

A1 Stewart
Noah Homes

A man in a brown tweed suit and hat is shown from the chest up. He is holding a magnifying glass over his eyes, which are completely obscured by the lens. His right hand is raised to the brim of his hat. On the left lapel of his suit jacket, there is a small yellow Ferrari logo patch. The background is a dark, solid color.

A Case of Time

Table of Contents

Love is an Open Road.....	3
A Case of Time – Information.....	6
Acknowledgements.....	7
Dedication.....	8
A Case of Time.....	9
Prologue.....	11
Chapter One.....	12
Chapter Two.....	14
Chapter Three.....	16
Chapter Four.....	20
Chapter Five.....	22
Chapter Six.....	24
Chapter Seven.....	27
Chapter Eight.....	31
Chapter Nine.....	33
Epilogue.....	35
Author Bio.....	37

Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

A CASE OF TIME

By Al Stewart & Noah Homes

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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A Case of Time

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A CASE OF TIME

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Photo Description

In the photo, two older men sit in front of big wooden doors, perhaps in France. They look comfortable together, as if they have experienced life and finally discovered what is most important. They have their arms entwined, and appear to be laughing as they look through a book.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These men seem so comfortable in each other's company. Is this a new relationship or have they been together for years? How did they meet and find one another? Does the book, the door, or this spot on the sidewalk have special meaning for these men? Are they travelling abroad, or is this setting their home? What sort of experiences and memories have they shared (perhaps including romantic moments and spicy moments along with everyday moments)? Please feel free to use these questions and ideas as jumping-off points for the story you're inspired to tell!

Thank you so much!

Marie

P.S. If you could avoid non-con, infidelity, and cheating, please, that would be ideal. Thank you!

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: over age of 40, life partners, Paris setting, explicit sex, humour, detective, author, mystery games

Word Count: 7,598

Acknowledgements

With thanks to Layla, Claire, and Debbie McGowan.

Cover art by Noah Homes

Thank you to all the MM team who host this wonderful event

Dedication

This story is dedicated to Flo and Belf

A CASE OF TIME
By Al Stewart & Noah Homes

“What we find in a soul mate is not something wild to tame, but something wild to run with.”

—Robert Brault

Prologue

The Werewolf Whisperer

Inspector Loupe felt the creature's presence as soon as he opened the door. The werewolf was sitting on a distressed-leather sofa, sipping what smelt like Earl Grey tea. Something was obviously wrong with that picture.

"But what exactly?" the experienced private eye asked himself. Was it the slightly open window, letting in a light breeze? Or maybe the unusually cheerful sneer on the suspect's face? The inspector gathered all the courage he had left and entered the room. The beast...

Thomas stopped typing and reached for the phone that was now ringing off the hook. He checked the number displayed on the screen and answered. Monday was not going to be just another gloomy day after all—not when a trip to the City of Light was in the works.

Chapter One

It's a Beautiful Day

Thomas said goodbye and ended the phone call with the travel agent. He slowly got up from his chair, picked up the still-warm cup of coffee from the desktop and walked to the window. It was raining cats and dogs. The water was streaming down the street, sweeping away leaves and broken branches, suddenly reminding him of when he first met the one and only Philippe Robespierre.

Thomas had been assigned a day shadowing and interviewing the young and aspiring Scotland Yard official as a part of the ridiculously expensive 'Crime & Thriller' writing workshop he was attending.

The day began in an exceptionally professional manner, with Inspector Robespierre demonstrating in detail how to properly handcuff a distressed criminal. It ended, however, with a very proactive Thomas bent over an office desk, moaning, "Yes! Pull my hair harder! I'm a perpetrator!" and a surprisingly accommodating Philippe, who was thrusting and grunting in wild abandon behind the trainee.

The fortunate outcome of that study-related event was a month of wild and fantastic fucking, followed by years of European vacations spent together. When back home, the long winters apart were filled with intense cross-continental correspondence between New York and London, and constant late-night phone calls making plans for future trips.

Thomas went back to his desk, opened the top drawer and slid the contents forward, searching behind all the junk with his fingertips until he felt the dog-eared corner of the old picture. He gently pulled it free.

It was him and Philippe—Pip—sitting next to each other in the Tuileries Garden, wearing sunglasses and grinning whilst they studied a giant map of Paris.

Things had changed since then. Pip had retired from the force a couple of years ago and started a fairly successful private eye business—not that he needed the money. It was mostly for fun and to maintain his ever-raging Sherlock Holmes ego.

