Terra Incognita

by wendymr

Summary

The two of them have always been more effective together than apart.

Notes

Warning: References and some descriptions through much of the story to physical and sexual violence against women, and one 'live action' scene containing threat of violence, all in the context of criminal acts. May be triggery for some.

Many, many thanks to my brilliant artist, Wallflower18/Wallflowering, for the gorgeous banners, chapter headers and icon. Please, if you like her artwork, send her kudos and compliments! Also much appreciation to my BRs, Uniquepov and Lindenharp, for both editing assistance and cheerleading as I was writing. And thanks to the organisers of LiveJournal's Smallfandombang for all their work in organising this fic event.
The knock at the door comes precisely on time.

All the same, caution drilled into him by experience as much as training, James checks the peephole before opening. The man outside’s not who he was expecting. He’s carrying a six-pack and a carrier-bag from the Indian takeaway down the road, but he’s not Tariq. This man’s stockier and a couple of inches taller, and – in deference to the cooler weather this evening - he’s wearing a knock-off Barbour jacket and flat cap instead of Tariq’s typical hooded fleece and baseball cap. And the bloke’s turned away from the door so James can’t see his face.

Alarm bells are definitely ringing, and James calculates possible escape routes and the likelihood that he can run faster than his visitor before calling out, “Who is it?”

“Bloody hell, man, you’re not so drunk you’ve forgotten I was coming over?” a voice he hasn’t heard in almost two months answers, and James almost slumps against the door in relief – and sheer happiness.

Quickly, he unfastens the deadbolt and opens the door, and Robbie Lewis steps inside. Lewis puts
a finger to his lips as James closes the door again, but it’s not as if he doesn’t know the routine. He
takes the food and beer from Lewis, who immediately produces a mobile phone-sized device from
his pocket and scans the room.

“We’re clear,” he pronounces a few seconds later, then gives James a steady look. “All right?”

James sets the food on the cheap dining table at the end of the single living-dining room, then turns
back to look at his governor. Words are churning around in his brain, words he knows he’ll never
say. Instead, he allows himself to look at Lewis for several long seconds before nodding. “All the
better for seeing you, sir,” he allows himself to say, letting the mocking tone he adopts disguise the
fact that he means every word.

Lewis is taking off his coat, but at James’s words he pauses, and James realises that actually he
hasn’t fooled his boss at all. Throwing his coat to a nearby chair, Lewis walks over to him, studies
him carefully for a few moments, and then pats his arm. “You’ll do.”

Oddly, those two short words fill James with a warmth he hasn’t felt since any of this started, eight
weeks ago. He smiles faintly, then gestures at the table. “Shouldn’t let the food get cold.”

He twists the top off a bottle – Badger’s, not Lewis’s usual choice of Loose Cannon, but then that’s
an Oxford microbrewery, which might be a bit of a giveaway out here – and gives his boss a
questioning look. “So, not that it’s not good to see you, sir, but I was expecting Tariq?”

“Don’t you think calling me that’s a bit risky, in the circumstances?” The amused but chastising
look that accompanies Lewis’s comment is achingly familiar.

“What, then?” he questions. “Robbie?”

“Haven’t changed me name in the last few weeks.” Lewis pauses for a drink. “Tariq’s off the case.
There was reason to believe he might’ve been compromised, so it was safer to pull him off.”

“But that doesn’t explain how you’re here.” Way out of his territory, miles from home. And, yes,
there’s no-one James could possibly have been happier to see, but why the hell has Innocent
allowed Robbie Lewis to take this risk?

“Someone new was spotted with Clarkson on a job, and the local coppers IDed him as a bloke
Tariq and his partner arrested a couple of years back. They had to pull Tariq off in case this bloke
recognised him, and the DCI here thought it’d be best to bring in another out-of-area copper as
your contact. I volunteered.” Lewis spoons more lamb madras onto his plate and continues eating.

That’s a sensible, almost surprising, decision from the DCI in charge of the case. Over the couple
of months he’s been here, James has had a few concerns with the way this investigation has been
handled. Yes, it’s difficult to minimise the danger for officers in this kind of situation, and he’d
expect to be on his guard all the time – but he had hoped for rather more support from the team
than he’s been getting.

“So, what? You’ve moved down to Dorset for the duration?”

“More or less.” Lewis chews on a piece of naan. “Cover story is I’m your uncle—” James pulls a
disapproving face at that. Lewis gives him a wry grimace. “Old schoolfriend was hardly gonna
work, now, was it?”

That was Tariq’s cover – that they’d been to school together, and since James had recently moved
to the area and didn’t know very many people, he and Tariq got into the habit of meeting up every
so often for a drink, which then gravitated to beer, takeaway and a porn flick at James’s rented flat
once a week. That gave them greater privacy to talk, and an excuse for Tariq to be here as long as he needed – even to stay overnight once or twice.

“I’m here on holiday,” Lewis continues, explaining his cover. “Staying in a caravan park in West Bexington so I can do some hikin’ along the coast and in the woods. And – as I already told the woman who runs the local shop – after I arrived, I realised me sister’s lad only lives three miles away. Handy, that.” He smiles.

James nods. “And no-one would wonder why you wouldn’t just stay with me instead?”

“It’s all booked now. Besides, I wouldn’t want to cramp your style, you bein’ a young lad an’ all. But since I’ll be here for six weeks or so – I’m a teacher, so I’m off until September – I can drop in on you once in a while. Keep me sister happy by checking up on you.”

James rolls his eyes. “Sure I shouldn’t be calling you Uncle Robbie?”

He gets a piece of naan thrown at him for his trouble.

Under cover of concentrating on his meal – something James won’t be surprised at, as he’s used to his governor enjoying his food – Robbie studies his sergeant. The contrast between James as he is in Oxford and the man sitting across from him now couldn’t be greater. It’s not just the absence of the sharp suits, or even James’s usual off-duty attire of skin-tight T-shirts and jeans, though the sloppy jumper and loose jeans he’s wearing now look so very wrong on him. It’s not the over-long, messy and unwashed hair, either, though that’s shockingly unlike the fastidious man he’s worked with for more than five years.

It’s the little things: the way James’s gaze keeps darting to the windows, how he frowns and focuses as if listening for something, as if he can’t allow himself to relax for a second. It’s the dark bruises under his eyes, marring the otherwise pale skin: he’s having trouble sleeping. And the way he reacted when he saw Robbie; Robbie’d expected shock and some degree of pleasure – they do get on well, after all, and he’s missed the bloke and, yes, he had hoped that maybe James missed him too – but for a second he almost imagined the lad was going to fall on his shoulders and weep.

It’s been that bad, has it?

Well, he’s here now, and one thing about the two of them is that they’ve always been more effective together than apart.

He doesn’t like seeing James like this, not one bit. But it’s better than not seeing the lad at all. The past two months have been... difficult. This isn’t his case – it’s not even his force – and so he’s had no right to any kind of updates on what’s going on. Innocent has been getting some information through, though, and she’s told him what she’s heard, which hasn’t been much.

It’s a major investigation, this one, the kind of thing that takes years and ties up a couple of dozen officers, and which one wrong move could completely destroy. The Dorset force has invested thousands of officer-hours and hundreds of thousands of pounds into this one over the past eighteen months, and it almost all went down the drain when one of the undercover officers wound up dead, apparently pegged as a copper by one of the suspects.

Their solution was to bring in someone from another force, a complete stranger, to try to infiltrate the organisation, and so the Dorset force appealed to Oxfordshire. Their requirements – an experienced officer who could pass for late twenties, fit and healthy, no ties that would prevent
him staying in Dorset undercover for as long as it took – led to James going on a shortlist, with his agreement.

James’s cover is that he’s a bit of a layabout who left school with only a handful of GCSEs and has spent the years since then alternating between unskilled jobs and prison sentences of varying lengths. Robbie was sceptical about how his accent, let alone his public-school, Cambridge-educated air that makes him act as if nowhere is barred to him, would fit the cover – but when he mentioned it to James the bloke slipped into a slouch and an accent that wouldn’t be out of place in a Cotswold farm-worker’s cottage. Shouldn’t be surprising, Robbie realised, given the lad’s upbringing.

A full history, including credible ID and records, has been created for James Henderson, and he’s been set up in the ground floor flat of this in-need-of-attention 1930s house on the edge of Abbotsbury. From what Robbie understood of the plan, James was to find some kind of work – in a shop, gardening or delivering things – and develop a reputation for doing just enough not to lose his job. He was also – discreetly – to be on the lookout for a local supplier.

It’s a drugs case involving millions of pounds worth of smuggled crack cocaine, not to mention the murders of at least ten poor young girls involved in the trafficking. The merchandise is being brought in by fishing-boat, the Dorset police are sure, but they’ve not been able to identify any particular boats or routines. All they know is that the women’s bodies have been found in the dunes along the coast near Abbotsford, or in the nearby woods, with their stomachs sliced open. Post-mortems have revealed recent sexual activity, as well as traces of the drug in the victims’ oesophaguses and stomach linings.

The women aren’t local – most of them appear to be Latin American, judging by skin tones and post-mortem results – and no-one in the area apparently saw them or knows what they were doing in the area. No-one has been able to put a name to any of them, and so far enquiries made with authorities in likely countries in Latin America – Colombia being the strongest possibility – have not resulted in identification of any of the victims. No surprise there, from what Robbie understands of law and order in the drug-ridden countries of that part of the world.

James’s task, of course, is to infiltrate the gang responsible. Local police know at least some of the members, but so far don’t have enough to get to the ringleaders, or prove the most serious charges. From the little Robbie’s heard, James has made contact and has passed some information back via Tariq, but so far he’s very much on the fringes.

And now there’s himself on the case. He wasn’t entirely accurate in his summary to James of how he got involved. Oh, he volunteered, yes; but initially Innocent refused point-blank to send him. She needed him exactly where he was, she told him, and there was no way she was going to spare an inspector when very probably a DC would do. It was only when Robbie threatened to take his accumulated annual leave and lieu-time and go off to Dorset anyway that she finally agreed. And, now that he’s finally got to see James for himself, he’s bloody glad he insisted.

Because they had to make sure that there was no possibility of connecting Robert Lawson, English teacher – and doesn’t that make him laugh, considering he failed his English Literature O-Level – with the Dorset Police, he’s had to come in here with little in the way of briefing. Plenty on the investigation itself, but little on James’s part of it or what he’s discovered so far. Time to make up for that.

Robbie sets down his cutlery. “So, time you brought me up to date on what you’ve been up to.”

It’s a few seconds before James meets his gaze and, when he does, the weariness in his eyes makes Robbie want to pull him off this bloody case and drive him back to Oxford – back home – right
now. But he can’t. There’s too much investment in the case. They have to see it through.

“I will,” James says, “but do you mind – can we talk about... home... for a bit first? Tell me how everyone is, and what you’ve been doing while I’ve been here? How’s Dr Hobson? Fully recovered from her ordeal, I hope?”

Right, yeah, of course. It was only a day or two after Laura almost got buried alive that James left on this assignment.

“Course.” He stands and starts collecting the debris of their meal. “Kitchen that way?” He gestures with his head. “Laura’s fine, by the way. No ill-effects.”

“Glad to hear it.” James grabs the remainder of the containers and ducks ahead of Robbie, into a narrow galley kitchen that’s even more depressing than the main room. The paint’s peeling, the cooker’s ancient and there’s a bad smell that Robbie suspects has been there for years. How James actually manages to cook in here is a mystery to him.

Back in the main room, James indicates the grungy sofa, another item that’s seen better days. There’s a low coffee-table in front of it, and the cigarettes and lighter James is never without are on it. “I’ve been smoking in the house,” James comments, reaching for the lighter, though he just plays with it, turning it around in his hand. “You’ll have noticed the smell. It wouldn’t have looked convincing if I always went outside.”

Robbie gives him a careless wave. “Go ahead. Not as if I’m not used to it, is it?”

“You have had two months in which to enjoy unpolluted air,” James points out, picking up the cigarette pack and sliding one out. “I’m sure that’s been a definite benefit of my absence.”

Robbie’d normally answer that with a vaguely insulting dig of some sort, which James always takes in the spirit it’s intended. It’s just the way they’ve always been. Here and now, though, he finds himself wanting to tell the truth: that James might be surprised to know how much he’s missed him, and that the smoking’s a small price to pay for having him as a partner.

But it wouldn’t be the right thing to do. It’s clear that James is looking for a bit of time in which he can... what? Pretend that everything’s back to normal? In which case...

“Yeah, that’s one thing I like about your temporary replacement.” James flinches; Robbie pretends not to see it. Besides, it’s not as if he needs to tell Hathaway that he’s missed him; the fact that he’s here says it all, and James is more than clever enough to know that. “He doesn’t smoke – and he’s not mean to me either, with or without the sir.”

Despite the flinch, James’s tone is smooth. “I’m very relieved to hear that you haven’t been suffering too much as a result of my absence, sir.”

“Well, his report-writing’s not up to your standard,” Robbie comments. “And he’s got terrible taste in beer.”

“Ah.” James smiles with faint satisfaction. “Well, we shall have to hope that this case will be over soon so that I can pick up the slack for you.”

“Yeah. Though you’ll have to get back up to speed after takin’ it easy down here for weeks on end.” He nudges James with his elbow, then reaches for his drink. “What did I say about callin’ me ‘sir’?”
James takes advantage of getting more beer to have a few moments to himself in the kitchen, letting his thoughts calm. It’s still hard to believe, even though the man himself is sitting on the disgusting sofa in this dive of a flat: Robbie Lewis is here.

He’s really never been happier to see anyone in his life before.

What doesn’t make sense is why: why would Innocent agree to assign one of her best DIs as liaison in another force’s case? Lewis must have insisted, but James can’t see why he would have done that. Of course he could ask, but – no. Not a direct question, anyway.

He takes a deep breath, picks up the beer and walks back across to the couch. “Don’t think I’m not glad to see you – but I’m not happy about the risk you’re taking. You do know one officer has been killed so far on this operation?”

Lewis meets his gaze, eyes serious. “I’d say the risk you’re taking is greater, and if you think I haven’t been worried sick since you came down here, you’re wrong.” He had thought that. Well, he’d just assumed that Lewis would have got on with the job, with a few grumbles about having to get used to a new bagman. His governor is a creature of habit, after all. Maybe here and there he’d have missed his drinking partner as well. “You know what I kept remembering about the two of us, James?” Lewis adds, summoning James’s attention back to him.

“What?” He hands Lewis one of the bottles.

“We’ve always been better working together than apart.” Lewis – Robbie – takes a drink, then levels a calm gaze in his direction. “Course I got the job done without you, but it wasn’t the same.”

Not the same, in what way? James wants to ask, but he won’t. Is it just that Robbie misses James’s efficient organisation and report-writing, or more than that: the camaraderie they had, the way they bounced ideas off each other that often led to solutions, the banter and mocking that – to James, at least – lent a closeness to their working partnership.

“I know, strictly speaking, I’m just here as your liaison,” Robbie continues, “but that doesn’t mean we can’t put our heads together on this case an’ see if we can’t get anywhere.”

“I’d like that,” he says instantly – though, if he’s honest, he’s not hopeful. Robbie doesn’t know this part of the country, and he hasn’t been immersed in the case the way the other officers on the team are. All the same, he’s no stranger to the impact a fresh pair of eyes can have. “What do you know so far?”

More than James expected, it turns out. Lewis has been keeping an eye on things, which is a surprise to James. He fills in the gaps and explains how his cover’s been developing, and for a while they talk about that.

Robbie has other questions then. “Have you made any progress on finding out exactly how the women are being brought into the country?”

“We’re still sure it’s via fishing boats, but we’re nowhere nearer pinning it down to a specific boat or fleet. No-one’s talking.” James expels a loud breath. “It’s just not credible. Eleven women of Latina origin brought to shore over the past eighteen months, and no-one saw anything?”

“Eleven?” Robbie frowns. “I thought ten?”

James knows Lewis will read some of the truth in his face, so he doesn’t even try to gloss over what happened. “There was another. Two weeks ago. And... they let me in this time.”
Good for the case, he’d thought at the time. He’d passed the initial tests, and they’re starting to trust him. Could be a breakthrough. “They texted me a time and location – half a mile west along the footpath through Stavordale Wood, ten pm. The woman had obviously been given the same location. Five of us were there to meet her.” He shivers. “I don’t know what she was expecting. Well, money, obviously. For the drugs. Somewhere to stay until nature took its course. What she got...” He swallows, his throat drying up as he’s taken back to that nightmarish hour in the woods.

Silently, Lewis grips his shoulder. “Just tell me what you need to, all right?”

James nods, struggling to regain the professional detachment he’s successfully cultivated over almost eight years as a detective. “My role was to keep watch. The other four raped her at knifepoint. She was still alive and screaming when one of them slit her stomach open.”

He’d had to watch and do absolutely nothing while a defenceless young woman, no more than about seventeen or eighteen, was brutalised and savagely murdered. He’d come back to this hovel after, when he’d finally been able to get away from the gang, and thrown up repeatedly. He’d then lain awake the whole night, shaking and crying, and praying for the soul of the dead woman.

Robbie’s hand tightens on his shoulder. “Christ.”

“I’d sent Tariq a message, letting him know the time and place. Even though they have undercover officers stationed in the closest fishing ports to here, no-one’s ever seen any of the couriers arrive, so it was the first time we’d had any way of knowing the meeting point in advance – they change every time. Each body’s been found in a different location somewhere between here and the coast. I thought... I hoped...”

“But no-one came.” Robbie’s voice is matter-of-fact, as if he expected nothing different.

“Oh, they were there – observing from a safe distance, with no intention of interfering. Tariq told me next time we met that they couldn’t risk it. Yes, they’d have saved that girl’s life, and arrested the men I was with, but there was no guarantee they’d get to the kingpin.” And so another girl had died, cruelly and in agony. Regrettable but unavoidable, Tariq had said, and James had wanted to hit him. Another reason he’s glad that Tariq’s not his liaison any more.

“They couldn’t even trace her route back to the coast,” he adds; yet another failure of the investigation. “They knew she’d be here in Abbotsbury. Knew where she was going and what time she needed to be there. They could have intercepted her. Found out how she’d got into the country and what she knew. But they seem to be assuming that these couriers know nothing.”

“Bloody stupid assumption, in my book. Never assume without checking,” Robbie comments, an edge to his voice. “Sometimes all you need is one tiny piece of information and everything else falls into place. This lot – I’ve got to assume they know what they’re doing, but from what you’ve told me so far I’m not impressed.”

Nor is James. It’s not that he disagrees with the need to get the people behind this operation. On the contrary: he’s completely in agreement. Putting away the locals will achieve very little; the generals behind the smuggling operation will soon find other legionaries, and even other centurions if need be. They’ll move to a different part of the country if they have to. It’s essential to find the generals, not only to eliminate the supply of drugs coming in, but also so that the operation can be traced back to its source. The Colombian police have shown appropriate signs of co-operation so far – though whether that’s genuine or not is another story, and that’s aside from the question of how effective they could be anyway in a country riven by guerrilla and paramilitary warfare.
But what James wants most of all is to prevent any more young women being recruited in Colombia – or wherever else they may have come from – and sent to England to be murdered, ending up buried as a Jane Doe. He also wants the women murdered so far to be identified so that their bodies can be returned to their families and, as long as he has any say in the matter, that will not be forgotten. But from what he can see – though admittedly he’s on the fringes of the operation – the women’s safety isn’t a priority for anyone else.

