape out and threw it into the bin. Then I realised that wasn't safe or wise. I pulled it out and began hacking away at it with the small pair of scissors in my shaving kit. I attacked it in a frenzy and kept chopping at it until it was reduced to a pile of shreds. I stuffed those into plastic bags for separate disposal. It

was only after I had finished that I allowed myself to feel any emotion. And then I got sick.

When I was cleaning myself up, I suddenly thought of Lewis's mysterious message and understood what it meant. Harry, of course, would not have received the tape because he was away from his flat, but Lewis had received it the same day I had and had probably watched it that night. That was why I had been unable to reach him.

I reached for the phone and tried ringing Lewis again. Again there was no answer, and I left a message pleading with him to call me back. I could hear the agony in my voice, and certainly it would be apparent to Lewis as well when he listened to my message. I even thought about trying to reach Lewis at work, although his office had been closed for hours. I didn't want to try any of our mutual friends for fear of alerting them that something was wrong. Finally I turned out all the lights and sat there sleepless. My life was in shreds. Lewis was so disgusted with me that he had run off. Or maybe he was sitting in his rooms listening to my voice leaving messages and then erasing them to rid his life of me. He had probably already reached Harry and told him about the tape. An endless fugue of despair played in my mind.

I finally fell asleep about 4:00. The phone rang at 6:00. I was still sitting in the chair wearing the same clothes I had on the night before. I almost did not answer the phone. I thought it would be Peter calling to crow about his victory. But it was Lewis. He began in midstream.

'Jonathan, you are not to worry. I have taken care of everything.'

'Lewis, where have you been? I've been trying to reach you.'

'It's ok, Jonathan. I'm at my parents. I'm calling from a box down the road. You're not to worry any more.'

'When you say that, it makes me worry all the more. What are you talking about?'

‘The tape from Peter. I know you got a copy—Peter said so on the tape. I’ve taken care of it. It won’t be a problem any more.’

‘How? What did you do?’

‘Don’t worry about it. I took the tape Peter sent to Harry too, and I’ve destroyed it and the one I got. You must promise me never to mention this to Harry.’

‘I’ve no intention of mentioning it to anyone.’

‘Good. Did you get rid of the one you got?’

‘I cut it to pieces. I haven’t figured out how to get rid of them yet.’

‘It’s best to burn it. You must find some way to burn it.’

‘But Peter can just make more copies.’

‘No, he won’t be doing that. Listen to me, Jonathan. You must follow your original plans for today. Go to your rehearsals and then leave for Edinburgh. Return to Birmingham on Sunday evening as you planned and then check back into the hotel. Call me at my flat then. I’ll be back there by Sunday evening.’

‘Lewis, what have you done?’

‘I solved our problem. That’s my contribution to the relationship, our relationship, yours, mine, and Harry’s. I solve problems. Just remember. Harry loves you. He needs you. We both need you. Don’t worry about Murphy. Before I left, I asked Anne Lavesly to feed him. Now you mustn’t call anyone again. I’ve spoken to Christopher and told him I had to make an emergency trip home. I couldn’t reach you or Harry before I left. That’s the story. This is the first time I could get away to call you. I don’t think anyone will ask. But that’s the story if they do.’

‘Lewis, tell me what you’ve done.’

‘Don’t worry. I’ve got to go now. Don’t forget to burn the tape.’ And then he hung up.