Thomas sighed deeply, returned the picture and slammed the drawer shut. Even after all these years, he felt the same way about that man. He just could

not help himself. And that was the problem, wasn't it? The moment he heard Pip's raspy voice on the phone, he was ready to leave everything behind and rush to him.

But Philippe never did pop the question, never asked him to stay, and never made *the* move. It was time for Thomas to clue him in or walk away for good. Maybe he was not Pip's Watson after all. Thomas sighed again and tossed what was left of his now cold and bitter coffee into the nearby plant pot. Then, after a few moments of thought, he reached for the phone again.

He had an idea. He was not a quitter...

Chapter Two

Silent Thomas

Pip

Hazy blocks of sunlight and vague uneasiness woke Pip. For a while he tried to snuggle back into the cosy warmth of sleep, shifting about in the tartan pyjamas and diving back under the covers, but eventually he gave in and sat up.

Early mornings were always productive, in the welcome peace and solitude of the soft bed as thoughts about work gradually floated into that keen brain. His recent foray into the world of private detectives was proving to be far more absorbing and interesting than he had imagined, leaving little time and even less inclination for anything else.

“What the bloody fuck?” he mumbled, as the alarm clock next to the bed shrieked. “Five a.m., for heaven’s sake.”

Thomas!

Pip all but jumped from the bed at the sudden memory. He had to be at the airport in less than an hour to meet Tom! Stiffening hands hastily pulled off the pyjamas as grumbling ensued. “I really haven’t time for a holiday right now. I told him that already. Why can’t he just leave me to my work?”

Thankfully, under strict late-night instructions from Thomas, he had already packed and got everything ready; the suitcase stood like a firm reprimand in the middle of the landing. “Bloody pain in the arse,” Philippe whined and then sighed deeply as he headed to the bathroom to shave.

Five minutes was all the time he was prepared to give his appearance. One cursory glance in the mirror at all the grey hair was more than enough, and anyway, it was only Tom.

He moodily dragged the case out to the hallway and noticed the telephone, quiet and silent. “Well, that *is* odd. He always rings at least five times to check up on me.”

Something was not right, but Thomas was an adult after all, and Pip was hungry. He dismissed the phone with an impatient jerk of the hand and a sneer and then moved off to the kitchen. There was no need to hurry; no doubt Tom had adjusted the flight time information to ensure Philippe arrived at the airport hours early. Then after the flight, there would be a train.

“I’ve time for marmalade and toast,” he decided, and he had just set about making this culinary feast when the doorbell rang.

“Oh, what now?” He frowned in disapproval, accidentally dabbing his sweater with butter on the way to the door. “Yes?” he growled waspishly at a blank-looking chap, who silently handed him a yellow bubble-wrap envelope. The mail delivery man snapped gum impatiently while waiting on the signature, shrugged, and left.

“People are so very rude nowadays.” Pip sniffed, peering at the little package with suspicion. Reading too many of Tom’s crime books had left him doubting and worrying about even the simplest of tasks.

The envelope opened easily, its contents spilling onto the hall table. “Hah,” he snorted, holding up a tiny detective fob with a key, and a folded note.

“Love goes by haps; some Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps.” Don’t get too COMFORTable, clue hunter. Room 127

Laughter erupted in an explosive series of barks as Pip flung the chair away and raced to the laptop. Gone was the weariness, along with his usual cool, calm, and collected manner, in their place bright eyes shining with a sudden light, making him look like a much younger man.

Long fingers nimbly tapped ‘Comfort Hotel, Paris’ into the search engine. The address that popped up almost immediately was *Comfort Hotel Paris La Fayette, 23 rue des Messageries*. Pip could not help a Cheshire-cat smile. “Elementary, Watson,” he murmured, hurrying now, while picking up the luggage on his way to the door.

Chapter Three

A Room with a View

Pip

He used to love travelling...

Trains, boats, planes, bikes and even horses... trees and fields, trees and fields, trees and fields... he stared out the train window, unable to read due to the very limited space and his impressive height. Once or twice, Tom remarked that Pip had to excel at everything—even growing.

Screeching brakes, everyone in a rush as the train finally arrived in Paris: Pip climbed off, half expecting Thomas to jump out, but a cautious, discerning initial screening revealed no sign of the cunning writer. Clearly Tom was playing hard to get. Inspector Robespierre rubbed his hands gleefully and made his way through the platform to the hotel.