Robbie says nothing else, but he doesn’t need to. James knows him well enough to know that he’s equally appalled – and just his calm, reassuring presence is helping more than James can say.

It’s no wonder James looks the way he does. Anyone’d be sickened after having to witness that – and he remembers how James was after finding that child during the Zelinsky case. This is worse, though. Having to stand there and watch and listen and do absolutely bloody nothing...

He’s obviously not been sleeping, or else having persistent nightmares. Waking nightmares, too, more than likely. Christ.

“Do you want me to get you taken off the case?” Robbie means it; if it’s what James needs, he’ll do it and face the consequences.

But James looks appalled. “God, no! I can’t do that – there’s far too much at stake. No, I’ll be fine, honestly. Just...” He hesitates; Robbie gives him an encouraging nod. “Do you mind just coming to talk sometimes? I mean, I know you have to come anyway, as my liaison, but it’s been really good just to talk about ordinary things, to forget about the case for a while.”

God, if he could march James out of here right now he would – but the bloke would never let him. Besides, it would destroy months of work, and he’s too dedicated a copper to want that anyway. “Course I will. Any time.” He hesitates, then adds, “I’ve missed our chin-wags over a pint.”

James smiles faintly at that, but the smile doesn’t reach his eyes; for a brief instant, Robbie catches sight of an expression of longing that, once again, tempts him to drive them both back to Oxford. Can’t be done, but he’s here, isn’t he? He can be a supportive mate as well as a liaison, which is why he came.

As James opens the door and turns to say goodnight, Robbie steps closer, quirking an eyebrow with a faintly amused smile that – he hopes – hides his genuine worry. “Decided I’m gonna pretend to be the type of uncle who hugs his nephew, no matter how much he hates it. You can pretend to be putting up with it under duress.”

He reaches for James, pulling the younger man into his arms and holding him briefly, patting his back. He would have let go quickly, despite his inclinations and the instinct that’s been telling him ever since he arrived that James badly needs a hug – it’s not something they do, after all, and if he’d ever considered such a thing before he would have assumed that James would hate the very idea.

But James... clings. Just for a few seconds, but it’s unmistakeable. Then he seems to recollect himself and he steps back. “Sorry. Didn’t quite catch the ‘under duress’ bit at first.”

“Not to worry. You’ll get it right next time.” Robbie turns and walks through the door, glancing back as he’s on the path. “Behave yourself, now. I don’t want to have to lie to your mother.”

“Yeah, yeah.” And suddenly James’s voice and posture are completely different. He’s Jim
Henderson, useless so-and-so and petty criminal, and the depth and speed of the transformation take Robbie’s breath away. “Whatever.”

Before Robbie’s got one step further, James has already slammed the door behind him.
Initiation

What did he ever do to deserve Robbie Lewis as his governor?

Lewis said he volunteered to come to Abbotsbury, but James knows it won’t have been anything as simple as that. This kind of liaison role isn’t a job for a DI. A DS, maybe, but most likely a constable, as with Tariq. Innocent wouldn’t have agreed to this easily, so Lewis must really have pushed hard. And since he can’t imagine that Lewis would have done this for his own benefit – willingly spending a month and a half in a draughty caravan up at Bexington? – the only possible explanation is that he did it for James. Why? That just doesn’t make sense.

He owes Lewis for this – another favour he can never repay.

Sleep’s still slow in coming tonight, but once he does fall asleep he doesn’t wake up once. And in the morning he has no memory of any nightmares.

Lewis – Robbie – is right. They have always been better together than apart. And, while they might not be working directly together on this case, he’s starting to feel confident that having Lewis available to talk to when possible will make a difference. It’s already making a difference.

James ignores his razor and arranges his hair into the scruffy look that’s appropriate for Jim Henderson, and then heads out for his temporary job – and, he hopes, another contact from the gang he’s here to investigate.

Robbie sets out after breakfast with his map and the walker’s GPS he was provided, not only to help him with his cover but also to make sure he can find his way around. This morning’s hike will take him into Abbotsbury via Bexington Coppice, and then he’ll make his way back through a couple of the other local woods. It’ll help to establish his credibility as a tourist on a walking holiday but, more importantly, it’ll give him local bearings.

It’s hard to concentrate on his surroundings, though, as his mind keeps drifting back to James. He’s seen the lad upset or introspected in the past, of course, but it’s rare, and never this bad. Whatever’s going on, even during cases that Robbie knows affected him badly, James has always refused to admit to any need for help or support. It’s cost him – apart from cases involving his own past, Robbie still remembers the haunted look in James’s eyes in the weeks following the Zelinsky case, and during the trial. Yet he insisted he was fine, was in no need of help.

This is worse than Robbie’s ever seen him before. Yet, other than once or twice during the evening, James still insisted that he was fine, he could cope, he didn’t need any extra intervention. He did say he’s glad that Robbie’s here, and there was that clinging hug, but he just bets that the next time he sees the lad it’ll be as if that never happened.
Yes, all right, he’s worried – even more so now that he’s actually here and has seen James. It’s the case – but it’s not only the case. James, he knows, has always been a solitary sort, but that doesn’t mean that being on his own is good for him. When he’s on his own, he’s got too much time to brood.

Bad enough trying to sort a brooding, melancholy James out when they’re working together every day, but when the lad’s been alone for two months... Well. He’s just going to have to find a way to spend as much time with James as possible without putting the case in jeopardy. Simple as that.

James is in the Swan that evening with the group of locals he’s insinuated himself with over the past couple of months. Three of them are part of the gang, but very much on the fringes – like himself, but more trusted. He keeps hoping that these drinking sessions will lead at some point to encounters with more important members of the gang, but so far it’s not happened – though, of course, being included in the rape/murder encounter two weeks ago was a major step forward, albeit one he would rather not have had any involvement in.

It’s still important to keep up appearances: Jim Henderson is a lad about town who enjoys his drink and fags and flirting with the barmaids, and maybe occasionally buy some dodgy smokes from a shadowy bloke in a back alley, and he’s the sort who’ll easily be led astray. Persuadable, easily manipulated, and not too concerned about breaking the law.

His phone beeps just as he’s getting in another round. Frowning, he pulls it out of his pocket. The only people who have this number are his boss at the hardware shop and some of the people he’s with in the pub – and Tariq, who won’t be in contact with him again. The story, apparently, is that Tariq got a new job and is moving away. In fact, he’s been temporarily transferred to a station in Shaftesbury, in the far north of the county, to avoid any chance that he might be seen and recognised.

James doesn’t recognise the number, but clicks on the text anyway.

*think i might have left my wallet round at yours last night. any chance i can pop over and take a look?*

There’s no name – but James doesn’t need one. Apart from the fact that there was only one person with him at his flat last night, he recognises the text style.

“Who’s that?” Jonno, one of the gang, asks. He’s also trying to read over James’s shoulder – not an easy task.

“My uncle. On holiday in Bexington, can you fuckin’ believe it?” He curls his lip in disgust. “Had no idea he was coming until he turned up on my doorstep.”

“Close, are you?” Jonno’s grinning, highly amused.

“Hardly. He’s a teacher.” James shrugs. “But he’s going to report to my ma if I don’t at least pretend to be hospitable.” He snorts. “I can put up with him coming over for a curry once a week or so for a while if it means she’ll keep the money coming.”

This is an idea he and Robbie came up with yesterday evening. As a shop assistant and general dogsbody, James earns the minimum wage. It’s barely enough to give credibility to the flat he’s renting, the cigarettes he smokes and the battered car he drives, never mind his occasional contraband purchases. If anyone asks too many questions, the cover might fall apart. That’s partly
the idea, James explained: the local men have been sucked into the operation by the promise of ready cash. So far he himself hasn’t been paid; he’s on trial, he’s been told, and pay will come later. If at all; the task force has a theory that the locals, once they’ve been drawn in via something like the cannabis cigarettes James has been buying, are offered Class A substances – crack cocaine – and then the price of further supplies is taking part in the receiving operations. And now that James has been present at one of those and been able to describe events, they’re all confident in the theory that having the foot-soldiers rape the women and then kill them is a tactic to buy their silence. Who’d talk, after all, if they knew they’d be charged with rape and murder?

Though of course it would be possible to negotiate with the police and CPS for a reduced sentence and possibly witness protection for giving evidence against the gang, and James has already discreetly tested out one or two of his local contacts to determine whether they might be likely to accept that kind of offer. It won’t fly, though. None of them know who’s ultimately behind the operation.

“Like you said, if they’re gonna draw you in properly, they’ll want you to buy drugs from them,” Robbie commented. “Can’t explain being able to do that on your income, unless you say you’ve been mugging little old ladies or breaking and entering.”

“And that’d be noticed in a village this size.”

“So how about letting it be known that your mother sends you money? And flash some cash around in the pub?”

It was a good idea, and he’s been doing it this evening. It’s not the first time he’s bought a round, or even let himself be seen with a twenty or two.

It’s been noticed tonight, as has his comment about money being sent. Jonno’s just glanced meaningfully at Pete. Good.

He texts back. Didn’t see it. Won’t be home for another hour.

ill be there, the return text – received five minutes later – says. James tries not to imagine his governor cursing at the tiny keys and managing to delete his message at least twice before sending – and tries not to want to leave the pub right now so he can spend some time with Robbie instead of with these wasters. But this is his job at the moment, and so he stays where he is.

Headlights bouncing up and down the rough gravel driveway announce James’s return. Robbie gets out of his car in time to see James almost fall out of his, and then stagger drunkenly towards the door.

“You never drove in that state! Bloody hell, man!” he exclaims, and it’s not all a disapproving-uncle act.

James shoots him a look of pure dislike, just about visible in the porch light. “Mind your own fuckin’ business.” But he still leaves the door open for Robbie to follow him in.

Once inside, Robbie scans again for eavesdropping devices. “Clean.” He turns to James in time to see a transformation; he’s standing straight again and moving smoothly to turn on inside lights.

He turns to Robbie then, lips faintly curved in a smug smile. “If I had been breathalysed, I’d have been well under the limit. I had just over a pint in three hours.” His smile broadens. “Convincing act, then?”
“Very. Was sure you’d been–” He shakes his head. He really does know James better than that.

“How’d you manage it? Shandies?”

“No. Can’t have the bar staff know I’m not drinking like everyone else. I’ve just learned to make it look like I’m sinking pints when I’m not. Pretend to take a drink, keeping my hand wrapped around the glass, then put it down near an almost-empty glass, and that’s the one I pick up next time.” He shrugs. “I’m getting pretty good at it.”

“As long as no-one notices.” It’s a dangerous game James is playing, though it’s not as if he didn’t already know that.

James shrugs. “Anyway, you wanted to check for your wallet? Or was that just an excuse?”

He huffs. “An excuse. Don’t mind admitting I was worried about you after last night.”

“I should say you needn’t and I’m fine, but...” James’s mouth turns down faintly at the corners. “It’s good to see you.”

And that he’s admitting that speaks volumes about his continuing mental state.

“Coffee?” James asks then, and he’s already heading to the kitchen.

“Shouldn’t be encouraging me to stay, should you?” Robbie points out. “You’re only supposed to put up with me grudgingly.”

“Got to be nice to you, otherwise the fountain of riches dries up.” Another flash of a swift grin. “Managed to drop that little nugget in the pub too. It still won’t make it convincing for you to come here every night, but a couple of times a week should be okay.”

And that translates to mean that James would like him to come that frequently. Well, so would he, and he has to admit that it’s not only because he doesn’t fancy spending more evenings than he has to alone in that caravan.

“Should tell you what I did today,” he says as he watches James make coffee. “Went for a walk, of course, since that’s what I’m here for. Had lunch in the Ilchester Arms – I know you do your drinking in the Swan, so I thought I should check out the other hostelry.”

“Oh?” James quirks an eyebrow. “Anything?”

Robbie shakes his head. “Other than establishing my identity an’ that I like a bit of a natter with my pint, nothing yet. Did mention to the landlord that I have a nephew locally an’ that I’m concerned that he might be straying from the straight and narrow again. Didn’t get any nibbles, but you know how these things work. I’ll make sure I’m seen there a few times a week, and sooner or later...” He shrugs.

James nods. It’s a strategy officers they know who’ve done undercover work use pretty successfully.

“And,” Robbie continues, “my route just happened to take me past two of the murder scenes. Had to be careful no-one saw me acting suspiciously, so I didn’t search them too carefully. Just pretended to be looking at some wild-flowers – and, yeah, I did that in several places along the way.”

James frowns as he leads the way to the living-room. “What were you looking for? Local uniforms and SOCO were all over those locations.”
Robbie shrugs again. “You know how I am. Just want to be thorough.” In case someone might have missed something – though James is right; it is unlikely. But he’s always been like that. If a job needs doing well, he needs to do it himself, or have it done by someone he trusts completely to do it properly. “Going to try to take a look at all them over the next few weeks. Not every day, o’ course. But I am here to walk, so it shouldn’t look out of the ordinary.”

James’s lips curve upwards in the mocking smirk Robbie hasn’t seen in far too long. “Must be more exercise than you’ve had in years. Your daughter would be very impressed.”

“Oi, you!” Robbie’s not had occasion to practice his exasperated glare in weeks, either – yet it still comes easily. “I get exercise. Keepin’ you in line, mostly.”

“Keeping up with me, maybe.” James pointedly stretches his long legs out in front of him. Robbie jabs his elbow into James’s side, and it’s as if they’ve never been separated.

The next couple of weeks are the most bearable he’s had since this assignment started. It’s not that James dislikes being undercover, exactly, though he hadn’t anticipated how much of a challenge it would be to maintain his persona, and he certainly hadn’t realised the kind of things he’d be expected to do to keep his cover intact and infiltrate himself further into the gang. But it’s also been isolating, and damn lonely. For someone who’s always been happy with his own company, James has been miserable.

Now that Lewis – Robbie – is here, the situation has improved immeasurably. They don’t see each other, or even talk, every day, but just knowing that his governor is close at hand has made more of a difference than James could have imagined. Robbie comes over with a takeaway a couple of times a week, and they exchange texts occasionally in between. Not the sort of texts James would like to send – no banter, no teasing enquiries about the state of his boss’s feet – but the kind of thing that might sound reasonable between an uncle and his reluctant nephew.

run out of teabags and the shops are closed – you got any? - an excuse for Robbie to drive over to James’s flat one evening and stay for about half an hour. Need to borrow a tenner gave James the cover to meet Robbie and talk unobserved for a few minutes just outside Abbotsbury after work one evening, before he was due down the pub. It all helps.

Now, what would help even more would be if they can catch these bastards so no more women will get killed and no more drugs will find their way into the country from this entry-point – and he and Robbie can go home.

“You don’t seem to be making a lot of progress in this investigation. Eighteen months with nothing to show for it and one officer dead...” Robbie shrugs. “Except your Chief Constable’s starting to ask questions.”

Not exactly the best way to build a good working relationship with the DCI in charge of the investigation – but that’s not Robbie’s intent here. As James’s liaison, he’s not going to have any kind of relationship with DCI Moore, a smooth, smug copper in his late forties who’s got ambitions to higher rank. Much higher, is Robbie’s guess.

This meeting’s a courtesy only, afforded to him in acknowledgement of his own relatively senior rank and because he’s James’s governor. He and Moore are having to meet in secret in a small coffee-shop in Dorchester; Moore’s in the city for a meeting, and Robbie’s cover is that he’s
playing tourist.

“Ever been on a major investigation?” Moore retorts, an edge to his voice – which Robbie can understand. Like the bloke or not, he knows how he’d react if challenged like this. “They take time, and they sometimes have collateral damage.”

Collateral damage. Robbie’s hands tense and he puts his cup down. With those two words, Moore’s just lost any possibility of earning his respect. Dead officers aren’t collateral damage. Dead victims aren’t either – and now he knows where James’s previous liaison got it from.

Is an undercover officer also potentially collateral damage, in the interests of making progress?

He won’t ask; he knows what the answer will be, or at least what the truth is, whether or not Moore would do him the courtesy of honesty. But Robbie swears there and then, on everything he holds dear – on Val’s grave – that he will not let James become ‘collateral damage’.

Steering the subject away from principles, he asks some detailed questions about progress so far, what they know and don’t know, and does his best to hide the fact that he despises the bloke and hopes they never meet again after this is over.

James is leaning against the wall in the hardware shop’s delivery yard, smoking a cigarette, one lunchtime almost a month after Robbie turned up on his doorstep.

It’s been a quiet couple of weeks on the investigation, with no new developments and no indication that he’s been admitted any further into the ranks of the gang. The one positive development is that the bait’s been taken as regards his hints of family money: a couple of days after his casual mention of it in the Swan, another of the local members of the gang – and one of the bastards who raped the last woman – asked him if it was true that he was getting his mother to send him drinking money. He laughed and, mindful of what he and Robbie had discussed around the possibility that he could be offered more than just a few roll-ups of cannabis, said, “Who gets the right kind of stimulation from alcohol?”

Nothing more’s been said, but the seed’s been sown. Now he has to wait.

The gate at the end of the yard swings open, and another of the gang, someone he knows only as Al, strolls in. “Oi, Jim! You skivin’ off again?”

“On me lunchbreak, aren’t I?” He sticks his cigarette in his mouth and casually makes a V-sign.

“Fuck off yourself,” Al retorts, crossing the yard. “Give us a fag.”

James passes over a cigarette, then lights it for Al. “What you want?”

“It’s your lucky day,” Al drawls. “Better tell that uncle of yours you’ll be busy tonight.”

He takes another drag. “Oh, yeah?”

“Be at the south path into Oddens Wood at 9. Don’t be late, and don’t fuck up.”

He pretends to think it over. “Yeah, I can probably be there.”

Al glares at him. “ Fucking make sure you are. This is the big one for you.”

Before James can say anything else – and he’s not entirely sure what he would have said – Al’s
gone. James slowly releases a breath, grinds out his cigarette and reaches for his phone.

*Can’t make tonight. Got other plans,* he sends to Robbie. Robbie’ll know something is up; they didn’t actually have arrangements for this evening.

*sorry to hear that. Hope you have a good time.* Robbie’s text comes five minutes later, as circumspect as he would expect.

And, using the encoding method in place for this kind of situation, he sends the important information. *Meeting point at south trail, Oddens Wood, 9pm. Assume it’s another courier.*

Robbie’s response, a few minutes later – but then he’s new to the code – is two words. *Got it.*

The team will be in place, observing, as before. If only that actually meant a life could be saved tonight.