Pip stood outside the place and fumed. There had to be some mistake... this could not be where they were staying! He feverishly checked the address again, and again. Thomas would never send them somewhere like this. Would he? An overwhelming urge to scratch his nose began, but he was a master of control and forced himself to merely sneer at the appalling sight in front of him.

The hotel was completely unacceptable: façades and balconies with brilliant flowing floral decorations hung like elaborate curtains over what was clearly a decent establishment. Pip wondered fleetingly if it might be possible to grab on and swing from one balcony to another while shrieking with unhappiness at this stylistic turn of events.

He stepped impatiently onto the harlequin marble tiles and then tripped across the staircase into the hotel reception, hoping that such grandiose décor was merely a precursor for more stimulating adventures.

In the past, Thomas had booked them into gloriously interesting hostelries, such as wooden huts, leaking boats and even a solitary hammock, but never once in thirty years had he expected Pip to stay anywhere as boring as a nice, modern, slick hotel. Perhaps he should spit to liven things up a little?

The reception was framed by a sweeping walnut desk adorned with a giant flower arrangement; on the wall behind it was a painting of a bouquet and a big

old-fashioned wall clock. Philippe schooled the smirk on his face as he stalked over to the suited young man—cap too, no less.

“Good afternoon,” he began frostily. “I believe you have a reservation for me?”

The young man stared at him insolently, eyes roaming up and down Pip as if he were for sale.

“*Monsieur Robespierre?* It has to be you! Oh my, you fit the description exactly,” he shouted, in what was probably the most affected manner the inspector had ever witnessed. “Oh *mon Dieu!* The face! The expression! Even the—” The young man stopped abruptly, fanning himself dramatically as he giggled like a silly child.

Pip tried to see what information Tom had given the hotel about him, because reading upside down was one of his many skills, but the hotel goon seized the booking sheet and thrust it away under the desk.

“Sorry, sir! I’m not myself today, what with the weather. If you’d like to sign your particulars just there, and I will see about your key. Let me be the first, but I am sure not the last, to wish you a very enjoyable visit to Paris. Retirement holiday, is it?”

Philippe signed his name with such severity the pen went straight through the paper, making such a peculiar scraping sound that the receptionist cringed.

“I declare, sir. You’ve still got some strength in you yet, eh?”

How did one answer that?

He smiled weakly as he handed over his passport, hoping stupidly that the young man didn’t check out his age.

“Oh, sir! You don’t look your age. Not really. I thought you were much younger than that.”

“My room number?”

“Oh, hah-hah, yes. Follow me, sir. I shall be pleased to accompany you myself. Is this your suitcase?”

“Indeed.”

Pip watched the receptionist mince around the desk towards his suitcase and hastily seized it himself. “I can manage, thank you. Key?”

“I’ll just check the room with you then, sir. Follow me, please.”

He smiled politely at the employee's chatter, thinking how much better a wet hammock in the Camargue would be than this clean, comfortable and well-appointed hotel.

"Here we are. This is your room. If there is anything you need to make your stay more comfortable, please do not hesitate to let me know. Oh, and this is for you."

"Thank you," Philippe muttered, taking the envelope and handing the receptionist what he hoped was an appropriate amount of money to tip such an enthusiastic welcome.

The room was not quite as stuffy as he'd expected, but the bright and cheerful interior did nothing to improve his flailing spirits. "This better be good, Tom, it really had. I'm too old for all this rubbish." Pip flopped down on the bed and wondered tiredly just what all this was about...

Foggy, general unhappiness woke him several hours later.

"Oh, fuck," he grunted, looking around the room and realising that this wasn't after all some horrible dream. Why had Thomas brought them here? Where was his sense of adventure? Surely he didn't think Pip too old to enjoy mosquito bites, sunburn and being chased by angry animals?

He stumbled from the bed into the plush bathroom, taking with him the envelope provided by the receptionist. "Hah!" he cried, peering at it suspiciously, knowing it was from Tom and unable to prevent the smile.

Surely they were far too long in the tooth now for poison and invisible ink? But one never knew; Thomas could be tricky. Anyway, perhaps a little toxin was just what Pip needed, amidst all this glossy hotel glamour?

He opened it slowly, pulling out the contents with deft fingers. It appeared to be an old *café* menu, slightly dog-eared with one corner ripped away. He immediately detected a darker spot, right at the bottom. It was a stain. Philippe sniffed at the menu carefully, but there were no odours except the pine bleach of the bathroom.

He examined the spot further, turning the menu upside down in case it was a letter or a word. But there was nothing. It was just an old stain.

"Oh for fuck's sake." He hurled the menu at the wall and sank down on the toilet to debate whether or not to get the next train home and to hell with the consequences.

It was during this lavatory visit, trousers and underwear around ankles, that he noticed two things. The first was stuck to the edge of the mirror: the missing corner to the menu, a tiny triangle of paper with a picture of a bulldog, which was enough. He raised one eyebrow at the ease with which he had *yet again* outfoxed Tom.

“Hah!”

The second occurrence was rather more embarrassing. That morning had been such a rush, putting on clothes without so much as a glance. But there it was: Inspector ‘dapper’ Robespierre was wearing two different coloured socks.

Pip cackled so hard he nearly fell off the silver-edged toilet, having to grab the bath to stop from sliding onto the floor. “Tom, you bloody fool,” he grumbled fondly. “Now I’ll have to find you, if only to ring your scrawny bloody neck. Elementary, my arse.”

A shrill noise made him leap from the bathroom in surprise. After what seemed ages, he found the ornate telephone.

“Yes?”

“Sir? Pardon me for interrupting, there is a message for you here at reception.”

“Right, right,” Philippe replied, unable once again to stop the grin, knowing the message would be from Thomas, urging him to hurry up.

Chapter Four

Have Your Cake

Pip

Ten minutes later, he was ready to go. Pip clutched the menu, a postcard with a picture of THE well-known Parisian bulldog store logo, and some directions the chap on reception had given him for the location:

Ladurée, 21 rue Bonaparte, 75006 Paris, France.

The cobbled streets of Paris teemed with the heady aromas and sights of life—men and women chatting, birds singing—all mingling together like a great colourful canvas.

Philippe slowed down his pace, just to observe. For many years, he had been a master at people watching—noting the twitch, the ruddy skin, the tapping of feet—using his observations to create profiles and string together intricate patterns of lives and crime. But he had never considered doing it for fun.

Slow down, slow down, Thomas had implored for many years, as Inspector Robespierre scoffed down expensive meals or coffee dates, just to get back to the elixir of life: his job. They always meant to have a leisurely retirement, doing all the things they hadn't been able to fit in, but somehow the ending of his career had just led to the start of a new one.

Two men sat opposite him, drinking coffee and laughing. There was something beautiful about the way they leaned in, as if just that short distance between them was far too great. Perhaps it was only the atmosphere of Paris, or the intricate designs of the art deco cafe that caught his eye, but the pang that went through Pip was not just art appreciation. He stirred and turned away. "I'd better get a move on."

As Philippe neared his destination, both legs began to ache, reminding him that he was not so young anymore. Age had crept up on him, and now every morning he was shocked by the visage of the old man who stared back so crossly in the bathroom mirror. It was funny though; he never noticed the ageing so much in Thomas.

A last few weary steps and he arrived at the patisserie. He fiddled with the menu for a second and then stepped inside the shop. A quick glance around revealed nothing unexpected and still no signs of Tom. There were the usual tables and chairs, a few customers, and a fine array of tiny cakes and macaroons.

Irritation and disappointment sagged at his bones, but also perhaps a touch of admiration; Thomas was really holding out on him this time.

“Oh, well, now I’m here, I may as well have a look,” he reasoned, scanning the dainties on offer. Pip adored sweets of all kinds, and as a consequence, Tom was always on at him to watch the cholesterol. He ordered an espresso and pointed at a few colourful cakes. “*Merci, madame,*” he said, with a fairly decent accent, and sought a chair in the courtyard behind the *café*.

A waiter brought his coffee and cakes and then hung around peering. “*Puis-je vous aider?*” Pip asked, a little impatiently, wanting to get back to his breakfast. The waiter smiled, far too cheekily for Philippe’s taste, and produced a beautiful box.

“Da daa. Your order is here, *monsieur,*” the chap exclaimed and then minced off. Pip ran his hand over the container and very carefully opened the lid.

Thomas did not disappoint. Inside the box were a dozen coloured macaroons. He chose the blue one first—his favourite colour. Slowly, he bit and chewed, gagging as something solid stuck in his throat.

He spat into his hand, wondering how on Earth Tom had guessed he would choose the blue macaroon first, and unravelled the chewed paper.

It was a Frederik Saunders poem he knew Thomas loved:

“My heart to you is given:

Oh, do give yours to me,

We’ll lock them up together,

And throw away the key.”

P.S. First light post to your heart.

Chapter Five

Serious Tom

Thomas

Thomas watched from his table across the street as Pip exited the bakery shop, took off down the street and confidently made his way through the crowd.