____________________________________

The advantage of James now having a liaison from outside the local CID is that there’s an additional layer between him and the investigating team, making it less likely that he’ll be indentified as connected with the police. Trouble is that the additional layer is also a disadvantage because, although Robbie now knows about tonight’s meeting, he still needs to report it to the locals. And, because it’s too risky to have him simply walk into CID headquarters, or phone his own liaison, the mechanism is that he phones a number and pretends to be asking the opening hours of whatever local business he might be calling. The detective who answers will give him a time and place, and that’s when they’ll meet so he can pass on the information.

It’s mid-afternoon before a young bloke in a cheap suit – do DCs nowadays have any idea of how to blend in? – comes to sit next to him at the bar of the Ilchester Arms. After a bit of casual chit-chat about the weather and suchlike, Robbie provides the details James gave him.

He’s thanked, but the DC doesn’t appear particularly happy. “Doesn’t help much,” he explains when Robbie asks. “We thought, the first time we got information on a meeting, that it was going to be a major breakthrough, but it wasn’t. If we still don’t know how the mules are getting in, we’re no closer. There’s only ever the local boys at those meetings, and we can’t risk arresting them. The most we can try to do is follow whoever takes the drugs, see if we can find their drop-off point. So far we’ve not been successful.”

“Why not?” Sounds bloody incompetent to Robbie. Surely they’ve got people with training in surveillance.

The DC shakes his head. “Can’t figure it out. Twice we’ve followed the courier, and twice he’s managed to lose our people. Different person each time, too, so we haven’t been able to set anything up in advance.”

In other words, again all they’ll do is observe and try to follow. And, for a second time, James will have to watch a young woman be savagely attacked and murdered without being able to do a thing about it.

Robbie has to excuse himself, and he heads to the loo, where he takes a couple of deep breaths before leaving the pub to walk back to his caravan.

____________________________________

It’s almost five to nine, and James is waiting at the beginning of the trail. Pacing. He’s been here
almost ten minutes, and he’s chain-smoking – has been since he got home from work. This is worse than the first meet-up he was invited to, because this time he knows what will happen.

It goes against everything in him, as a copper and as a human being, to have to stand by and do nothing while a young woman is raped and murdered, but what else can he do? Even if he wasn’t under orders, it would be him against five or six others, most of whom will be armed with knives. Maybe with other weapons as well; he didn’t see any guns last time, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t any. All he’d achieve would be to get them both killed.

Though that reality hasn’t stopped him working through several scenarios in his mind. What if he creates some sort of distraction, something that appears accidental, that would allow the woman to get away? He could pretend to faint, or trip – but that wouldn’t distract enough of the gang, and more than likely only for a moment or two. He could pretend he heard someone coming. The risk of discovery would stop them, wouldn’t it? He –

“Jim, me lad!” A hand claps his shoulder firmly. It’s Al. “On time, I see. Good. The boss will be impressed.”

He takes a deep breath, then turns to face Al, who’s surrounded by four others, including Pete and Jonno. “The boss?” Clarkson, whom they already know about? Or someone else, possibly higher up in the structure?

“Oh, yeah. He’ll be here tonight, and it’s all for you. You’re a lucky bastard.”

“I am?”

Al’s hand on his shoulder tightens and steers him towards the wood, signalling that it’s time to move. “Oh, yeah. It’s time for your initiation.”

Initiation? What’s that supposed to mean?

He doesn’t have to wait long to find out. In under ten minutes, they’re in the clearing, where a young girl, probably no more than sixteen, is pacing. As with the other girl – all the other courier-victims, in fact – her skin has the olive tones that suggest Mediterranean or Latin American origins. She’s dressed in a short denim skirt and a T-shirt, and her long hair’s limp and bedraggled, which fits with several days’ travelling by sea. Cargo ship, transferred to a fishing boat in the English channel: that’s the working theory. And she’s shivering – cold or fear?

She startles and her eyes widen in sudden fear as she catches sight of them – and no wonder, because Jonno and Al are now holding long knives. Jonno’s is single-bladed and looks like a kitchen carving knife, while Al’s has a double-sided blade – a Bowie knife.

Pete and the other two are moving swiftly past the girl, and James remembers from the previous occasion what they’re doing. Getting behind and to either side of her, to cut off her escape. And another, older man whom James hasn’t seen before has slipped out from behind the trees to their right. It’s Clarkson, all right; James hasn’t met the commander of the local foot-soldiers, but he’s had a detailed description.

“Madre de Dios! Lo que está pasando?” She clutches at her throat, and James sees a flash of silver in the dying sunlight. A crucifix.

Al nudges his elbow sharply. “Off you go, Jim-boy.”

James glances at Al, a question in his mouth, but his words dry up. Al’s holding out his Bowie knife to James, handle first, and he’s making an unmistakeable gesture with his hips. It’s
immediately followed by a slicing motion with his free hand.

And James instantly understands. His initiation.
James stares down at the knife now in his hand, his stomach churning. If he were to give into the nausea he’s feeling, he’d start to throw up.

It’s tempting – would it cause the distraction he needs? – but he resists. No, it wouldn’t achieve anything. There are six others here, and he’d bet anything they’re all armed. If he were incapable, the others would do the job themselves without hesitation, and he’d be out of the operation – and quite possibly bumped off on his way home. After all, he’s seen all of them, and after tonight he’ll have seen them commit crimes meriting life sentences twice.

No, he has to be seen to be complying, at least for now.

He takes a deep breath, steadying himself, then steps forward. The woman cringes and takes a sharp step back, only to be shoved forward again by Pete. The sick feeling intensifies.

“Oi, Jim!” He barely glances around as Jonno calls out to him. “Looks like you need some of this.”

That makes him turn. Jonno’s holding out a crack pipe. He recoils, but remembers just in time the role he’s playing. And he knows that trying to get him hooked on the drug is all part of the strategy.

“No, thanks,” he says, cool and sardonic. “Prefer to keep my mind clear when I’m on the job. Later, maybe.”

He takes another deliberate step towards the woman, praying inside for inspiration, for something to happen to take this appalling burden from him. If thou art willing, take this cup from me...

One step, then another. The DCI in charge had told him, when he was first briefed on the operation and his role in it, that undercover work carried not only great risks but also great challenges. He could be expected to do things while undercover that went against his personal ethics or that were illegal. Of course, Moore told him, if it’s safe to do so he should avoid compromising himself, but if there’s no way around it he is authorised – in fact, ordered – to comply. And, Moore added, Home Office instruction has been clear on that: as part of an undercover operation, if it is to protect cover on a very sensitive operation, or to obtain information that could be crucial to the case, an undercover officer has permission to do whatever needs to be done, if it’s unavoidable, and there will be no prosecution.

He’s pretty sure that Moore was talking about drug-taking, probably theft, and being a witness to illegal activity of various types in the kind of capacity that would normally attract a conspiracy charge. But rape and murder?

Not that he’s going to do either. Never, not even with his own life under threat. But just what is he going to do? He’s already delaying too much.
O Lord, deliver my soul. Save me for thy mercy’s sake. Save her for thy mercy’s sake.

He’s close enough to touch her now, and she’s trembling, crying, noisy sobs accompanying the words she’s mumbling as her fingers continue to clasp her crucifix. “Dios me salva, por favor, Dios me salva.”

Everything in him is crying out to reassure her, to promise she won’t be hurt, that he won’t hurt her. That he’ll keep her safe. But he can’t. He–

“Get on with it!” The harsh voice behind him is Clarkson, the boss. “Or you’ll be next.”

James swallows and his fists clench. He’s about to turn around and tell the man that, yes, he will be next, because he’s not fucking going to do this – when the miracle he’s been praying for happens.

“Evening, lads.”

It’s Lewis – Robbie – and he’s strolling into the clearing as if he has every right and reason to be here. He’s wearing a different light jacket – not the fake Barbour this time – and a flat cap worn low, and he’s carrying a stick of the sort used by hikers. “Fine evening for a ramble, isn’t it?”

James’s blood freezes. If they recognise him as James’s supposed uncle, or if any of them is nervous enough, there’ll be three bodies left here for the police to discover.

“On your bike, Granddad,” Pete shouts. “Isn’t it time you were in bed?”

As James watches, frozen, not daring to move in case he puts Robbie in even more danger, Robbie walks into the middle of the clearing, alert but seeming unconcerned. Until he stops a few feet from James and his brows draw together. “What’s this? You lot frightening this young lass? Ought to be ashamed of yourselves, you should.”

And, before any of the gang has a chance to react, Robbie’s stepped in front of James and taken the girl’s arm. “It’s okay, love, you come wi’ me. Soon have you safe.”

James’s heart is in his mouth as Robbie starts to lead the girl away. Instantly, Pete and the two others whose names he doesn’t know stand and block Robbie’s path. Al and Jonno come closer, crowding to Robbie’s side; Al shoves James, forcing him to form part of the blockade.

“We were just havin’ a bit of fun,” Al says, sounding far more like a sulky juvenile delinquent than the vicious bastard James knows him to be. It’s all an act, James knows only too well. Any moment now, one of them – most likely Al, unless the older bloke’s going to take control – is going to hurt Robbie. Maybe even kill him, and then kill the girl as well.

Bile gathers in James’s throat and his fists clench as his brain starts processing one desperate idea after another. What if he throws himself against Al and starts a fight? That might give Robbie time to get away. But then if even one of them does have a gun... Shit. What if–

Robbie’s raising his free hand, and what’s that–? Bloody hell, it’s a mobile. “Just in case any of you has any bright ideas about stoppin’ me, I dialled 999 before you even knew I was here. The police know where I am and what’s goin’ on. You do anything to harm me or this lass an’ you’ll just make things worse for yourselves.”

“He’s bluffing,” Pete says, and James holds his breath for a moment, debating the best course of action. Should he argue? Point out the risks if Robbie’s telling the truth? It would be better if it came from one of the others.
It’s worth a try, he concludes. “Let’s just get the fuck out of here. I’ve already got a record and if
the filth get me for something else...” He shakes his head, expression mutinous.

“Sensible lad,” Robbie retorts, a sneer in his voice. “Out of me way!” he adds, in the forceful tone
James knows only too well. “You bloody toe-rags. Ought to be in jail, you should. An’ you will be,
if you don’t move right now.” He’s wrapped his arm firmly around the girl now, and he steps
forward again, pushing against the men in his path. “I said, out of me way!”

“Do as he says.” It’s Clarkson, taking charge. “There’s more than one way to skin a cat.”

Jonno and one of the others step aside, leaving just enough space for Robbie to lead the girl
through. James watches as Robbie strides out of the clearing and back onto the trail, heading
northwards, and he doesn’t breathe again until he sees them round a corner and disappear out of
sight unharmed.

But it can’t be as simple as this, can it? The woman’s got crack cocaine inside her stomach with a
street value of at least tens of thousands. And she and Robbie have seen all their faces. They can’t
just be letting the two of them go?

James isn’t the only one at a loss. The others are looking confused – and angry, no doubt
wondering if they’re going to get paid for this evening – as well. It seems like an age before
anything happens, though it’s probably less than a minute.

“Get off home with you. All of you,” Clarkson snaps. “If he wasn’t bluffing, the police are on their
way. Al and I will take it from here. You’ll receive instructions when you’re needed again.”

Al snatches the Bowie knife from him. James stands for a few moments, indecisive, as the others
with the exception of Al and Clarkson scatter. Should he follow Robbie? There’s no doubt that
Robbie and the woman are in trouble. Al and the boss are going to track them down, and no doubt
murder them. At least with him it’d be three against one.

But he has no idea if his cover’s already compromised – if Al recognised Robbie as James’s
supposed uncle. If he knew for certain that his cover was blown, he’d go after Robbie without
hesitation. But if it wasn’t, and he was seen going in the wrong direction, it could not only put
Robbie in even more danger but compromise the entire investigation.

Quickly, he pretends to walk away from the clearing towards the trail and then ducks behind a tree.
If they don’t see which direction he goes in... But they’ll be heading south. He’d need to stay
hidden the entire way, assuming that’s possible. And avoid making any noise, not easy when
walking through a wood in the dark.

While he’s still deliberating, his mobile vibrates. He cups his hand around the screen to hide the
light, and checks. A text – from Robbie. It says simply, go home. ill meet you there.

Well, that’s clear enough. He just has to trust Robbie to know what he’s doing and to keep himself
safe.

James jogs back down the trail towards his car, heart pounding, not knowing whether he’s doing
the right thing or not, and terrified that his choice is going to haunt him.

____________________________________

It’s just as well that he’s got one of those faces people instinctively trust. The girl’s completely
petrified, clearly scared for her life, and with good reason, but she came with Robbie without
hesitation. She’s still with him, letting him hurry her along even though she’s obviously exhausted.
“Not long now,” he tells her, though whether she understands or not he has no idea. Even if she does understand English, she’s not in any sort of mental state to communicate or focus.

He shoves his phone back in his pocket as they walk. As a bluff, it worked brilliantly, even if he does say so himself. He hadn’t really dialled 999, though he’d been tempted – but the last thing he wanted was some over-zealous uniforms barging in and panicking the gang into killing people.

It isn’t far, though he knows they’ll be followed, and that if they’re caught chances are they’ll both be killed: the girl for the drugs, and himself for interfering. But, if he’s right and the map he memorised before setting out is accurate, it should be just around–

Yes. Just south of the tiny lake, there are three dark, unmarked cars parked up against the trees. “You’re safe now,” he tells the girl. “They’re the police. They’ll help you.”

“Yes?” She sounds frightened. Shit, if she’s from Colombia, mentioning the police won’t be reassuring. Especially if she’s carrying drugs.

“Help,” he stresses. “Help you.”

The door of the nearest vehicle, a Land Rover, opens and a man hurries over. “What the–” he begins.

“DI Lewis, Oxfordshire Police,” Robbie says immediately. “I’m the liaison–”

“Yeah, I know who you are. What the bloody hell are you doing here? You could have ballsed everything up!”

The girl’s struggling now, trying to get away from him. Robbie tightens his grip on her again. “Look, this woman needs help. She needs a doctor and an interpreter – now. Get her out of here.”

The other man, most likely a DS at Robbie’s guess, looks uncertain. “She’s a material witness, and her life is in danger,” Robbie snaps. He glances at the girl again. She’s still looking terrified. “What’s your–” he begins, then hesitates. “Su nombre?” he tries, recalling – no doubt inaccurately – some of the basic Spanish he picked up on family holidays to Majorca and the Costa del Sol.

“Maria Cristina,” she murmurs.

“What’s happening, Johnson?” another, older man asks. He takes in the situation at a glance. “Lewis?” he says, looking at Robbie. Robbie nods. “I’m DI Carson, in charge here tonight. Johnson, get that girl taken back to the station and looked after. Peters–” Another man appears out of the darkness; night’s now fallen. “Take the other DCs and round up the suspects. We can’t risk any of them reporting back to their bosses. I’m guessing they’ve scattered?”

Robbie nods. “I heard an older bloke telling them to go home.”

“Right. Even if we don’t catch them now, we should have enough information courtesy of DS Hathaway to find them.”

Johnson tries to lead Maria Cristina to the Land Rover, but she clings to Robbie. “I’d best go with her,” he tells Carson. “If one of your people would drive me back to my car first...?”

In the car, he texts James, hoping that the lad’s safe and that he hasn’t come to any harm because his ‘uncle’ got in the way of tonight’s exercise – and that he’s not done anything stupid like try to follow Robbie, because that’d more than likely be the easiest way to get himself killed.
It’ll be a while, looks like, before he can make it to James’s place, but come hell or high water he’ll be there. Once he knows Maria Cristina is safe and reassured, that is. There’s no way he can leave her before then.

Until then, he’ll have to be patient, which isn’t easy. Apart from needing to make sure that James is okay, he’s got questions – not least of which is why James was standing not two feet from Maria Cristina, a bloody great hunting knife in his hand.

Just as well he’s got lots of experience in putting police business first.

For the second time this evening, he’s pacing, unable to relax. Not chain-smoking this time; he’s lit cigarettes three times, and each time he’s stubbed it out and broken it into little pieces.

It’s been over an hour and a half since Robbie sent him that text.

Yes, of course his priority will have been to make sure the woman was safe. He’ll have intended to take her to the police, and most likely wait around to make sure that she was delivered safely into the hands of the local DI on the ground, Carson. They’d have wanted a statement from him, of course, but James knows his governor’s dislike of bureaucracy only too well. He wouldn’t have cooled his heels in an interview room somewhere waiting for some DS to speak to him – or Carson himself, out of courtesy. He’d have wanted to get it over with immediately so he could get away.

And with all that, he should have been here at least half an hour ago, probably more. At the very least, he should have sent another text, or phoned, to let James know what he was doing.

The fact that he hasn’t done that and he’s not here...

James doesn’t want to think it. He’s trying desperately to stop himself. But all he can see as he paces, hands raking through his over-long hair, is Robbie Lewis’s body lying in the woods, dead from multiple stab wounds. Or a bullet.

While he... He just ran away, leaving his boss, the man who volunteered to come down here because he was worried about James, in danger.

Yes, Lewis told him to go home, but since when has either of them hesitated when the other’s been in danger?

It’s after half-eleven now. He sets himself a deadline of midnight. If he hasn’t heard from Robbie by then...

There’s a knock at the back door.

James throws down the cigarette he’s currently shredding and runs through to the kitchen, remembering caution and his established security routine just as he gets to the door. “Who is it?”

“Who d’you think, man?”

A breath whooshes out of him and he grabs at the key, fumbling in his haste and knocking it to the floor. “Just a sec,” he calls, bending to pick up the key and reinserting it in the lock. “Sorry, dropped the bloody key,” he explains as he opens the door and stands back.

As Robbie enters, James gives him a full visual examination. No visible injuries. “You’re all right,” he says on an exhale.
“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Why wouldn’t you–? It’s been nearly two hours! I was worried that they’d killed you!”

“You don’t get rid of me as easily as all that, lad. Look, first things first,” Robbie adds, laying a hand on his arm for a moment. His tone signals that this is business. “You need to know that they’re rounding everyone up. To protect your cover, they’ll be taking you into custody as well. I asked them to give us a couple of hours first, so I could update you.”

James frowns. “Won’t that destroy the operation? The supply chain will just move somewhere else.”

Robbie shakes his head. “They don’t have any choice, not now. Besides, it looks like they might be making some progress.”

“How? No, wait,” James holds up a hand. “I don’t want to hear it yet. I want...” He shakes his head roughly. “Christ, sir, I thought you were dead!”

‘Cause you thought they’d followed me.” Robbie’s expression is understanding. “They probably did – but Carson and his team were waiting up near the lake. I knew they’d be there, and I just had to make sure Maria Cristina and I got to where they were waiting before your mates caught up with me. I was pretty sure that once they saw I had company they’d give it up as a bad job.”

“Maria–” James breaks off and claps his forehead. “God, I completely forgot. Is she okay?”

“She’s fine. She–”

James cuts across him. “Good. I am glad to hear it, really, but it’s not the most important thing for me right at this minute. I’m sorry, sir, but I need to...”

“Ah, I told you not to call me sir,” Robbie begins, just as James reaches for him and pulls him into a rough, unsteady hug.