It was getting close to noon, and the area was buzzing with people on their way to lunch.

As soon as Tom lost sight of the detective of his heart, he felt like running after the familiar tall figure, getting in step with him and never leaving his side again. Instead, he looked down at the plate placed in front of him. Shopping and exploring Paris without Philippe constantly nagging and commenting did not prove to be much fun. Still, he was determined not to go easy on ‘Mr. All Talk and No Trousers’ this time.

Tom sighed deeply as he finished eating his croissant and decided to spend a couple of minutes making some notes for his new book. He pulled out his scuffed, pocket-sized notebook and borrowed a pen from the waiter, but instead of brainstorming storyline ideas, he found himself dreaming of the past...

Paris, Twenty Years Ago

A long arm snaked from behind and a big hand closed over his mouth. Thomas’s eyes widened, but before he could even make a sound, he was pulled inside a nearby building’s dark and mouldy entrance hallway. As any sensible person would do in such a situation, he tried to bite his way out of the tight embrace, but then a painfully familiar voice stopped him in his tracks.

“Give me your bags, garçon!”

“Do I have to pretend to be terrified? And why are you wearing a scarf? You hate scarves.”

“Be quiet,” boomed the voice in his ear again. “Face the wall, spread your legs and show me what you’ve got in that shopping bag. Do it slowly.”

“OK. Gimme a sec.” Thomas tried to disentangle the plastic bag with shaky fingers. He had tied the handles in a bow earlier, so it was easier to hold while

walking in the street. His heart was pounding now, with Philippe so close he could smell his aftershave.

Finally he gave up and simply ripped the bag open, offering it to his 'captor'. He heard Pip choking a laugh. "A bloody beret?! That's what you offer me to show you mercy?!"

"I'm a tourist. I have always fancied owning a beret."

"Put it on then, tourist boy. Go on. Do it."

"Here? Right now?" Thomas asked, already putting the beret on.

"Hurry up. I'm a busy man."

"It's not like I was getting in your way or anything."

"You got in my way, all right. Years ago. Now, my advice is less talking. Turn around and face me."

Thomas did as he was told as fast as he could manage.

"Get on your knees."

"Pip, you can't be serious. Someone may walk in on us any minute now."

"They may indeed, so you better get to work."

Tom gingerly got on his knees and reached for Pip's zipper. But then he stopped and lifted his head up to meet Pip's eyes. "I'll try to open it with my teeth, like in that amateur video I sent you last month."

Pip nodded his head in approval. "And no asking for breaks this time," he added without even a slight trace of guilt.

Thomas pinched his nose with overexaggeration and greedily wrapped his mouth around Pip's dick. It was a good thing he had already eaten a baguette sandwich with butter and cheese for lunch. There was no doubt that he'd need the energy to keep up with the forceful thrusts, and to cope with his new beret constantly falling over his eyes. It certainly was not 'one size fits all', as the vendor had assured him earlier that morning.

Chapter Six

Saddle Sore

Pip

An array of padlocks clung to the railings, making the Love Lock bridge look like an ornate artistic display. There was no way he could reasonably be expected to locate his own padlock clue amongst so many identical lumps of metal.

Philippe surveyed the bridge, casting shrewd eyes over his previous clue before following the instructions carefully. Years of discipline, training, patience and dogged determination returned to him.

Just as the clue instructed, chained to the railing right next to the first light post to the left was a large lock with his and Tom's name written across the front. Pip fumbled with the key, and the heart-shaped piece of metal was in his hand.

"Yes!" he snickered in triumph. It was time to turn the tables... he had about a half-hour head start on Thomas.

Thomas

Tom's phone started buzzing from inside his pants pocket. He got it out and looked at the screen. A text from Pip. Two words only.

Hurry. Bridge.

Thomas's heart sank. This was so out of character for Philippe. He would normally send a message like:

Coming down with a cold. Bring tissues.

Something was way off. He feverishly found 'Inspector Boo' under his contacts and pressed the call button. No answer. Thomas tried again. Still no response. His fingers were starting to tremble. He needed to get to the bridge as soon as possible and check if Pip was all right!

Running up the street, he continued texting.

R U OK? Call back. Comin—

Then he bumped into a street lamppost. A few passersby helped him to get up and he was on his way again, limping slightly.

By the time Tom got to the bridge, he was all covered in sweat and hyperventilating. It took him a moment to catch his breath and focus. No sign of Pip. He ran to the place where he left the lock earlier. Something was different, he realised immediately. The lock was hanging open, still attached to the tiny key and the detective figurine key ring. But now, as well as the lock, there was a short length of metal chain securing an old yellow bike, which Tom had never seen before in his life.