“You really were worried, weren’t you, man?” Robbie hugs him in return, his hand sweeping over James’s back in reassuring strokes.

“Told you.” James swallows down the inconvenient lump in his throat. God, he’s actually shaking. This is embarrassing.

He starts to pull away, intending to apologise for over-reacting and to put the kettle on. But he finds he’s not being released. “James.” Robbie’s voice is gentle, but commanding his attention, so he stills and looks down to meet his boss’s gaze. “I’m sorry I worried you. Should’ve thought. I could easily have sent you another text from the station.”

“It’s okay.” He tries again to pull back; he’s not used to letting his reactions show like this, and he’s only too well aware that his boss isn’t given to expressions of emotion. Put it out of your mind and get on with it, that’s Robbie Lewis’s approach, and if he doesn’t always manage to do that himself, he rarely lets it show.

“Stay still for a moment, will you? You’ve got something in your–” Robbie reaches up as James dips his head, and abruptly their faces are inches apart. James can’t pull his eyes away from Robbie, and he feels as if all the air’s been sucked out of the room.

He never remembers after who moved first. All he knows is that seconds later they’re kissing, rough and needy, and then they’re push-pulling each other along the passageway to the bedroom.
He’s ripping at Robbie’s jacket, then his shirt, while Robbie tries to get James’s T-shirt over his head. And then they’re on the bed, James half on top of Robbie, trying to wrestle Robbie’s vest off but not wanting to break the kiss, while Robbie’s hands are everywhere: at James’s waist, over his arse, between his thighs. Kisses turn into almost-bites, and lips wander to jaws, necks, ears.

They’re not even fully naked when they stroke each other fiercely to orgasm, hands reaching inside barely-open trousers to get to hard, hot cocks.

Spent, James goes limp on top of Robbie, and his governor’s arms close around him with an exhausted sigh.

____________________________________

It’s almost one in the morning when Robbie shakes James awake. “Oi, soft lad. Told you the local lads will be coming to take you into custody. An’ I said I’d bring you up to date first.”

James groans. “Do we have to?” Abruptly, he jerks upright. “Sorry. Yes, of course. What time is it?” He looks at his watch, answering his own question. “I suppose...” He shifts to sit on the edge of the bed and fumbles with his jeans, not looking at Robbie. “We should go into the other room. Coffee?”

“Yeah, that’d be nice.” Robbie rolls himself off the bed and rearranges his clothes. He has to find his vest, which ended up on the floor, and his shirt, which has somehow got buried underneath the quilt. By the time he’s dressed, James has already gone.

Embarrassed? Regretting what they’ve just done? Well, damn it anyway. It’s not like either of them planned it. It’s not difficult to understand how it happened, though. Fear and adrenaline can have that kind of reaction – as coppers, they’re both well aware of that.

Well, if James is embarrassed by it – and why wouldn’t he be? Shagging his not-far-off-retirement governor, who’s got more wrinkles than hair these days – then by far the best thing to do is never to mention it again. Act like it never happened. Fear and adrenaline can have that kind of reaction – as coppers, they’re both well aware of that.

Well, if James is embarrassed by it – and why wouldn’t he be? Shagging his not-far-off-retirement governor, who’s got more wrinkles than hair these days – then by far the best thing to do is never to mention it again. Act like it never happened. He can do that. It’s been a long time – a very long time – since he had to put the awkwardness of a one-night stand behind him. And never before with a bloke, of course. But it can be done. It won’t affect their partnership or their friendship, Robbie will make sure of that. If James is wishing it undone, then as far as Robbie’s concerned it will be.

Mind, it’s bloody ironic that James is the one having a crisis about what’s happened, isn’t it? He’s the one who should be panicking. He’s the one who was married to a woman for twenty-five years and never once showed any interest in a bloke before today, let alone someone more than twenty years his junior. Christ – the age-gap between them is almost the same as the duration of his marriage to Val, and what that says about it all he has no idea.

In the kitchen, James is setting out mugs and milk while the kettle boils. He barely glances up when Robbie enters. “It’ll just be a minute.”

“That’s okay. Look, I wanted to ask you–”

“Yes?” James’s voice is stiff and he’s visibly on edge.

“What was happening earlier? In the clearing? You were right next to her and you had a knife.”

Whatever James was worried he might ask, this wasn’t it. He half-slumps over the counter. “Initiation rite. I was supposed to...” He turns to look at Robbie, gesturing viciously with a hand.
The penny drops. “They wanted you to kill her?”

“After I’d raped her, of course.” Disgust oozes from his voice. “I... was playing along, trying to work out what I could do. There was no way I would have—”

“I know that.” Robbie cuts across him; James doesn’t even need to say the words. “Course, if you’d outright refused, that probably would’ve been the end of your involvement. You might even have been the next murder victim.”

James nods, turning back to deal with the kettle as it boils. They take their coffee into the dingy living-room, where James takes the armchair, leaving Robbie to occupy the couch on his own. “Tell me what happened after,” he says, all business now, his gaze levelled at Robbie.

Robbie gives James a succinct account. “When we got to the station, they already had a Spanish interpreter – which tells me they’ve been expecting to interview one of the couriers. Anyway, I would’ve left to come here then, but Maria Cristina wanted me to stay, an’ since she was terrified of the police an’ all, I couldn’t do anything else. The good news is,” he continues, “that she was able to give us some very precise information about the fishing-boat that took her from the freighter, including a clear description of the captain, and where she came ashore. Carson’s already dispatched a team to the coast. The other important thing she said is that she wasn’t the only courier on the freighter.”

James frowns. “There were more? I mean, it would make sense when they’re sending the couriers all this way, but only one woman seems to come ashore at a time, and they space them at least three weeks to a month apart, from what I’ve been able to work out.”

“Ashore to the Abbotsbury area, yeah. Maria Cristina says there were two other young women with her, and they were put into another boat. She says she remembers something that sounded like Wesbee. The DC who was in the room with us thinks it could be West Bay.”

“Right – that’s about eight miles along the coast from here. So all this time there’s been more women coming in and we never knew?” James drums his fingers on his knee. “What’s been happening to them, though? The only bodies have been found in and around Abbotsbury. I suppose some of them could have come in through West Bay, but...” He shakes his head. “Doesn’t make sense. What happened to the two women who travelled with Maria Cristina?”

“Carson’s sent some officers to West Bay to look into it. If they’re lucky, there’ll be a few more arrests by morning. Oh, and she gave us some useful stuff about the freighter as well, and the coastguard is already onto that. No way the captain or at least some of the crew didn’t know the girls were on board. Maria Cristina says they were kept in the hold, but they were given food and water once a day.”

“So, finally the break we needed.” James rakes a hand through his hair. “And all because you put yourself at risk. Moore and his team wouldn’t have lifted a finger to save that woman tonight. Yet more collateral damage.” He spits the words in disgust.

Before Robbie can comment, there’s a knock at the door. He nods once James has checked and confirmed that it’s a couple of uniforms, following the plan to pretend to take James into custody, and says quietly, “I’ll let meself out the back. Meet you down there.”

At the station, he’s shown into an incident room, where James is already seated at a table with several of the team of detectives. The latest news is that everyone who was in Oddens Wood this evening is under arrest, and several of them are singing like canaries – including Clarkson, whom they all knew was pulling the strings locally, but was too junior in the structure to be brought in
sooner without any guarantee that he’d give information on his chain of command. They’re expecting more arrests on the coast, and there are alerts out for the other two women who were on the freighter with Maria Cristina. She’s supplied descriptions and names for both of them.

“What will happen to her now?” James asks, leaning forward with his elbows on the table.

“She’s been taken to hospital,” Carson says. “The priority is to ensure the drugs are removed from her stomach without rupturing and that she’s in good health.” Robbie’s glad to hear that too. They did have a station medic examine her when she first arrived, to make sure that there were no imminent signs of danger, but she needs serious medical attention. “Longer-term, I don’t know. We may want her to give evidence in court, depending on what else we have. Ultimately, it’ll be up to the Home Office.”

“You can’t send her back to Colombia.” James sounds adamant on that. “She’d be dead within days, if not hours. The cartels don’t take kindly to people who co-operate with police.”

“It won’t be up to us,” Carson says. “I’m sure you’re aware of that, Sergeant. It’s the Home Office’s decision.” His patronising tone sets Robbie’s teeth on edge, and he’s about to respond, but James gets in first.

“Naturally.” James’s tone is one Robbie well-recognises; polite and respectful, but with an undertone that says I think you’re an arrogant tosser and I’m going to make you regret it.

“However, as I’m sure you’re well aware, a recommendation from the DI – or, even better, DCI – in charge of an investigation like this, citing co-operation that led to significant progress including arrests, is taken very seriously by immigration officials.”

“Yes, I am aware, Sergeant,” Carson says, irritated. “But you must remember that she came into the country illegally, and carrying a high quantity of Class A drugs with intent to conceal.”

“And you know that it’s unlikely to have been her choice to do it,” Robbie points out before James can; he can get away with arguing with a DI, while James could end up with a reprimand on his file if Carson was enough of a shit about it. “I’ll be making a recommendation that she be allowed to stay if she wants, whether or not you and DCI Moore feel able to support it.”

The discussion’s interrupted by more news. Arrests have been made on the coast, and an active line of enquiry is being pursued in West Bay. Dorset Police’s coastguard liaison is confident that they can identify the freighters that are part of the smuggling operation. And, while it’s too late now to speak to trusted contacts in Bogota, conversations will be had in the early afternoon tomorrow.

“Did you have anything else to report, Sergeant Hathaway?” Carson’s tone suggests that he’s expecting the answer to be in the negative. “If not, then I don’t see that we need—”

“Actually, I do.” James leans forward and spends the next fifteen minutes outlining observations and intelligent speculation about the drugs operation itself, lines of communication within it, and personnel not yet apprehended. He speaks confidently and capably, and all based on things he’s gleaned from his time undercover, as well as what he’s heard in the last couple of hours. His points are clever, his suggestions for further investigation are insightful and plausible, and his overall approach is highly strategic. Carson – at first exhibiting polite sufferance – begins scribbling rapidly, before waving at one of his DCs to take over that task, and as soon as James is finished raps out orders to subordinates to follow up on several of James’s ideas.

But James isn’t completely finished. “One last thing, and I will be communicating this in writing as well to DCI Moore, via Chief Superintendent Innocent. I have strong reservations – in fact, deep disagreement – with the way particular aspects of the investigation have been conducted.
Specifically, I will be placing on record my professional opinion that the first courier meeting I was invited to was mishandled by this team. Based on tonight’s breakthroughs, it’s very probable that you could have been where you are now more than six weeks ago. You could have saved valuable time and resources – and, more important, at least one life could have been saved.”

“There’s no way of knowing that,” Moore begins, but James is already getting to his feet.

“You weren’t willing to try. Nor were you tonight – you’re only in the position you are now because Inspector Lewis risked his life to get the courier to safety without revealing police involvement. I’ve always admired Inspector Lewis’s ingenuity, but is it possible that nobody in this team could think of another alternative?”

Or didn’t consider that the couriers might be able to provide helpful information, Robbie can’t help thinking. Judging by what he’s seen and heard around the incident room tonight, he’s convinced that’s the case.

All the same, as much as he agrees with James, his sergeant’s made his point, and any more discussion of it isn’t going to end well. He catches James’s eye; James inclines his head in a barely perceptible nod.

“If you have no further need of us, Carson, Hathaway and I will be off. We’ve a long drive back to Oxford once we’ve packed.”

Carson goes through the motions of thanking them for their assistance and assuring them that they’ll be kept updated if they wish, and may be called upon to give evidence in due course, but finally they’re walking out of the station and to Robbie’s car, parked outside.

And now there’s another depressing thought on Robbie’s mind, to add to the interlude in the bedroom of James’s temporary flat that he’d best never mention again. What he just witnessed up in the incident room were the investigative and strategic skills of a man who’s wasted as a sergeant.

James is ready for promotion, and Robbie will be doing both him and Oxford CID a major disservice if he doesn’t talk to Innocent about putting him down for OSPRE preparation immediately.

It’ll depend on when a vacancy comes up, of course, but he’s pretty sure he’ll have lost James as his partner by Christmas.

________________________________________________________________________
Going Home

Once they’re alone, outside the station and walking towards Robbie’s car, James finds himself tongue-tied. He’s always been crap at this sort of thing: putting things right after he’s made a mistake. He never even managed to apologise to Lewis after lying to him over and over on both the Will McEwan case and at Crevecoeur, after all, did he?

Lewis – Robbie, though he won’t be allowed to use that name again, will he? – forgave him both times, but this is different. This time he... Christ, he took advantage of the kindest, most decent man he’s ever known. He practically assaulted his boss, kissing him and then pressing him into a sexual encounter without giving him a chance to consent or not. Oh, yes, Lewis participated, but it’s not something he ever would have initiated himself, or gone along with if he hadn’t been affected by what they’d both just been through.

How can he possibly beg forgiveness for that? How could Lewis bring himself to forgive that?

What’s worse is that he knows Lewis is heterosexual, has been all his life, and is still in love with his dead wife. He pushed himself at a man who would never have freely consented to sexual relations with another man, let alone his sergeant.

Should he tell Lewis of his intention to resign now? Or wait until they’re back in Oxford and hand in his papers? Or do nothing and give Lewis the opportunity to file disciplinary action – or criminal charges?

He’s still trying to formulate a sentence that will tell Lewis how deeply sorry he is when, abruptly, his boss speaks. “Glad that’s over. Tell the truth, I hope I never have to meet any of those tossers again. Dunno how you managed to put up with them for three months.”

It takes a moment or two for James to recognise that the first thing his boss has said isn’t related to what he did back at the flat – and that, in fact, Lewis’s tone was remarkably friendly.

He makes some sort of sound of agreement. Lewis clearly doesn’t notice anything strange, because he adds immediately, “I’ve got to get my stuff from the caravan, and you need to pack. I’ll drop you off first an’ then come back for you, all right? Or would you prefer to sleep first an’ we can leave in the morning?”

The sooner they’re back in Oxford the better, as far as James is concerned. But Lewis generally needs his sleep, and it’s after three in the morning. “Which would you prefer?”

“This hour of the night, it’ll take barely two an’ a half hours. Could be in me own bed by just after six.” Lewis glances at him again as they stop at the car. “Though I forgot. You left the keys to your flat at the station for safe-keeping.” He gets into the driver’s seat. “Ah, not a problem. You can
come home with me. Kip on the couch for a few hours.”

James has to stop himself from staring at his boss. It doesn’t make sense. Lewis is talking as if nothing happened. He’s actually offering to make James welcome in his flat.

“Sir...” he begins, though he has no idea at all of what he’s going to say.

Lewis gives him a sharp look as he manoeuvres the car into the road. “Ah, for god’s sake, do we have to go back to that already? We’re not even back in Oxford, man!” Lewis sighs. “Look, why don’t we try this? Sir at work, Robbie off-duty.”

It must be sleep deprivation; that’s why none of this is making sense. Although it is only shortly after three. They’ve been up all night on cases before and he’s not had this sort of hallucinatory experience – and neither has Lewis suffered from apparent amnesia.

It’s not much more than five minutes from the station to James’s flat, and he manages to exit the car without, he hopes, sounding like too much of an idiot. He has around half an hour before Lewis – no, still Robbie – will be back, in which time he has to sort out personal belongings from items provided by Dorset CID, and leave the flat in some sort of reasonable state.

Not that there’s much here that he needs to take with him, anyway. His instructions had been to travel as light as possible and bring nothing that could in any way identify him as Detective Sergeant James Hathaway or link him with Oxford. A very small amount of his own clothes, his guitar – with some soul-searching, but in the end he couldn’t face being separated from it for months on end – and his iPod. It’ll take ten minutes at most to throw everything into a rucksack.

The bed has to be his first priority. He bundles up the sheets and throws them in the washing machine; it’s got a drying cycle, which is just as well since he won’t be here to sort that. There is absolutely no way he wants anyone else coming into this place and seeing evidence of... well.

God, how could he have imagined for one second that Lewis wanted him like that? It’s as clear as day now; what he thought was Robbie reaching up to touch his face was nothing of the kind. He can hear his boss’s words now: You’ve got something in your– Something in his hair, maybe. Probably from that cigarette he’d shredded just before Lewis arrived. And the hug – that was only for comfort.

“Congratulations, James. You’ve gone and fucked everything up again.”

James is quiet once they’re on the A34. Hardly surprising, really. The bloke’s had a bloody awful few months, not to mention what happened earlier. Being faced with the choice of blowing his own cover – and probably getting killed as a result – and doing harm to that young girl... no wonder he’s not himself.

“Put the seat back and get your head down for a couple of hours if you want,” he suggests. “I’m fine driving.”

“Don’t think I could sleep, but thanks.” There it is again, that strain in the lad’s voice. He knows only too well that there’s no point asking what’s up. James won’t say. Never does.

Best just change the subject, then. Distract him.

“I was gonna wait until we were back in Oxford before bringing this up, but since we’ve got a couple of hours to kill now... might as well get it over with, I suppose.”
He’s glancing in James’s direction as he finishes speaking, and catches sight of the alarmed – no, almost appalled – expression on his sergeant's face. He frowns. “James?”

James’s swallow is audible. “Sir – no, don’t correct me, please,” he adds hurriedly as Robbie sighs. “I... I know I owe you an apology. No, more than that. You have every right to be furious about what I did, and I–”

Robbie cuts across his stammering ramble. “What are you on about? You’re making no sense at all.” Abruptly, he frowns. “I hope you’re not referring to the way you went nuclear on Carson’s arse back there? Because I couldn’t be prouder of you for that. You were bloody brilliant.”

As he glances across again, he sees James’s hands curled into fists on his lap. “No, that’s not – but thank you.” James swallows again. “I meant at the flat. I sincerely apol–”

Oh, Christ, so that’s it. The lad’s got himself in a panic about getting carried away earlier. Clearly, just ignoring it isn’t going to work after all.

And, again, Robbie can’t help but feel the irony of it. He and James had sex, and who’s the one going into a tailspin about it? Course, it is bloody odd that he isn’t bothered about it himself. Maybe it’s just not sunk in yet that he wanked off, and was wanked off by, his bagman. No, his friend. But still, his very male and very young friend. He should be feeling awkward and embarrassed, at the very least. The fact that he’s not... well, is it just that he’s so comfortable around James now that even snogging him and falling into bed with him doesn’t seem strange?

Is this how he reacts to dangerous incidents on cases now? Instead of a pint or two at the Trout, he–

Now who’s going into panic-mode? But he’s not – well, not about the sex. Having a melt-down about the fact that he’s not having a melt-down is just ridiculous. As is James getting himself tied up in knots about it.

Right; well, that’s easily sorted.

“Oh, don’t be so gormless! We were both on edge after what happened in the wood, an’ then relieved that everything turned out okay. Nothin’ to apologise for.” He shakes his head. “Forget it – I have.”

“I...” He can feel James looking at him, his shock almost tangible. “Thank you.”

Right. Because that makes him feel so much better. Robbie turns his attention back to the road, glad of the lack of lighting along the road so James can’t see his face. Of course he knew the bloke wasn’t really attracted to an old fart like him, that it was just the circumstances, but it’s hardly a compliment, all the same, that a five-minute mutual wank with him’s got James this worked up and desperate to wipe it out.

Not that he’s looking for anything more with James – it’s not as if he’s even gay, is he? But it’s the principle that matters.

Ah, it’s not important, is it?

He steers the car around a hairpin turn, then glances back at James. “What I actually wanted to talk about is your career. Specifically, your next move. I think it’s time you started studying for OSPRE.”

“What?” There’s an edge to James’s voice that says he’s not at all happy.
“You’re ready for it, man. Was obvious to me back there with Carson, though it should’ve been before now.”

“And what if I don’t want promotion?” That edge is still there.

Robbie hesitates. He never expected this. James was supposed to be the high-flyer, the fast-tracked graduate entrant. He’s not chasing after the next rank? “You don’t?” he says, aware as the words emerge that he sounds like a sodding idiot.

“Are you trying to get rid of me?” James asks – though it’s more of an accusation.

“What?” Sod it, what made him think this was a suitable conversation to have while driving? If it wasn’t almost four in the morning, he’d pull into the closest transport café and have it out with James face to face. Can’t, though. Even if there were anything open, if he stops now he’ll be too tired for the rest of the journey.

He’s too weary to be anything but bluntly honest. “Don’t be daft. If I had my way, you’d be with me until I retire. But that’s not fair to you. You’re too good a copper to trot around after me for the next four or five years.”

“I see.” It’s spoken in that bland Hathaway tone that gives away absolutely nothing.

“You should be thinking about promotion. And, as your governor, I should be encouraging you. Mentoring you.” Robbie shakes his head. “Not that Morse ever did that for me – but then I’d never’ve taken lessons from Morse in how to treat a bagman.” He smiles faintly, fondly. “If you really don’t want it, though... well, it’s up to you. I won’t push you.”

James exhales, a long breath, and when he speaks the suspicious, resentful note’s completely gone from his voice. “I appreciate your belief in me. It does mean a lot. But I don’t know if I’m ready. Not sure when I will be, really. I feel there’s so much more I can learn from you.”

“Ah, it’s not as if we’d never run into each other once you’re promoted,” Robbie makes himself point out, much as he wants to accept James’s reluctance as the final word. “An’ you could always talk to me if you needed to. I wouldn’t suddenly stop going for a pint with you.”

With a wry curl to his lips, James says, “ Wouldn’t you have to do your duty by your replacement bagman?”

“It’s not an obligation, y’know.” Robbie just about stops himself from rolling his eyes. “Look, think about it,” he adds. “I think you’re ready. If it was up to me, I’d tell Innocent to put you down for the exams like a shot. Don’t hold yourself back because you’re comfortable working with me, all right?”

“I’ll think about it,” James promises. “Now, can we talk about something else, please?”

“Come on in.” Robbie leads the way into the flat, snapping on a light in the hallway, and James follows. “You know the way. Why don’t you use the bathroom while I get a pillow and a blanket for you? If you need a toothbrush, there should be a spare under the sink.”

James just stops in the hall, barely absorbing Robbie’s words as he takes in the familiar sight of his boss’s flat. It’s finally sinking in that he’s home. Back in Oxford – and back to being James Hathaway again. No more Jim Henderson, petty criminal and would-be drug runner.
God, it feels... what? He can’t even put it into words.

“James?” He blinks, then realises that Robbie is standing in front of him, one brow raised as he studies him. “You really are wiped out, aren’t you? Should’ve tried to sleep in the car.”

“It’s not that.” He tries to explain. “It just suddenly hit me that it’s over, I think. I can be myself again.”

Robbie steps closer and lays a hand on his shoulder. “Yeah, I know. First time undercover, wasn’t it? It’s never easy, an’ especially not in a long job like this one, never mind the danger.”

James dips his head. “You did try to warn me, I know.”

Robbie’s expression is endlessly patient. “Just wanted you to think it all through, that’s all. I knew it’d be good experience. Though if I’d known what Moore and his team would be like...”

“But it’s over – even though it’s not, really – and he doesn’t want to talk about it any more. “Look, just tell me where to find the blankets and I’ll sort myself out. You go to bed, please.”

Robbie hesitates, then directs him to the hall cupboard. “Innocent doesn’t know we’re back, so I reckon we can sleep until early afternoon if we want. Then we’ll get you sorted properly.

James barely sleeps, despite being so tired he was ready to drop by the time he’d made up the sofa. There’s too much in his brain: vivid images of violence and weapons and murderous intent, and the terror in the eyes of the girl Robbie says is called Maria Cristina. Fear of him, of what she was convinced he was going to do to her.

Rape. Such an ugly word. Uglier than murder, somehow. Worse? Difficult to say. Murder’s final, the death of the body, the consignment of the soul to judgement before it’s fully prepared. Rape is a life sentence of memories of pain and invasion and humiliation. It can change a person beyond recognition. Even where consent is dubious at best, the effect on a person can be devastating. Did Robbie change tonight? But he says it was nothing. Mutual. Circumstances. Not worth remembering. Not worth repeating, therefore. Got carried away, nothing more.

Robbie got carried away? Robbie gave in because he felt sorry for him, more likely, assuming James gave him the opportunity to think clearly at the time.

Forget it. I have.

Can’t forget it, though, can he? Holding Robbie. Kissing Robbie. Touching him. Licking the skin of his neck and throat. Nibbling that ear he’s always rubbing. Holding Robbie’s cock in the palm of his hand. Stroking it, squeezing it, feeling it respond. Wanting to lick and suck it, but no time, not this time. Wanting to make him come, lose control, cry out James’s name mid-orgasm. Wanting to lie with him afterwards, limbs tangled, damp skin clinging, breath mingling in sleepy kisses.

Wanting to wake up and do it all over again. Only it didn’t turn out like that.

He tosses and turns, alternately too hot and too cold as the inescapable images flash through his mind. This is what he has become. This is who James Hathaway is beneath the veneer he knows he shows to the world. Useless in the face of danger. Selfish, obsessive and unworthy of Lewis’s forgiveness and, yes, compassion.

He can – must – will do better. Whatever it takes.
James looks at Robbie blearily when he walks into the living-room not long after noon. Of course, the bloke wears contacts – and, yes, there’s one of those little plastic containers on the coffee table – so he probably isn’t seeing that clearly. But he doesn’t look like someone who’s had a decent six hours’ sleep either.

“I’d make coffee, but I haven’t got anything in,” he points out, apology in his voice. “Though if you’re as knackered as you look, why don’t you just go an’ sleep in my bed for a couple of hours? I’ll go and get some shopping before heading to the station, so you can get yourself something when you want to get up.”

“No, there’s no need for that.” James throws the blanket aside and swings his bare legs to the floor. “I just need...” He frowns for a moment. “A shower, if you don’t mind, and a cigarette. I brought the shaving kit I had at the flat.” He rakes a hand through his untidy hair that’s far longer than Robbie could ever have imagined on James, but of course cutting it would have ruined his cover. “I just don’t have appropriate work clothing.”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about that.” Robbie perches on the arm of the sofa, next to James. “You don’t even need to come into work. After what you just came back from, you’re probably due at least a couple of weeks’ leave.” A quick glance at James’s face tells him that leave is the last thing his sergeant wants. “But, all right, if you don’t want that we’ll go in together. I doubt Innocent will have a problem with how you’re dressed, an’ anyway it’s not as if we’d be back on the rotation immediately. Go on.” He waves in the general direction of the bathroom. “Sort yourself out. We’ll stop for lunch on the way in.”

It’s around half past one when they finally make it to the station. James catches several curious glances as they walk through the public area and then up the stairs, but other than an occasional nod or a smile in response to a shout of Welcome back, sir! neither of them acknowledges their curious colleagues.

They have to see Innocent first; Robbie’s been away for a month, as well, and there’s every possibility that their office has been commandeered by other officers in the meantime. And anyway, James’s warrant card and keys – car, office and even his flat, for safe-keeping – are locked in Innocent’s safe. He can’t even go home to change without seeing the Chief Super.

“Robbie! James!” She’s already standing in the outer office as Robbie taps on the door. The grapevine’s working normally, then; the desk sergeant obviously reported their presence. “Come in. I heard you had a major breakthrough last night.”

“DI Carson, Ma’am?” Robbie will be very interested to hear the version of events Innocent’s been told.

“DCI Moore, actually. He called to thank me for the loan of two outstanding officers.”

James glances at Robbie, his mouth turned down at the corners and his brows raised. Robbie’s sentiments exactly; he had not imagined either senior officer would be their biggest fans. But it seems that the report Innocent received was very positive, citing James as a highly observant, resourceful officer who demonstrated significant initiative and the ability to think on the spot, as well as excellent skills of analysis and logical thinking.

“There’ll be a commendation on the way for you, James,” Innocent adds, laying down the printed-out email. “From Dorset Police, but I expect it will be echoed by Oxford CID. Excellent work – I’m very proud of you, and I’m sure Inspector Lewis is as well.”

James looks as if he’d prefer to be anywhere else other than standing in Innocent’s office listening
to this. “Thank you, Ma’am.” His tone is stiffly polite. “Though last night’s major breakthrough, and the arrests made, are largely thanks to Inspector Lewis.”

“So I understand, though they could not have happened had it not been for the groundwork you laid so successfully.”

Robbie decides that it’s time to intervene. “Ma’am, there are some things that DCI Moore may not have told you about. James has some serious concerns about the way the case was handled, and I agree with him.”

“Go on.”

After they’ve explained, Innocent frowns. “Strictly speaking, it’s not any of our business. We don’t have the right to interfere. All the same, if poor decision-making put one of my officers at risk...” She taps a pen on her desk. “Leave this with me. I take it you made your concerns clear?”

James is silent, so Robbie answers for him. “Yes, Ma’am. Very effectively and professionally, naturally.”

“Naturally.” She continues tapping, then pauses. “Very well. Again, excellent work, Sergeant Hathaway. I do hope, however, that normal sartorial standards will resume as of tomorrow? Including a haircut?”

“Of course, Ma’am. I do need my keys back, however.”

James gets his keys and warrant card, and then Innocent sends him away. “Robbie, should I be worried about him?”

If he could be sure of the answer to that himself... If only the lad wasn’t so reluctant to admit when he needs help, or unwilling to talk about experiences that have upset him. Not that Robbie can criticise him for that; he’s not exactly a sharer himself, to use what seems to be the popular expression these days. He’d thought he was making something of a breakthrough with James the evening he arrived in Abbotsbury, given the bloke revealed more than usual about how the case was affecting him. But now, though Robbie knows damn well that James isn’t all right, he’s closed off again.

Hardly surprising. Having to go through that experience in the woods, discovering what it was he was expected to do, is enough to give anyone nightmares. And James cares. He hasn’t become hardened by the job like so many other coppers have, and – although he’d find the work a lot easier to live with if he did – Robbie hopes he never does.

He grimaces as he responds to Innocent. “I’m keepin’ an eye on him. Leave him to me.”

“All right, but you will let me know if there’s a problem, won’t you? And if you could persuade him to see the psychologist...”

He’s already shaking his head before Innocent has finished. No chance James will agree to that. And it’s true that in the past the best counselling – for either of them – has been a pint or two shared in companionable silence, repeated as often as necessary. That’s already his plan for this evening.

“One other thing, Robbie. It occurs to me, based on what I’ve heard, that it’s really time we were planning for James’s promotion. I’ve got a set of OSPRE preparation materials for him—”

Robbie holds up a hand. “Ma’am, I really think it’d be for the best not to mention that at the
In some ways, it’s surprisingly easy to slip back into the routine. There’s a new case the day after, the murder of a city businessman who’s also an ex-con – so naturally the investigation focuses on his former criminal activities and associates while in prison. (It turns out to have nothing whatsoever to do with the victim’s past life, and everything to do with a resentful ex-employee, but the detour around several different paths of enquiry exercises James’s brain and helps him to get used to being a detective again rather than a pretend layabout, and to prove, as much to himself as to anyone else, that he’s a responsible professional more than capable of doing the job he’s paid for).

Lewis is worried about him; it doesn’t take more than that first afternoon back at work to see that. But not only does he not need anyone worrying about him, he doesn’t want it. Either he can do the job or he can’t; it’s as simple as that. Push the nightmares aside; even if he still believes he could have done more to save that woman whose death he had to witness – and whose name he still doesn’t know; the Colombian police still haven’t been able to identify her – he can tell himself over and over that he tried. And he was partly instrumental in breaking the smuggling network up. No more women will be facing a brutal, terrifying death, at least not through this particular route.

He can – he must – put it behind him. Other coppers do. Lewis has dealt with many cases equally as bad as that, or worse. He’s still able to get up every morning and do the job, and James knows damn well that Lewis isn’t heartless, hasn’t lost that essential empathy that James admires so much in him.

Put the case behind him – and put the aftermath, that stolen hour in Jim Henderson’s flat, behind him as well. That’s easier to manage if he keeps his distance from Lewis as much as possible, beyond a pint after work once or twice a week – if he didn’t do at least that much, he knows he’d offend his boss.
If he were to allow himself to get too close to Lewis again, to spend time with him in a more relaxed environment like they did in Abbotsbury from time to time when they were able to let themselves forget about the case for a stolen half-hour or so; if he allowed himself to let Lewis become Robbie again, he’d never be able to rid his mind of the memory of kissing Lewis, of having sex and falling asleep together. It’s not that he still thinks he forced Lewis into anything; rational thought, which returned a day or two after they got back to Oxford and once he’d had a couple of decent nights’ sleep, told him that if Lewis really hadn’t wanted it in that moment he could and would easily have stopped James. But Lewis made his feelings on the subject very clear: it happened in the heat of the moment, and won’t be repeated.

*Forget it. I have.*

It’s all easier said than done – forgetting what happened with Lewis, and forgetting what happened in Abbotsbury.

It helps that there’s good news on that score, a month or so after they left Dorset. Further investigation, based on interviews with the arrested suspects and with locals at the ports now under suspicion, led to suspects further up the chain, and there’s now a real chance that they’re close to arresting the kingpin of the operation. Best of all, as far as James is concerned, there’ve been no more mutilated bodies of young Hispanic women found abandoned anywhere in Dorset. Or, yet, anywhere else in the country. That, above all, makes those three bloody awful months worthwhile.

Also, it’s very likely that Maria Cristina will be granted asylum in the UK. He and Lewis both wrote to the Home Office, as they’d said they would, and the formal response they received soon after informed them that DCI Moore had already made a strong case for exceptional leave to remain, due to the valuable information Maria Cristina provided to the investigation, leading to major arrests and the collapse of a significant drugs network.

And, of course, with every confession Dorset CID extracts from people further up the chain, the likelihood that he or Lewis – or both – will be needed to give evidence in person, beyond their written statements, recedes further.

He might yet be able to put it all behind him.

But then they’re called to investigate the murder of Bibiana Santos, a maid at the Malmaison who’s been found dead in Christchurch Meadow. She’s been raped and murdered, with savage knife-wounds inflicted ante-mortem. James gets to the scene before Lewis, though after Dr Hobson has started her preliminary examination. He takes one look at the woman’s body, and has to rush away as his stomach rebels.

He vomits up his breakfast near a clump of trees – and looks up immediately afterwards to see his boss standing in front of him, face creased in concern.

*Salva me, Domine. Salva me.*

“I can’t do this any more, sir. I’m sorry.” Without another word, and without waiting for Lewis to answer, he turns and bolts for his car.
Laura comes hurrying up. “Is James all right?”

Robbie’s about to explain, then hesitates. As far as he knows, James hasn’t told anyone else, other than Innocent, the details of what happened in Dorset, and even Innocent doesn’t have the full story. And, knowing his reticent sergeant, he’s pretty sure James wouldn’t want anyone else knowing – and, anyway, he hates being discussed behind his back. Although Robbie wouldn’t mind getting Laura’s perspective, he won’t tell her without James’s knowledge.

“Not feeling well. I sent him home.”

“Ah.” She nods. “Well, I hope he feels better soon. Anyway, you ready to take a look?”

He follows Laura back to the body. He did have a very quick glance at the victim before going to see what the problem was with James, and it was immediately obvious why his sergeant had reacted the way he did. All the same, Robbie can’t help kicking himself. He told Innocent he was keeping an eye on James, and he has been – sort of. But James has made it more difficult over the few weeks since they’ve been back. They’ve still gone for occasional pints together after a hard day’s work, but the lad’s been less inclined to drop over to his flat on the pretext of updating his boss on their case. That closer friendship they developed in Abbotsbury seems to have faded; James hasn’t used his first name once since they got back.

In hindsight, he should have seen that the bloke’s been avoiding spending too much time with him because, if they’d been together more outside the work environment, Robbie would have seen that things weren’t right.

Trouble is, Robbie’s suspected for a while that James is avoiding him because of what happened the last time they were in that flat in Abbotsbury: the kisses, the... well, the sex. He’s thought James is most likely still feeling embarrassed about it, the way he was in the car on the way back, regretting it and wishing it had never happened, in spite of Robbie telling him to forget it and making clear he wasn’t assuming anything by it – even if he’s realised since, to his considerable surprise, that he wouldn’t mind trying it again, though in a bit less of a hurry next time. That explains why he wasn’t going into panic-mode over it, doesn’t it? So, Robbie assumed, James has been keeping his distance to make sure Robbie knows it was a mistake.

That could still be part of it, but it’s obviously not all. And now it’s all come to a head – and what did he mean? I can’t do this any more. Any more today? Or any more at all?

“Earth to Robbie! They don’t pay me to stand here talking to myself, you know!”

Sodding hell. He’s got a job to do, and he can’t afford to be distracted, even if James did mean he’s thinking of resigning. He’ll have to sort the lad later. “Sorry, Laura. Woolgathering. Now, what
was that again?”

His phone beeps as Laura’s explaining what she’s determined so far of the time and cause of death and the likely timing of particular injuries – mostly before death, which of course makes James’s reaction even more understandable. Though this woman is not a drug smuggler; she’s a local hotel worker and, according to one of the uniforms who was first on the scene and found her driving licence, has been in the country for around four years. She’s also from Madrid, not Bogota. Not that any of that would make any difference to how it affects James.

Finally, Laura’s on her way back to base, he’s instructed SOCO and the uniforms, and he can check his phone. A text – and it is from James. I apologise for deserting you, sir. I’ll phone you this evening, if that’s all right.

The unspoken message being, of course, that James would prefer him not to phone now, much less go and see him. Not that he’s got time, in any case. Being without a sergeant at the start of a new case means he’s got double the work to do.

The case turns out to be ridiculously easy to solve, and the outcome all too predictable. Bibiana’s fellow maids at the hotel all know she had a new boyfriend. None of them have met him, but were able to list the days and times he’d come to pick her up from the hotel after her shifts. From there, getting CCTV footage was straightforward, and after only a brief search of the PNC Julie was able to identify the boyfriend as a known sex offender, recently released from prison; a bloke who’d been suspected of murder in the past, but not enough proof could be found. A manhunt is launched, and Jonathan Lake is in custody by late afternoon.