There was a note threaded through one of the chain links. Thomas pulled it out quickly and unfolded it. Philippe's handwriting...

My dear Watson,

hunter becomes the hunted.

44 rue de Sévigné, 3e, Marais.

Suddenly Tom was enraged! He had been running around the city all morning, placing clues since dawn just for them to have a little fun before meeting here, on their first evening in Paris, to watch the sunset together and maybe finally talk about the future.

Unfortunately, he was starting to realise, once again it really had been nothing but a game to Pip. Inspector Big Shot was already bored playing clues and was probably sitting outside some shady restaurant—to his liking rather than Tom's—ready to order dinner without even taking the time to think twice about the consequences of his actions.

Thomas felt blood rushing to his face. "Yes, the man is *that* careless!" he yelled at the love locks hanging off the bridge railing in front of him. A group of Japanese tourists turned around and stared at him. Two ladies seemed impressed enough to snap pictures.

That was it. He'd had it. And he was going to tell Philippe face-to-face—once he found him—that he was an ungrateful, selfish, cold-hearted, stubborn, awful, awful man.

With all he had left in him, Tom pulled the bicycle off the chain, climbed on and started pedalling furiously. The old bike kept veering left and made it almost impossible for him to make the street corners. He could not help but wonder if Pip had maybe snatched it from some retiree.

It had a basket attached to the front, holding a paper shopping bag with a half baguette left inside. He considered throwing it away but thought it best not to; the speed he was moving at, his destination was still at least twenty minutes away, and he might need a snack.

Chapter Seven

Into the Blue

Pip

Pip sat in front of the beautiful blue wooden doors next to the small bookshop and waited for Thomas to catch up. He loved Paris, always had. The cobbled alleyways and the busy streets held many personal memories of chases and liaisons with Tom. It was right and fitting that they should end up here, back at the very spot where they first decided to make Paris their favourite playground destination.

He shifted stiffly towards the bookshop to take yet another good look at the place where it all began, nodding at the owner standing outside talking to a customer. All these old books reminded him of the real purpose of this holiday. Nervously, his fingers sought the solid lump in his pocket.

One Month Before...

There had not been many situations during his lifetime where Pip Robespierre had felt out of control. He was a master of psychology—able to create criminal profiles so accurate sometimes he even surprised himself. When working, he was known as The Sniffer, because his instincts were unfailingly excellent, and he always got his prey. Always.

But now, a lesser man might well have fled.

There were so many! Rows upon rows upon rows of shiny, ridiculous, multi-coloured rings. The harsh burning of the lighting on his neck gave him something to focus on instead of making a dash for the exit. He carefully weighed up the many reasons for abandoning this pursuit and doing something more useful—like extracting nasal hairs one by one. He managed to regain himself, took a breath, and walked purposefully towards the first cabinet.

“Are you looking for anything in particular?” the shop worker enquired politely.

“Wedding.”

“Oh, how lovely. Diamond for the lady then? Do you know what size?”

There would never be enough sighs, and why hadn't he planned what he was going to say?

"It's for a man. Same size as me."

"Oh, how lovely. You're looking at the wrong case then. Over here, the blue one."

Pip trailed miserably over to gaze hopelessly.

"What occasion is it for, again? Eternity or wedding?"

"Wedding."

"Oh, how lovely. Have you any ideas about what sort you want?"

"None whatsoever."

"Righto. Well, then. Gold, is it?"

"Well, yes. I suppose so."

"Oh, how lovely. How about this one?"

It looked like something out of Philippe's tool box, but then they all did. It was just a plain ring, and where was the romance in that?

"No, no. Not really. I was thinking of something more..."

"More...?"

He shrugged helplessly. The shop worker—'Alison' it said on her nametag—narrowed her eyes. "Something a little more unique?"

He nodded silently, clenching and unclenching his fist and wondering if this was really such a good idea after all. What if Thomas said no?

"Don't worry, sir, no man would say no to you." Alison smiled, making him wince. Was he so transparent? "How about this range? It's very expensive, exclusive, but quite striking. All the rage in Paris, I believe."

She led him to a smaller container with the emblem of a wolf. There were only a few, and Pip saw it straight away. It looked like two fine gold threads twisted around each other, as if they were chasing and running... forever playing games. But it was the front that really caught Philippe's attention.

"Yes, that's the one," he whispered.

"Oh, how lovely. There's a small space on the inside of each ring where you can have a name or word engraved."

“Yes. Yes! That’s perfect.”

Alison smiled at him as she chatted about rings and trends. He paid the bill and asked her how long she had worked there, thinking how good she was at her job.

“Twenty-five years, sir.”

“Oh, how lovely,” Pip replied.

The Present...

All day long he had been aware of its presence pushing against his thigh, but now he drew it out to look closely. The ring was quite stunning and one of a kind. Pip had looked at it many times since the purchase, but still he marvelled at the perfection of the engraving. Werewolves had been a *leitmotiv* in their lives. Philippe knew each of Thomas’s books as well as he knew the man himself—his all-consuming desire to explain every little detail, his appalling use of grammar, and his lifelong pursuit of happy endings. They had spent many hours arguing if it was necessary for a writer to always aim for a happy ever after, but he was not sure even now that they had reached any agreement.

The ring was perfect—a depiction of two wolves wrought together by a winding thread, ending in a happy lupine squabble.

He stroked the cool metal gently, closing his fist around it.

“Pip!”

Pip shot up, startled from his thoughts.

Tom was pushing the old bike and walking towards him, with a face red as tomato and a scowl that would turn the milk sour. Philippe really didn’t mean to laugh, but all the angst and stress of the day bubbled up and spilled from him.

“The tyre,” Thomas spat, waving his arms in distress.

“Come and sit down,” Pip offered with a grin and counted to five, reckoning that Tom would probably get to three before he put his hands on his hips and shook his head dramatically. *One... two...*

Thomas petulantly threw the bike against the wall and glared.

“You take me for granted. I have had enough!”

He stopped for air, shaking and furious.

“Oh, hey, Thomas. Stay calm, now.”

For a moment there was silence as Pip pulled himself up and considered how best to handle this. The spur-of-the-moment bike prank hadn't quite been the expected jumpstart to an exciting evening. He was never short of words, but now they all faded away. Philippe grasped at his pocket, plucking the ring free and wondering why it now looked just like a piece of old tin.

“Here, this will cheer you up!” he said, thrusting the small circular band at Thomas and hoping for the best. Thomas peered at it, frowned, shook his head at him, and just crumbled.

Next thing Pip knew, his hand was knocked away as Thomas pushed against him, hurling the ring in the direction of the bookshop. He strode away down the centre of the street, seemingly oblivious to anything. Cars sounded impatient horns, people shouted, and Inspector Robespierre felt control of the situation slipping from his grasp.

“Thomas, wait!”

Tom paused for just a few seconds to fleetingly meet Pip's eyes, then, he was gone... gone... and everything faded.

People, hands, voices, fuzzy grey...

Philippe found himself sitting inside the tiny bookshop with a glass of water and the store owner looking at him with grave concern.

Chapter Eight

Books, Books, Books

Pip

When Pip was a young detective he had once spent forty-eight hours crouched outside a house and negotiating with an armed man, all the while knowing the hostage was desperate, and the criminal trigger-happy and at least a slab short of a patio.

Worried colleagues brought him coffee, sandwiches, and took it in turns to try to persuade him to move back while they battered in the door and shot their way to a happy ending. But he refused.

In the end, it was not brute force that led out that frightened criminal, but Inspector Robespierre's clever questions, intellect, and patience. The hostage—a middle-aged woman—escaped unharmed and later became a well-known figure on TV chat shows.

He pondered those forty-eight hours, sheepishly sipping water, surrounded by piles of books and avoiding the gaze of the store owner, who eventually handed over the ring.

“Caught it, did you?” Pip asked, defeated.

“Yes, *monsieur*. Luckily I saw the other gentleman throwing something right at me.”

“Well, thank you. He certainly has a very fine overarm.”

“Are you all right now, *monsieur*?”

“Yes, yes. I just felt a little light-headed.”

“Ah. Is this the book you called about earlier, *Monsieur Robespierre*? I had it bound and covered as you requested.”

The chap produced a large out-of-print edition and solemnly slid it across the counter. Philippe caught his breath.

“Yes, that's it. My word! Wherever did you get this?”

“I've had it for a while, *monsieur*. I have what you might call—an interest—in wolf lore. The author is my favourite.”

“Mine too.”

Pip tenderly flipped the cover open and started looking through the pages. Even though he had not seen this volume for many years, he still knew every word, every misplaced comma and superfluous sentence, every illustration. He even remembered the fucks that had followed every squabble over such minor irritants as plot.