It’s still a couple of hours before Robbie can get away, what with initial paperwork and interviews and bringing Innocent up to date, but at almost seven he’s driving away from the station. Home first to change out of his suit – to arrive in work clothes would send a message he has no intention of sending – and then to James’s flat via a Chinese takeaway and the off-licence next door to it.

James answers promptly when he knocks, and he’s wearing a checked shirt and jeans. His expression shows surprise, but the smile that follows after a moment is genuine. “Hi. I was actually just about to phone you, sir.”

“No need.” Robbie holds up his bribes. “Can I come in?”

James is already moving back, holding the door open in an unhesitating welcome Robbie didn’t expect. “Of course. You didn’t have to do this, you know,” he adds, taking the food from Robbie. Robbie shrugs. “ Been a long day. Me stomach thinks me throat’s been cut.”

James brings plates and cutlery to the breakfast bar while Robbie opens the containers. The bloke looks fine, he thinks; not obviously upset or brooding, and he’s not behaving as if he’d have preferred not to be disturbed. “Looks like you’re feeling better,” he comments. “I told Innocent an’ Hobson you’d gone home sick, by the way, so there shouldn’t be any questions.”

James nods. “I am sorry. I just took one look at her and...” He pauses and takes a long breath, staring down at the floor. “I couldn’t.”

Robbie lays a hand on his bicep. “I know. Didn’t feel too comfortable about it meself, an’ I’m not the one who was there that time. But, if it helps, we got the murderer. He’s in custody.”

“I’m glad.” James sits next to Robbie, turned at an angle so they’re half-facing each other, and opens his beer, then takes a long drink. “You didn’t miss me too much today, then, sir,” he adds
with a faint upward tilt of his lips.

“Ah, man, will you call me Robbie!” He pulls a face at James. “I went off-duty almost an hour ago, and I’m not here as your governor.”

“I realise that.” The lack of any name or title is glaring. “I am glad you came over. I wanted to talk to you, to make sure you understood what I meant earlier.”

“You can’t do this any more,” Robbie quotes.

“I can’t.” James stops eating, stops drinking and just looks straight at him. “I’m resigning from the Force first thing tomorrow.”

For himself, it was an easy decision to make. The hardest part about it is knowing that he’s letting Lewis – no, Robbie, if his boss insists – down. And it’s clear he is. Robbie’s looking back at him, understanding in his expression, but sadness in his eyes.

“Yeah, I knew that’s what you meant.” Robbie lays his fork down and pushes his plate aside. “I understand, course I do. Won’t stop me missing you.”

James starts. What an idiot – it hadn’t even occurred to him that he and Robbie wouldn’t see each other after he works out his notice period. But why should they? They work together. It’s not as if he’s Robbie’s best friend, much less someone he can’t live without.

But then, maybe a clean break will be best. He’s still not been able to stop wishing for the chance to be intimate with Robbie again. There’ve been days where he’s had to find ways not to be in the same room with his governor because the craving, the *yearning*, was just too much to bear.

He still can’t help saying, “Nothing stopping us going for the odd pint, I assume?”

“If you’re interested, then yeah, I’d like to. Course I would. Just wasn’t sure if you...” Robbie shrugs with a self-deprecating grimace.

“It’s not you I need to get away from, Robbie,” James says, and only as he finishes speaking does he realise how soft, *fond*, his tone is. Damn it. He can’t afford to give himself away.

“Glad to hear it.” There’s gentle irony in Robbie’s tone, and his eyes are kind.

“Thank you.” He starts clearing away the food, since neither of them seems to want any more. “I am sorry for abandoning you, though. I’ve tried since we came back, but I just can’t...” He shakes his head.

“Reckon I always knew you’d never stick a lifetime in this job,” Robbie says. “Can’t help wishin’ you’d never gone to Dorset, though. Might’ve been able to hold on until I retired otherwise.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” He drums his fingers on the table. “How long have you got to go, anyway?”

“Four years, give or take. Too long for you.”

“Yes.” If it had been a year or less, he might have been able to consider keeping going. But, given the way he’s been feeling over the past month or so, or even before Dorset, four years sounds like a life sentence. “I’m sorry.”

“Ah, stop apologising, lad. What will you do, anyway? Too young to retire, you, unless you’ve got
a fortune hidden away somewhere.”

“With my smoking habit? No chance.” He stands and gestures towards the sofa; Robbie brings his beer over. “I do have some savings, though. Enough to pay the bills for a few months while I get things organised.”

“Things?”

“Yes.” He flops onto the sofa, only realising as he does so that he’s automatically chosen the cushion right next to Robbie. They’re inches apart, something he’s been avoiding since that night. “I’ve been thinking for a while about what I might do if I wasn’t a copper, and I came to realise that there isn’t really any other ready-made job for me – not something I’d want to do, anyway. Don’t fancy the Civil Service, or any of the usual sort of things ex-coppers tend to do, like security or insurance investigation. What I really want,” he explains, the words coming slowly, probably because he suspects Robbie won’t like this, “is to go back–”

“Not to the priesthood?” There’s almost a plea in Robbie’s voice. Why? Because he hates religion that much? Or because the thought of James returning to a life of celibacy – no. No, of course it’s not that.

“No,” he says immediately; whatever Robbie’s reasons, he doesn’t want him to worry that James is about to do something he’d really hate. “Back to university. A research degree – and ultimately, if I’m fortunate enough to find a job, a lectureship or research fellowship.”

“A sodding academic.”

“Yeah. Will that mean you don’t want to acknowledge me any more?”

Robbie rolls his eyes. “Give over, ye daft sod.” He drains his beer. “When will you start? An’ how are you planning to pay for it, anyway?”

“I’m too late for Michaelmas entry. Term starts in a couple of weeks. But the application deadline for Hilary term is in a couple of weeks, which is just enough time to get the paperwork and references together. As for funding, I’ll get a loan if I have to, but there are scholarships and studentships I can apply for, including Research Council awards – and most of the ones connected with Oxford come with accommodation, so I won’t have to worry about rent for this place. That’s how I got through Cambridge.”

And, though he won’t say it, he’s fairly confident of being successful in a competitive application again. It’s more than ten years since he left Cambridge, but he’s made a habit of reading within his field over the years – because he enjoys it, first and foremost, and also because it’s been a solace after some of the things he’s seen and done on the job.

“They’ll probably be falling over themselves to throw money at you,” Robbie says, and there’s even a hint of pride in his voice. “An’ you’re sure you’ve got enough savings to manage until then? You don’t want to delay giving notice until December?”

“I think today’s taught me that the sooner I go the better. And, yes, I’ll be fine – well, as long as I’m sensible, and that won’t be a problem.” He gestures towards Robbie’s empty bottle. “Another one?”

“Nah. Best be going, but thanks.” Robbie stands, and James follows him to the door, wanting to ask him to stay but not finding the courage. Not feeling capable of accepting Robbie’s rejection, either.

“I’ll see you in the morning, then.” Robbie’s face is creased into concern and sorrow, and part of
James wishes he could tell his governor that he doesn’t mean it, that he’ll stay in the job as long as Robbie wants him to. But he can’t.

So he just nods. “Goodnight – and thank you.”

“For what?”

“For understanding.”

Robbie holds his gaze for a moment, then turns and leaves without another word.

Understanding? Well, yes, he does understand. Doesn’t mean he’s happy.

But James has made up his mind, that’s obvious. There was a sort of peace about him this evening that Robbie hasn’t seen in a very long time. It’s the right decision for James, and he won’t try to talk the lad out of it.

He can do his best for the bloke in other ways, though. Once James has handed in his papers, he’ll talk to Innocent. For one thing, James was entitled to at least three weeks’ leave after Abbotsbury, quite apart from whatever other holiday and overtime he’s accrued. He’ll have money coming in for a few weeks after he leaves, if Robbie has anything to do with it.

Innocent isn’t happy. She storms into Robbie’s office the next day not long after James told Robbie he was off to deliver his resignation. James hasn’t returned – either licking his wounds or out for a smoke. Coming to a halt just inside the door, Innocent bites out, “I thought you said you had things under control with Hathaway?”

“Did my best, Ma’am.” Robbie stands, involuntarily rubbing his ear. “But I don’t think anything would have made a difference. You didn’t see what he had to go through down there, or the lack of support he got from the local CID. I doubt they told you, but on that last night the gang he’d infiltrated gave him a knife an’ ordered him to rape that poor Colombian girl, then cut her open an’ get the drugs.”

Innocent gasps and her face turns white. “Good god. Why?”

“Initiation. An’ if he’d refused, as he was going to, they probably would have killed him.” Relentless, he continues; Innocent should know just what it was like. “Moore’s team knew James was going to the meeting. They knew what’d happened the previous time, that he’d just had to stand there an’ watch that other poor girl get gang-raped before she was sliced open, an’ they did nothing. Just ordered him to go to the meeting-point and keep his cover.”

Innocent actually looks ill. “And then you had that maid yesterday. No wonder.” She swallows. “If it would help, I’m sure I could swing a couple of months’ paid leave for James. Give him some time to put it behind him. He could go on holiday...”

Robbie’s already shaking his head. “I talked to him last night. His mind’s made up. And, much though I hate to admit it – I don’t exactly want to break in a new sergeant – it’s the right thing for him.”

“All right.” Innocent’s tone is reluctant. “Well, in that case, I suppose we need to talk about his replacement.”

“Not now, Ma’am, please? Though there is something else I wanted to discuss...”
He gets her agreement to an additional six weeks’ salary for James, which will take him halfway through November. And, with that, James’s resignation is final, with a last day of work set for two weeks’ time. It feels like a Doomsday countdown – and, yes, Robbie knows he’s being melodramatic, but he doesn’t particularly care.

The news spreads around the station like wildfire. Robbie only just about manages to announce it to their own team before the gossip reaches them – from where, he has no idea, because neither he nor James has told anyone.

He won’t take no for an answer that evening when he invites James for a pint. It’s a more melancholy session than usual, though he suspects that’s entirely on his part; James is still exuding that serenity that Robbie knows comes from having made a decision that’s right for him.

Halfway through their second pint, James leans across the table. “Have you thought about a replacement sergeant yet?”

“Oh, not you an’ all! Innocent’s already been on at me about that. Give me at least a few days to get used to the idea.” Robbie can’t help it; he just doesn’t want to think about having to train up someone new. Every time he looks at the new bloke – or woman – across the office he’ll be reminded that James isn’t there any more. Even though he’s starting to acknowledge in his own mind the fact that James is leaving.

“You should,” James says, almost as if he’s the governor and Robbie’s the bagman in need of mentoring. “And if I may offer a suggestion…?”

“You’re going to anyway.” His tone’s grumpy, and he doesn’t care.

James isn’t deterred. “Julie – DC Lockhart. She’s not far off being ready for promotion, and a few months as a bagman – especially as your bagman – will get her there. She’s clever, shows initiative, excellent attention to detail, stands up for herself and doesn’t seem to be put off by your occasional… shall I say odd humours?”

“An’ what’s that code for?” He’s even more grumpy now, and cares even less.

James smiles crookedly. “You know very well – sir.”

“You’ll get an even odder humour if you keep callin’ me sir off-duty. An’ I hope you’re not planning on siring me after you leave!”

“No.” James’s lips twitch. “Thought I might switch to Mr Lewis. Or Detective Inspector.”

“You want to watch it. You’ve seen how I treat civilians who don’t show proper respect for the police. Doesn’t take that much to get arrested for breach of the peace, or failing to co-operate with an officer in the fulfilment of his duty.”

James’s grin widens. “You’d actually put me in handcuffs, Detective Inspector Lewis?”

He feels himself flushing. “Oh, give over, you cheeky sod.”

“Don’t be a stranger, now,” Laura Hobson instructs him, and reaches up for a hug. He hugs her back, touched not only that she’s come to his farewell drinks at the White Horse – arranged behind his back by Lewis – but that she’s actually fond enough of him to do this.
Hobson’s barely stepped back when Innocent takes her place. Thankfully, the Chief Super doesn’t try to hug him; she extends a hand with a warm, if wry smile. “Good luck, James. I’m sorry we couldn’t persuade you to change your mind, but do keep in touch, won’t you?” He promises he will, though the notion of phoning or emailing Innocent once in a while feels too bizarre.

Next, Julie Lockhart’s smiling at him. “I’ll miss you, Sarge. But good luck.”

He smiles back at her. “You’ll run into me around town, I’m sure. For some odd reason, the university’s never far from one crime scene or another.”

“I wanted to thank you, too. Lewis told me you recommended me.” She reaches up and presses a kiss to his cheek.

He bends and kisses her in return. “You’ll be fine,” he assures her; he knows she’s nervous about stepping into his shoes. “He’s the best governor you could wish for.”

“I know – and you were the best Sarge.” Her smile’s tinged with sadness this time. “I’ll look after him for you.”

He smiles his thanks, then turns away, hoping that he can make his escape – and finds Lewis standing by the door. “Ready to get out of here?”

“God, yes.” Lewis is giving him a lift home, since he no longer has his car; it was Oxfordshire Police property and has been returned. He’d said he can make his own way home, but Lewis insisted.

The drive’s silent, but companionable. Lewis studied him just before starting the engine, the expression on his face one that speaks volumes without saying a word. Regret and sadness, but also glad that James is free to do what he wants instead of being stuck in a job that was eating him up inside.

Ten minutes later, Lewis pulls up outside James’s flat, leaving the engine running. “Well, night, then.”

James turns to look at the man who’s no longer his boss, and notices with some surprise – and yet part of him isn’t surprised at all – that Robbie is the only person who isn’t acting as if this evening is any different from any other time. Yet it is, and now it hits James himself: for the first time in five years, apart from when one or other was on holiday or he was in Dorset, he won’t be seeing Robbie Lewis at work in the morning.

But that’s the only thing he regrets about his decision. Nothing else. He meets Robbie’s gaze. “Thank you, sir.” The title is deliberate; it’s an acknowledgement of everything his governor has done for him, been to him, over the years. And his thanks is for more than just the lift home.

Robbie seems to understand; his face creases into a knowing expression. “Go on with you now. I’ll phone you in a few days.”

Incapable of further speech, James nods and gets out of the car.

It’s more than strange the following morning, and subsequent days, not to get dressed in a suit and head off to the nick, or to get a phone call at some unearthly hour of the night to go to a crime scene. For the first time in eight years, in fact, he doesn’t actually need to carry a phone around with him at all times. All the same, he buys himself a new smartphone; he’s got too used to the
convenience to be without one.

He texts Lewis with his new number, but doesn’t receive an acknowledgement, and spends several hours fretting that his former governor was just being polite when he said they’d stay in touch. But then around six Robbie phones him, explains that he was tied up in meetings and suspect interviews, and invites him for a pint. They arrange to meet at the White Horse, given that James has no way of getting to their other favourites, but the Broad’s easily accessible by bus. “Next time, I’ll come and pick you up,” Robbie promises as he drops James home afterwards.

In between drinks with Robbie, which seems to happen every four or five days, James is busy with crafting a research proposal for his DPhil application. He’ll probably get bounced down to an MPhil due to the lack of an existing postgraduate degree, but he can transfer to a DPhil after a year or so. There are also applications to complete: to the theology department, the three colleges he’d most like to be associated with, and for four scholarships for which he’s eligible and are available for a Hilary term start.

It’s mid-October and he’s been officially unemployed – though still receiving a salary, at least for another few weeks – for a month, and again he’s waiting for Robbie to arrive for a pint, this time at the Victoria Arms in Marston, one of their regular haunts over the years. He got here early enough to secure their favourite table by the river, but so far he’s occupying it alone. It’s ironic; as a copper, he was more than familiar with the adage that detectives rarely got to keep plans they’d made for off-duty time, and it almost never bothered him. Now that he’s the off-duty plans of a still-working detective, it’s frustrating. Over the past few weeks, Robbie’s been late for a pre-arranged meeting twice, had to cancel once, and one other time never arrived at all. It wasn’t until much later that James got a brief text explaining that Robbie had been called to a murder scene.

What’s even more ironic, of course, is that before he resigned he’d been avoiding Robbie at times, because of what now feels like a ridiculous level of self-consciousness over his feelings for the man. His feelings haven’t changed, but now he’s grateful for every minute of Robbie Lewis’s company he can get. The thought of avoiding Robbie now is just ludicrous.

He’s starting to feel as if he understands what Robbie’s wife’s life must have been, and why Robbie’s commented a number of times over the years about not getting to see his kids enough while they were growing up.

Still, this evening he has a few things to sort out, and it’s definitely more pleasant working on them by the Cherwell than in his flat.

“The way you’re frowning over that, it’s either stupidly complicated or it’s got you worried.”

James looks up from his smartphone to see Robbie sliding onto the bench opposite him and reaching for the pint James – more in hope than expectation – had waiting for him. “Not really. It’s just logistics, but they’re proving a bit more challenging than I’d hoped.”

Robbie simply raises an eyebrow. James smiles wryly and explains. “It’s just that if I get any of the scholarships I’m under consideration for I’ll have accommodation in college, but not until the second week in January – which means I can’t let the flat go any sooner than the end of January.”

“Ah.” Robbie nods. “So you’re stuck with almost a month’s rent you won’t need an’ could do without having to pay.”

“Yeah.” James closes down the app and puts his phone away. “Not a huge problem. Anyway, how’s the case?”
“Now, you know I shouldn’t be talking about police business with a civilian,” Robbie points out, but then grins and gives James a run-down of what’s happened in the few days since they last talked. “Could do with your massive brain to tell me where I’m going wrong.”

Not being immersed in the details of Robbie’s latest investigation means that of course he’s not as useful as he would once have been, nor does he have access to the resources for research and information-gathering that he previously did. But he still offers a couple of suggestions that seem rational to him, and is gratified to notice that the second one sets Robbie nodding and looking thoughtful. Unfortunately, it also means that, as soon as he’s finished his pint, Robbie says he has to be off so that he can follow up on the potential lead.

“Give you a lift home? Or at least back into town,” Robbie offers as he stands. “An’ I never asked how you got here, did I? Some friend I am.”

James smiles, shaking his head. “It’s fine. I have a bike now. Reminds me of my Cambridge days.”

“Proper student you’re turning into. All right, if you’re sure?”

“Yeah, think I’m going to sit here a bit longer. Good luck with the case.”

It does hurt, just a little, to see Robbie drive off and know he’s not entitled to go with him any more – but it’s not the work he misses, and given that Robbie will never want what James can only dream of, maybe it is just as well that his share of his ex-governor’s time is so limited these days, even if he’d prefer it otherwise.

Yet another interrupted evening with James. It feels as if he’s barely seen the lad since they stopped working together. It’s the job, of course, and James understands that, but still Robbie can’t help wondering how many more times the bloke will just put up with being kept waiting for hours, or abandoned in the middle of a pint – or being stood up altogether. Sooner or later, James will stop suggesting they meet, or will have other things to do when Robbie invites him.