The Werewolf of Paris by Guy Endore. The rare 1933 edition had long since disappeared from most bookshelves, but this was what had inspired Thomas’s very first Inspector Loupe novel. The shop owner had thoughtfully bound the book in a transparent envelope to protect the yellowing pages from further damage. Pip fingered it for a while, quite unable to drag himself away or go and face Tom.

“Pardon me for asking, *monsieur*, but that gentleman who threw the ring? Isn’t he Thomas Bertrand, the writer?”

“Yes. The one and only. The werewolf whisperer himself.”

They stared at each other.

“*Monsieur*, you must go after him.”

Pip slid the ring into the transparent cover, closed the book, and silently handed it back to the store owner, who clutched it to his chest.

“Can I ask you to keep it here for just a little while longer?”

“*Oui, bien sûr*. With pleasure.”

Each nodded politely at the other before Pip went back out into the loud streets of Paris and called a taxi. As it sped towards the hotel, he considered his options carefully. There was always flowers or champagne, expensive chocolates or declarations of love. Any of those things might be expected to pacify Thomas.

Or not.

Chapter Nine

69 Shades

Pip

Inspector Robespierre opened the hotel door and cautiously stepped into the passageway that led to the bathroom and bedroom, and listened... an alarm clock ticking... the steady roar of traffic from outside... What he did not hear were any crashes, bangs or shouting.

He wriggled tired feet out of his shoes and tiptoed silently towards the bedroom.

Tom was just sitting there, smiling apologetically.

Philippe sat on the bed and faced him. Of course Thomas was changed from their first games—slightly wider in girth, with many more wrinkles across the face that Pip knew so very well, but the eyes... the eyes would never change.

They had no handcuffs or play toys this time around, no tricks or disguises. Years and years of chasing, and finally they had caught up, and it was just them.

Next Morning...

“*Monsieur Philippe!* I have it for you, just as I promised. Do you think he might give me his autograph?” the ever-polite bookshop owner gushed, thrusting the book at Pip and trying to see past him to where Thomas was sitting on the curb in front of the picturesque big blue portal of the building next door.

“Yes, I think he might. Just give us a few moments, eh?”

“Of course.”

“And thank you.”

Thomas sat with his eyes closed as he had promised, though he was trying to peek, up to his tricks again, clearly. Pip sat down next to him and slid the precious book onto Tom’s knees, opening it carefully at the transparent slip where the wolf insignia ring lay waiting.

“Can I look now, Inspector?”

“Would there be any point in me saying no?”

“No.”

Thomas opened his eyes, and something about the way his face lit up told Pip they had many years yet of mystery games.

Epilogue

Thomas stopped writing and looked up from the computer screen. Philippe was sitting on the small couch in front of the fireplace, slurping tomato soup and watching *Family Feud* on TV. The newest edition to their family—the bulldog puppy, Zelna—was playing tirelessly with one of Pip’s slippers. Tom sighed contently, took a big bite from the giant grilled cheese sandwich in front of him and went back to work. Still chewing, he slowly typed with one finger: ‘Inspector Loupe was breathing heavily as his beloved alpha Alfonso entered him and started thrusting. It sure proved nice being the alpha’s mate.’

Bonus chapter from Thomas Bertrand’s upcoming new book... *Inspector Loupe is Flirting*

The forest was his ally. The squeaking leaves were clearly telling him there was an intruder on pack grounds—none other than Inspector Loupe, by the scent of it. Alfonso growled in annoyance. This nonsense needed to end now. He stepped out of the trees’ shadows.

“Inspector François Loupe. Trail walking this stormy evening?”

The inspector provocatively spat his chewing gum on the leaf-covered soil and replied coldly, “Fancy meeting you here too, Alpha Alfonso.”

“Cut the crap, François. What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you.”

“What for, Inspector? You need a partner in crime?” Alfonso snarled and stepped forward.

“Actually, yes. I need you to pretend I’m your future mate.”

“Say what now?” Alpha Alfonso was suddenly sweating profusely.

“You heard me. I need you to be my cover at the Bears and Grunts Club.”

“That will cost you, you know.”

“How much?”

“A roll in the hay.”

Inspector Loupe looked around with some concern. “It’s muddy.”

“Who said it would be easy to be the alpha’s booty call?” Alfonso grinned, showing some teeth.

François slowly undid his raincoat and dropped it on the wet forest floor.

The End

Author Bio

Al Stewart and Noah Homes are best friends. They share a love of coffee and croissants, sausages and blue doors.

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