He’ll just have to do better, if he wants to keep James as a friend – which he does. Sod it, he misses the bloke, even if Lockhart is showing promise as a bagman. She’s not James, though, either in the standard of her work or in her presence as a partner. He’ll be walking through the city or a college, on the way to or from an interview, and turn to Lockhart to make some comment or other, fully expecting a snappy comeback or erudite quote, and half the time she looks at him with clearly no idea what to say. And he still walks into the nick most mornings and feels a sudden pang of loss when the face at the other desk in his office isn’t James’s.

He misses the way they’d got to the point where they could almost anticipate what the other was about to say. So many times lately he wouldn’t even need to finish a sentence; James was already doing what he wanted, or was finishing his thought. He misses the way they’d exchange glances when Innocent was on their backs about something, or would bounce off each other when asking questions of a possible suspect, trying to catch their interviewee off guard. The constant literary quotes and allusions. He even misses the sardonic way James would call him sir when he was pissed off about something.

And he’s going to have to do something about it, if he doesn’t want to lose the person he’s been closest to since he came back from the BVI, the friend who’s been his strongest support and helped him stay sane. And, though it’s taken him some time to recognise what he’s been feeling and come to terms with it, the only person he can imagine wanting as a permanent part of his life – and in his bed, always assuming that James would be open to that.
Not his next off-duty – he’s already committed to going to Lyn’s – but the time after, work permitting, he’s going to invite James over to his place for the day. They can have a natter, share a takeaway, go for a walk, watch crap telly and have a beer or two; doesn’t matter what, as long as he makes clear that he wants James to stay a part of his life.

There might be something else he could do, as well. That’ll take a bit more organising, and won’t happen as quickly, but it’s doable – and the only wonder is that it never occurred to him before now.

Nothing he can do about his plans yet, though. For now, the case beckons. He pulls into his usual parking space outside the station and calls Lockhart back in. It’s probably going to be a long night.
October gives way to November, and leaves fall from trees and turn into a soggy mess on the ground. Long, mild autumn evenings give way to rain and blustery wind, and cycling around the streets of Oxford becomes decidedly less fun.

James is on his way over to Robbie’s. What with a triple murder that’s occupied all of Robbie’s waking hours and more, and visiting his daughter in Manchester the last time he had a couple of days off, it’s been more than two weeks since they’ve seen each other – unheard-of in the old days other than holidays – and almost that long since they’ve done more than left voicemails or texts on each other’s phone. Finally, though, Robbie has a free day and, his voicemail said, he’s had a promise from Innocent herself that he won’t be called except in case of dire emergency, and he’s invited James to his flat.

Although he still wants more than he can have, seeing Robbie so infrequently has taught James that he can cope with those inconvenient desires. Far better a bit of frustrated longing once in a while than never seeing the man who means more to him than anyone else ever has.

As luck would have it, he’s less than ten minutes away when the heavens open. By the time he makes it to Robbie’s, he’s soaked to the skin. He swears roundly and, when he runs out of imaginative words in both contemporary and Shakespearean English, switches to Latin, which takes him to his destination.

“James!” God, it’s good to see Robbie. He’s looking tired, James immediately notices when his friend opens the door. “You’re wet through, man! Come on, get inside. Straight in there with you.” Not taking no for an answer, Robbie practically shoves him into the bathroom. “Plenty of towels in the cupboard, an’ I’ll bring you something dry to wear. Leave your clothes on the floor and I’ll throw them in the dryer.”

He’s in the shower five minutes later, letting the hot water pour over him – absolute bliss; his teeth had been chattering by the time he tied the bike up outside Robbie’s building, and his fingers had fumbled so much with the lock he almost gave up and left the bike unprotected.

“I’m coming in, all right?” Robbie calls, and James yells assent. He wonders for a moment whether Robbie expects him to turn his back, but then reminds himself that they’ve seen each other in varying stages of undress so many times over the years, between the gym, getting changed in each other’s flats or one briefing the other while one of them dressed – and, of course, in the flat in Abbotsbury. No. That’s forgotten.

He shoves the memory aside; dwelling on what can’t be will get him nowhere, and could damage what he’s managed to rebuild with Robbie if his friend ever realised. “I’ll be out in five minutes.”

“Take your time,” Robbie says, and through the steam on the shower door James can see the other
man bending, obviously to pick up his clothes. “I’ll have the kettle on.”

The clothes Robbie’s left look ridiculous on him. A rugby shirt that’s far too wide, but the sleeves ride up halfway to his elbows. Tracksuit bottoms that would fall down except for the draw-cord, and that end at half-mast. At least Robbie’s left a pair of long, warm socks.

He pads out of the bathroom and into the main area of the flat. Robbie’s pouring water into mugs, but he looks around at James’s approach, and immediately grins. “You’re a sight, man! If you’re serious about this cycling lark, best get yourself a decent slicker.” His grin widens. “Play your cards right, I might give you one for Christmas.”

“You’re too kind,” James drawls, accepting the coffee and wrapping his hands around the hot mug.

“Never thought, though.” Robbie’s face creases into a grimace. “Should’ve come and picked you up. I knew the forecast was for rain. Still can’t get used to you not havin’ a car.” As they move to the couch, Robbie adds, “Next time you come over, bring a change of clothes, eh? Could be handy having something to wear here, just in case.”

James makes himself comfortable on the sofa, barely resisting the temptation to curl up with his feet beneath him. “How’s the investigation? Any new leads?”

Robbie nudges him with his shoulder. “Go on, put your feet up.” Oh, he’s missed this, their ability to read each other with just a look. Robbie waits until he’s followed instructions before continuing. “Thought we were making progress, until our prime suspect turned out to have a solid alibi for one of the murders.”

“And you were convinced he – or she – was the one?” Robbie nods. “Then either the alibi’s fake or there’s an issue with the time of death.”

“We’ve checked and double-checked the alibi. An’ Laura’s certain about the time of death.”

James tilts his head as he looks at Robbie. “Remember what you always told me? If something doesn’t fit and you think it should, keep checking from every angle. If it still doesn’t fit, either the facts aren’t right or your theory’s not right.”

Robbie regards him in silence for close to a minute, his expression a mixture of affection and exasperation. Finally, he says, “There’s times I want to bloody shake you for resigning on me, you useless sodding lump!” James stays silent; he can’t exactly apologise, because he doesn’t regret his decision. “Ah, you’re all right,” Robbie adds after a moment. “It’s not as if I don’t understand why you had to. I just miss you.”

“I miss you too,” he dares to say.

After a moment, Robbie reaches out and ruffles his still-damp hair. “We’ll just have to make sure it’s not so long next time.” He moves away before James can properly enjoy the sensation of his friend’s hand in his hair, reaching for his mobile. “Laura? Lewis. Do me a favour? Can you take another look at the results on Alex Darber? I’m hoping the time of death might be out by a couple of hours. No, I’m not questioning your expertise! You know better than that. It’s just...” He pauses, clearly listening – or enduring a reprimand for his doubt in the excellent Dr Hobson’s ability. “Yeah, I know it’s a long shot, but if you could...? Thanks. I owe you one.”

Robbie ends the call, then hits a button again – another speed-dial. “Hi, Julie. Yeah, Lewis. I know we already checked Thompson’s alibi for the Darber murder, but I need you to look at it again. Re-interview everyone involved if you have to, check all the timings, whatever. Phone me if you find
out anything.”

Robbie drops his phone on the coffee-table. “So much for not working today. All your fault, that is.”

James quirks one brow. “Do you want me to apologise?”

“Course I don’t, you daft sod. I just want you to—” *Come back*, James fully expects to hear. “—distract me from bloody work by telling me what you’ve been up to lately, now that you’re an idle layabout.”

James pretends to pout at the insult. “If you’re sure you’re actually interested in the doings of an idle layabout...”

Robbie swipes at his arm. “Don’t be daft. You know better than that.”

____________________________________

“The big news is...” James pauses for effect, and Robbie throws him an impatient glare, but inside he’s smiling fondly. “I’ve been accepted for the MPhil.”

“Come on – as if that was in any doubt!” But he smiles all the same. “Good job. That deserves a proper drink.”

“Just a minute.” James holds up a hand. “And... I heard yesterday that I’ve made the final shortlist for the Balliol College scholarship. They liked my essay.” His smile this time is almost shy. “There’ll be an interview, and then... well, we’ll see. The other alternative is Research Council funding, but I’d have to wait until September for that.”

“That’s great.” He’d love to find the words to tell James how proud he is of the lad, but anything he can think of saying sounds trite, or even patronising. He’d hug him, but after what a hug led to that last night in Abbotsbury he can’t imagine that going down well. “Not that I’m surprised, bloody genius like you.”

It’s ham-handed and, viewed in one light, not even complimentary, but James seems to understand what he means, for he smiles again, a genuine, happy smile. “Thanks.”

Robbie realises that he’s just sitting there grinning fondly at James like an idiot. “Right. Drinks.”

Going to the fridge gives him a minute or two to get himself under control – and to decide that this really is the perfect opportunity to bring up the first stage of the plan he came up with a few weeks ago.

It’s a little later before he mentions it; James is back in his own clothes and they’re on their second beer. “Was hoping you might do me a favour.”

James turns towards him, eyebrows raised. “Of course.”

“You haven’t heard what it is yet.” James’s lips twitch and he makes a *get on with it* gesture. “I’m moving in a couple of weeks. Got movers booked an’ that, but there’s all the packing and unpacking. Wondered if you’d mind... I know it’s an imposition, but—”

“Of course I’ll help,” James says instantly. “But this is a bit sudden, isn’t it? At least, you never mentioned it before. What’s brought this on?”
“Wanted somewhere bigger. Second bedroom, mainly,” he explains, then adds, “Something else I haven’t told you yet, but I couldn’t before. Our Lyn’s pregnant. Almost four months gone, but she didn’t want anyone outside the family knowing before she was past the first trimester.”

James’s eyes widen, and his lips curve into a wide, genuine smile. “That’s wonderful. You must be very happy.” The smile turns to a wicked grin. “Granddad.”

“Yeah, yeah. Had more than enough of that from Lyn already.” For a moment, he looks away; not for the first time, he’s reminded that Val never got the chance to be called Granny. Lyn’s baby will never know its second grandmother.

A hand covers his, pressing warmly. “You’ll love the baby enough for both of you,” James says, his voice gentle but assured. “And you’ll tell him or her all about Granny Val.”

Was he really that transparent? But, no, it’s just that James knows him so well. “Thanks, man,” he mutters, and briefly turns his hand over to grip James’s before the lad can pull it away. “Anyway,” he adds, regaining composure with a deep breath, “thought that a bigger place might be better, so she an’ Tim can come down with the baby if they want.”

James nods. “Makes sense. Just tell me when you want me. I’ll be there.”

*What would you say if I told you I always want you, lad?* “Monday after next. I’ve got the Tuesday off as well – maybe, if you don’t mind, you could stay over an’ help then too? If you’re not busy, that is.”

“As you reminded me earlier, I am an idle layabout at present. What would I be busy with?”

James is treated to accounts of Lyn’s morning sickness; apparently, she’s just like Val in that regard. It wouldn’t exactly be his preferred topic of conversation but, on the other hand, Robbie’s never talked to him this much about Val before. It’s a privilege he feels honoured by, and he shares Robbie’s irritation when they’re interrupted by Robbie’s mobile.

It’s Dr Hobson, and after a few minutes’ conversation Robbie sets the phone down, looking both irritated and pleased. “You were right. The lab wrote a couple of figures down wrongly and, with that corrected, the time of death’s ninety minutes later than originally estimated. Laura is not happy.”

“But it puts your suspect back in the frame, doesn’t it?”

“It’d be a stretch, but it’s doable.” Robbie reaches for his phone again and, as he does so, it rings a second time. From the conversation, James works out that it’s Lockhart. Robbie ends the conversation five minutes later with a satisfied, “Bring him in and caution him. I’ll interview him tomorrow.” Setting the phone down again, he turns to James, his expression fully Detective Inspector Lewis on top of his game. “Right a second time. Thompson’s alibi confessed to having been paid to provide it – and that he was told to give specific times. Those times match the original time of death, which Thompson knew from when we questioned him initially, but not the revised time. We’ve got him either way.”

Even though he’s not a copper any more, James can’t help feeling satisfied that he’s still got it. “Sure you don’t want to go in and question him now?”

“Nah. He can cool his heels in a cell overnight – do him good. Besides, this is me day off, an’ I had other arrangements that are more important than a self-serving tosser like him.”
James’s lips twitch. “Good to know I’m more important than a self-serving tosser.”

Robbie grins. “It’s a close call.”

Later, Robbie insists on sharing a bottle of wine to toast the baby, over-riding James’s protest that he’ll need to be able to cycle home. “Don’t talk nonsense. I’m not lettin’ you go back out in this.” The rain has been relentless throughout the day. “You can sleep here an’ I’ll drop you and your bike off on me way to work tomorrow.”

James’s grateful acceptance isn’t just because of the rain. Robbie’s offer is further confirmation that the few, and occasionally abortive, invitations for pints aren’t just politeness on his former governor’s part. Robbie really does want to spend time with him.

After Robbie drives him home the next morning, they don’t see each other again until moving day. There’ve been phone calls and texts – Robbie updating him on the case (he got a confession out of Thompson, which clearly made his day) and on plans for the move. James offers to come over for a couple of evenings before the official moving day, so he can help to pack up the old flat. At Robbie’s suggestion, he brings a rucksack with enough clothes for a few days and sleeps on the sofa, carrying on with packing up the kitchen, bathroom and breakables in the living room while Robbie works on Sunday.

It’s a reminder that before too much longer he’ll need to do the same with his own flat. None of the furniture is his, but he’s accumulated a lot of possessions over the years, and there won’t be room for all of them in his rooms in college. At least he knows now that he’s got a scholarship: full funding and accommodation for at least the two years of his MPhil, and renewable if he is accepted as a doctoral student later.

He tries to imagine asking Robbie to help him pack up his own belongings, but can’t quite see it happening. As he wraps a framed photograph of a much younger Robbie Lewis with his wife and kids, James wonders for a moment if Robbie might offer, but dismisses the thought. Robbie hasn’t asked about his own impending move in weeks, and anyway, he has far less free time and more important demands on it.

The following day, James sees the new flat for the first time and is stunned. It’s almost twice the size of Robbie’s last place, and completely different from the functional flats Robbie’s had over the years. They were always fairly comfortable, and bit by bit Robbie had added personal touches to make them homely, but none of them had ever felt like a home. Rather like his own flat, he realises soberly.

This place is bright, airy, with a large bay window in the living room, a kitchen twice the size of the other flat, a dining area, and two sizeable double bedrooms. The first has Robbie’s orthopaedic bed, and the second sports a king-sized bed – clearly chosen with Lyn and her partner in mind. There are bedside cabinets on either side, as well as a wardrobe and low chest of drawers with a mirror, and James calculates that a cot will also fit.

“What do you think?” Robbie asks from the doorway, and James turns, startled.

“It’s lovely. Very spacious. I imagine your daughter and her family will be very comfortable here.”

“Hope you will be, too.” James blinks. Robbie raises his eyebrows. “You’re sleepin’ here tonight, aren’t you?”

That hadn’t really occurred to him; if he’d thought about it at all, he’d assumed he’d be on the couch again. It dawns on him then that Robbie has planned this carefully – after all, he didn’t need
to have the new furniture delivered today, did he?

There’s another surprise later, when Robbie drives them to the Trout for dinner, the kitchen still being in a state of barely unpacked. “Given notice on your place yet?” Robbie asks, munching his way happily through steak and kidney pie and chips.

“Not yet – remember I said I’ll need to keep it on until the end of January?”

“No, you don’t.” Robbie takes a gulp of beer. “I’ve got a spare bedroom now, an’ plenty of room for your stuff. Give notice before December, and you can move in wi’ me until you get your college accommodation. I’ll take a look at my off-duty between Christmas and New Year so I can return the favour an’ help you pack. Lots of storage space in the new flat, too, so you can leave anything that won’t fit in your rooms.” He pauses to chew. “Come an’ stay for the weekend any time you want, as well, or if they kick you out for the summer.”

A brass key appears on the table, and Robbie pushes it across to him.

James is lost for words for several moments as it dawns on him that Robbie lied to him. He didn’t get this bigger flat so Lyn could come and visit – or not entirely. He did it so James could have somewhere to stay.

“Thank you,” he finally manages, struggling to speak around the lump in his throat that must be food he’s not chewed properly. “I never expected...”

“Know you didn’t, lad.” Robbie’s smile is fond as well as kind, and James’s heart does flip-flops. “Was being selfish, mostly. Don’t get to see enough of you, what with the job wreckin’ our arrangements more often than not. If you’re staying at the flat at least some of the time—” He shrugs. “Makes it easier. Besides,” he adds with a grin James is very familiar with, “you saw that kitchen. You don’t imagine I’m gonna make much use of it? That’s your job.”

That’s an easy opening. “You saying I should forget research and try a third career as a chef?”

Robbie laughs. “No chance. Then you’d be the one working crazy hours and I’d still never see you.”

That went well. Robbie drains his pint as he watches James head outside for a cigarette. He’d been half-afraid the lad’s pride wouldn’t let him accept. Of course, James saw through the gesture, knows damn well the only reason he’s got this flat is so there’s proper space for James rather than an uncomfortable couch.

It just made perfect sense once he started to think about it. They’ve always got on well, and now they don’t have the barrier of their working relationship to get in the way, presenting procedural obstacles as well as the power imbalance inherent in his being James’s boss. He likes James’s company, has never been bored during any evenings the two of them spent over the years slouched on his sofa, sharing a drink or two and either talking or watching something on the telly. And, while he knows James would never have accepted an invitation to move in when he wouldn’t be able to afford what he’d insist were his share of bills, he took a gamble that the offer of a few days every now and again would be acceptable.

James might not want what Robbie is ever more certain he would like the two of them to be to each other, but that’s okay. Friendship and companionship are pretty good compromises, and if there’s anything he’s learned since Val died it’s how to live with compromises.
He goes to the bar to pay the bill, then walks outside to find James. “Come on, lad, let’s go home. Via Sainsbury’s, mind. Since I’ve got you staying the night, you can make us a proper breakfast in the morning.”

“Which, I presume, means I don’t get to go to bed tonight until I’ve found the required cooking implements,” James comments dryly.

“Either that, or you’ll be up at the crack of dawn,” Robbie retorts cheerfully, laying his hand against James’s back as they walk to the car.

“James, it’s Jean Innocent. Where are you?”

Innocent? Of course, he thought the number on his display seemed familiar, but she’s no longer on his phone’s contact list, and it’s been more than three months now since he left the Force. “At home, Ma’am. Is something—?”

He breaks off as he hears her talking to someone in the background. There has to be something wrong. The Chief Super wouldn’t phone him for a casual conversation, and in any case her brisk, no-nonsense tone gives it away.

“James, I’m sending a uniform car to your flat. You’ll need to come to the John Radcliffe immediately.” Robbie. His throat’s dry and his voice refuses to function. It has to be Robbie; there’s no other reason why she would call him. “It seems that Inspector Lewis never removed you as his local emergency contact, and so we need you.”

“What’s—” His voice gives way, and he tries again. “What’s happened to him, Ma’am? Is he–?”

“He was injured in the pursuit of a suspect, and was admitted with head injuries. He’s currently unconscious, and the hospital has requested his emergency contact be present.”

And that’s the only reason he’s been told. James swallows, trying to lose the lump in his throat. Of course he doesn’t have any right to be notified. He’s not Robbie’s bagman, not any more. But— He castigates himself silently. He isn’t the one with rights in this situation. “What about his daughter, Ma’am? Has she been notified?”

“Not yet. It all depends on how things go in the next hour or two, apparently – and,” Innocent adds, faint impatience in her voice, “it seems as if you’re the only one with authority to make that decision. Lewis apparently didn’t want his daughter worried unnecessarily. Now, I must go. Constable Daly will bring you straight to me.”

James shoves his phone in his pocket and, for a moment, stares sightlessly at the wall. Then, taking a deep breath, he seizes coat and shoes, putting them on simultaneously before bending to fasten laces. He’s waiting outside on the street when the car arrives, lights flashing.

The constable insists that he sit in the back, and doesn’t talk to him at all other than an “I really couldn’t say, sir,” in response to James’s request for an update. It’s a stark reminder of his loss of status – which, of course, Robbie’s reminded him of many times, but it never mattered until now.

Even though lights and siren are on and Daly’s driving as fast as is safe as well as going through every red traffic light, the journey still takes too long. The nail on James’s index finger is bitten to the quick by the time they arrive. He’s escorted in through A&E, where the brightly-coloured decorations and tree, and the piped Christmas songs, seem completely incongruous. A week until Christmas – oh, god, what if he has to tell Lyn her father is dead, or permanently disabled in some
way, within a day or two of the anniversary of her mother’s death? And when she’s expecting her first child, too.

And he’s the one who has to decide whether, and when, to tell Lyn what’s going on. Thank you very much, Robbie Lewis. You might have told me that’s what you’d done. He inhales deeply, girding himself for whatever is to come.

Don’t borrow trouble, man. Wait until you have all the facts.

“Yes, sir,” he murmurs to himself. Constable Daly gives him an enquiring glance, and he shakes his head. “Talking to myself. Don’t mind me.”

Innocent is waiting in a private room, and Daly leaves the two of them alone with the door closed. Bypassing formalities, James says, “Where is he?”

“A doctor’s with him at the moment. The staff will want to speak with you when the examination’s finished. In the meantime—”

“What happened, Ma’am?”

“I can’t tell you that, James. As you’re very well aware, I can’t discuss ongoing investigations with civilians.” Despite her words, though, Innocent’s expression is sympathetic.

“Official policy makes clear that, as Lewis’s emergency contact, I can be told whatever you would tell family members,” James points out.

She inclines her head. “True.” A frown creases her forehead. “I may have been labouring under a misapprehension. I assumed Lewis had simply forgotten to change his record, but...? The two of you are still in contact, then?”

“We’re friends, Ma’am. I’m sure his phone records will reveal regular calls to my number.” And he’s spent several nights in Robbie’s new flat by now, and even has a couple of changes of clothes and a spare toothbrush and razor left there, at Robbie’s express instruction.

“You don’t need to prove it, James. And I apologise. Had I realised that you and Robbie were still close, I would have handled this differently.” She waves him to a chair and sits opposite him. “From what DC Lockhart told me, I understand that they were in a residential street in Blackbird Leys, and Robbie was pursuing a suspect who was resisting arrest. The suspect got into a car and drove straight at Robbie. He took evasive action, but the suspect then opened the car door and slammed it into Robbie. He fell and hit his head on the edge of the kerb.”

James’s fists are clenching and unclenching. “And did the bastard get away?”

“No, thanks to Lockhart’s prompt action in phoning for backup and an ambulance. She gave a detailed description of car and driver, and I was notified just after I phoned you that the suspect is in custody.”

“Good.”

The door opens then and a dark-skinned woman in scrubs enters. “Chief Superintendent? I understand Inspector Lewis’s emergency contact has arrived.”

“Yes. James Hathaway, this is Dr Hamza. She’s been treating Robbie. I’ll leave you to it, if you prefer.”
He’s about to nod until he notices what he previously missed: the tension in Innocent’s hands and around her eyes. She’s worried – which makes the fear inside him intensify, but he pushes that aside. Innocent cares about her officers; he’s always known that. “Please stay, Ma’am.”

Dr Hamza sits opposite James. “To reassure you first, Mr Hathaway, although Inspector Lewis sustained a serious head injury and is currently in an induced coma, as well as sustaining lacerations to his left thigh and right hand, his life is in no immediate danger.”

James seizes on the one word that alarms him. “Immediate?”

“All head injuries have the potential to be serious, Mr Hathaway, particularly if they’re significant enough to lead to unconsciousness. I wouldn’t be doing my job properly if I led you to think there was no risk that his condition could worsen. However, from what I can see, Inspector Lewis appears to have a rather solid skull. The injury he sustained could well have left another person brain-damaged, yet I strongly suspect that he will wake up some time later today or tomorrow with nothing more than a bad headache and concussion. The induced coma is nothing to worry about, by the way. It’s only to give him time to heal before his brain is required to work again. I expect that we’ll be ready to withdraw the medication controlling the coma within a number of hours, and then it’ll be up to him.”

“Skull like an anvil,” James murmurs as the breath whooshes out of him in relief.

“James?”

“He told me that once. Said he got one hell of a knock on the head years ago on a case, and the doctor who treated him said he has a skull like an anvil and he was bloody lucky.”

Dr Hamza nods. “There was certainly evidence of a previous blow to the head. Anyway, we’ll be moving him out of the ED shortly - to a private room, given he’s a serving police officer. Depending on how he is when he regains consciousness, I expect we’ll want to keep him in for a couple of days.”

Innocent’s frowning. “You’re really sure there shouldn’t be any long-term consequences?”

“Not according to our tests so far, but rest assured that he will continue to be monitored.” Dr Hamza turns back to James. “I understand Inspector Lewis has a daughter in Manchester, but that it’s your decision as to whether she should be informed.”

“Apparently so.” James glances at Innocent. “Lyn should know – if she were the one unconscious in hospital and no-one had told Robbie, he’d be furious. I’ll phone her once I’ve seen him, and then it’ll be up to her if she wants to come down.”

James leans against the open doorway of Robbie’s private room – standard procedure for serving police officers injured in the line of duty – watching as a nurse adjusts a control on the machine monitoring his brain-waves. Despite Dr Hamza’s reassurances, he’s not finding it all that easy to let go of his fear for Robbie’s well-being.

It’s surprising, he can’t help thinking, that over the years they’ve worked together and the dangerous situations they’ve been in, this is only the second time one of them’s been admitted – and both times it was in an unconscious state. They’ve had minor injuries aplenty, and even bullet and knife-wounds, but only this time for Robbie and that other time for him, more than two years ago now, when Robbie ran into a burning building to save him after he’d lied and lied and lied.
“I am so sorry,” he murmurs now, the apology Robbie would never let him deliver at the time.

The nurse leaves, first setting a comfortable visitor’s chair by the bed, and James drops into it, suddenly overcome by exhaustion. He shakes himself – how ridiculous, it’s only mid-afternoon and he’s been doing nothing all day until now.

Robbie is lying still and pale in the bed, a large bandage over part of his head, and the bedcovers over his left thigh are raised. Unconscious, not moving. Induced coma, James reminds himself, and orders himself to be patient.

He leans forward, speaking close to Robbie’s ear. “If this is all an attempt to prove to me that I should never have resigned and left you to your own devices, you devious Geordie bastard, it won’t work.” He’d really love a cigarette right now, but he’s going nowhere. “Just bloody wake up, sir, so I can abuse you to your face.” If anything would annoy Robbie enough to open his eyes, that sir would do it.

He shifts in the chair, making himself more comfortable. “Well, you’ve just managed to put a spanner in your Christmas plans, haven’t you? Can’t see you being able to drive to Manchester with your leg in that state. Assuming you were planning to go to Lyn’s – you never said, but you do most years.” James drums his fingers on his knee. “I would drive you, and come and pick you up to go home as well, except I don’t have a car any more. Sorry. Could hire one, I suppose. Though I imagine it’s more likely that Lyn or her partner will come and get you. Or you’ll insist on taking the train, just to prove you don’t need me.”

*Bit inconsistent there, James,* he tells himself. Or is it just that he suspects Robbie would be only too happy to claim he needs James at work, but not otherwise? Though that’s not entirely fair. Robbie was quick enough to ask for his help with moving, and then there’s that offer to put him up whenever he needs it.

“I just wish I knew what you really want from me.” His gaze rests somewhere close to the top of Robbie’s head; the closed eyes aren’t offering much in the way of succour right now. “Friendship? You know you’ve got that. A drinking companion whenever you’re feeling a bit lonely? Someone to keep you company now and then after you retire – assuming you don’t move to Manchester. A flatmate? Hardly. Whatever it is, I hope you know you only have to ask. There’s only one thing I won’t do, not even for you, and that’s rejoin the police.”

Robbie’s not helping; not waking to answer any of James’s questions, though that’s just as well since he’s not sure he’d want Robbie hearing any of the rubbish he’s been spouting anyway. He presses his lips together and exhales sharply through his nose, then, abruptly, reaches out and strokes one fingertip down the side of Robbie’s face.

“Enough,” he tells himself, then stands and leaves the room. Time to go outside for a fag and to phone Lyn. Not that he can tell her much at the moment, but it’s the least he can do.
The conversation with Lyn is difficult. She’s upset, not just by the fact that her dad’s lying unconscious in hospital, but also because she wasn’t the first to be informed.

“It’s not that I have a problem with the fact that you and my dad are close, James. It’s that it shouldn’t have been left to you to decide whether or not I get told!”

“I know, and you can beat him up about it when he’s back on his feet. I will be, too, for what it’s worth.”

That makes her smile, but she’s teary again when she asks for more details of Robbie’s injuries. James tells her what he knows, and finds himself drawing on all the skills he used as a detective when talking to family members. As she calms, her questions become more technical, and he’s reminded that she’s a nurse, so he suggests that she phone the hospital later and ask for Dr Hamza.

“Do you think I should come down?” she asks then.

He takes a deep breath, then a draw on his cigarette. “I really don’t think he’s in any sort of danger. The doctor is pretty sure he’ll wake within the next twelve hours, and then there’ll just be the other injuries on top of what’ll most likely be a very bad headache. Maybe concussion.”

“You said his leg is injured. And a hand. He’ll need help when he goes home.” Yes, and James has every intention of providing that help – but if Lyn wants to, she takes precedence, doesn’t she? But when she speaks again, she sounds torn. “I’d come down, but we’re so busy at work and already short-staffed because of flu. I’d be leaving them in a terrible fix.”

“No problem. Dunno if he’s told you, but I’m between occupations at the moment, and more than capable of stepping into the breach. He’ll no doubt complain about being mothered, but I never listen when he complains.”

She laughs through the worry that’s still in her voice. “You’re good for him. I was really sorry when he told me you weren’t his sergeant any more.”

“Sorry.” It’s not really an apology, and he is not going to let Robbie’s daughter make him feel guilty. “It’s not as if we don’t see each other, though. We’re still friends.”

“I’m glad about that – and that you’re with him now. Keep in touch, won’t you?” He promises he will. “And, James? Come up here with him some time, would you? I’d really like us to meet.”

He makes non-committal noises and then ends the call; after all, he has no idea whether Robbie would want that at all.

Back in Robbie’s room, there’s no change in his condition. Dr Hobson drops in a few minutes later
and exchanges pleasantries of a sort while examining Robbie’s chart and the monitoring machine. James isn’t sure whether he’s just being over-sensitive, but he can’t help suspecting that she blames him for not having been there with Robbie. *I had very good reasons for not wanting to be a policeman any more,* he’d like to tell her, but he won’t. Can’t.

Can’t imagine ever telling anyone the full story. But then the only person whose opinion on the matter counts already knows.

Laura does squeeze his shoulder as she’s leaving. “Chin up, James. He really is going to be fine, from what I can see.”

He catches her hand briefly. “Thank you.”

She gives him a lightning-fast smile. “I’ll look in again later. Call me if you need to.”

His phone beeps a little later; email, not a text. It’s from Innocent, and he has no idea how she got his personal email address, but she’s not a Chief Superintendent for nothing. The email says simply, *Thought you might be interested in this, and there’s a video attachment.* It’s the CCTV film from the attack on Robbie – so much for him not being entitled to information about police investigations.

The video captures the scene very well – they were clearly fortunate with camera locations. It’s all over in less than a minute, and it’s very obvious that Lockhart couldn’t possibly have done anything to help, and that there was no way that Robbie could have avoided getting hurt. If James himself had been there... no, he wouldn’t, couldn’t have done anything Lockhart didn’t.

That, at least, makes him feel better.

He waves his phone in Robbie’s direction. “Just in case you try to make me feel guilty as well, Inspector Lewis, I’ve got proof now. You were just taking stupid risks. Which you’d better promise not to do again, or you can whistle for your home-cooked breakfasts while you’re recovering.”

There’s still no change in a couple of hours’ time, when medical staff arrive and shoo him out so they can “make Mr Lewis more comfortable.” He’s advised to get something to eat and come back in half an hour. He gets a sandwich from the Pret a Manger downstairs and half-heartedly chews on it, then gives it up in favour of a fag. A second cigarette and a quick phone call to Lyn, letting her know there’s still no news, and he’s ready to go back upstairs.

“You never told me,” he says as he sits down again. “Did you stay all night when I was unconscious? But you wouldn’t have. Not after everything. And besides, you were dressed for work when I saw you. Strange, though, that you happened to be there right at the moment I woke up.”

He’ll be there when Robbie wakes up. There’s no question whatsoever about that.

Later, a hesitant knock at the door makes him glance around. DC Lockhart’s standing in the doorway. Her eyes widen when she sees him. “Sarge! I didn’t expect–”

A brief glance is enough to see the anxiety and guilt in her eyes. “James is fine, Julie. I’m not a copper any more, remember.” He reaches back to another chair against the wall, pulling it forward. “Come on in.”

She sits awkwardly next to him. “How is he? No-one will tell me anything.”
He smiles slightly. “As Himself would tell you, you have to learn to ask in the right way. He’s fine, they tell me. Skull like an anvil. Knowing him, he’ll wake up in an hour or two and demand the arrest report.”


“Julie.” She turns to face him. “It wasn’t your fault. And there was nothing more you could have done.”

“How do you know?” Her hands twist in her lap. “You weren’t there.”

Someone else who thinks he shouldn’t have resigned? But it’s not important. James covers Julie’s hands with his own for a moment. “Don’t tell anyone, but I’ve seen the CCTV. You did everything you could have.”

She looks at him for a long moment, as if trying to verify that he’s not lying to her, and then nods. “Thanks, Sar– James.”

He gives her a quick smile. “When are you taking your sergeant’s exams? Don’t look so surprised,” he adds as her eyes widen. “I know Lewis has suggested it, and he wouldn’t do that if he didn’t think you were ready.”

They talk for a while longer, and then James sends her away; it’s already almost ten o’clock, “and you’ll have half of his work to do in the morning, as well as your own,” he points out.

Julie’s footsteps have barely faded to silence when there’s a light tap at the door. “I always knew you’d make an outstanding senior officer.”

“Ma’am.” He stands. “How long have–”

“Long enough.” Innocent comes in and studies him, one eyebrow raised. “Are you sure you won’t change your mind and come back? You’d have to reapply, but a recommendation from me would short-circuit a lot of the process. You’d be an excellent trainer, if you really can’t stand front-line policing.”

He shakes his head. “While I appreciate your confidence in me, Ma’am, I really am sure. I’m starting an MPhil at Balliol in January.”

“Oh, well, it was worth a try.” She smiles faintly. “And Robbie’s still speaking to you?”

He can’t stop the smirk. “He gave me a reference.”

“Ah.” The single syllable appears to convey much more meaning. But she changes the subject, asking about Robbie and whether James has spoken to Lyn. When she leaves ten minutes later, she squeezes James’s arm. “I’m glad he’s got you to look after him.”

You’ve got it the wrong way around, he wants to say, but discretion wins out.

Once she’s gone, he pulls his chair closer to Robbie’s bed and lays his hand on the cover. He’s been talking to Robbie, yes, but everything he’s ever heard about unconsciousness and coma suggests that touch is also important. Pressing his hand to Robbie’s cheek feels too intimate, though – fine with him, but not with Robbie. He settles for a hand on his friend’s shoulder, and gets comfortable in the chair, prepared for a long night.
His head’s bloody thumping and his leg hurts, but there’s a familiar, soothing voice in his ear and a comforting touch to his shoulder. After a few minutes, Robbie forces his eyes open and manages a smile. “They let you in, did they?”

James starts, his hand immediately slipping away, and Robbie regrets letting the lad know he’s awake. “Apparently I am your emergency contact. That’s going to cause a bit of gossip around the nick, I should think.”

“Don’t give a rat’s arse,” he retorts, and pulls his arm out from below the covers. He rests his hand on James’s arm, and immediately feels better, headache regardless.

James glances at his hand, then pulls his arm free from Robbie’s grasp. Shit, he overstepped the mark there, didn’t he? But then his hand’s taken in a warm, firm hold and, as he shifts his gaze to James’s face, his friend’s looking down at him, eyes fond.

“You need a shave,” he points out, but what he’s really saying is that he knows James was here all night. He should be irritated with the bloke for that, but he can’t be. Not when he remembers spending most of a night in a hospital room himself a few years ago.

“Idle layabout,” James says with a shrug. “Got to live up to the stereotype.” His lips twitch.

Robbie shakes his head, then winces as pain stabs him. James’s hand tightens around his in sympathy.

“I saw the CCTV, you know,” James says after a moment, voice soft. “Can’t leave you alone for five minutes, can I? You had to do something reckless.”

“Oi,” he protests, but without heat.

They stay like that for a few minutes, hands joined, not speaking, until James takes a deep breath and pushes back his chair. “I promised a few people I’d let them know when you wake. And the doctor will probably want to see you.”

“People?”


“Lyn?” Bugger it, he doesn’t want her worried, especially not now.

James stands, hands in his jeans pockets. “How would you feel if she called and told you she’d been unconscious and in hospital after an accident, and she only told you after the event?”

He huffs. “Pissed off.”

“Exactly.” James’s lips twitch briefly. “I’ve been keeping her updated. She’s fine, so you don’t need to worry.”

Bloody fantastic. Now his life’s being organised by his ex-sergeant. All the same... “Thanks,” he calls as James leaves the room.

The poking and prodding starts a few minutes later, and much to his disgust he’s told that he needs to stay in another twenty-four hours or so for observation. The pain in his thigh’s getting worse, though, so his protests are more muted than they would otherwise be, and he doesn’t complain too much about the injection he’s given either.
He’s drifting off to sleep when a faintly-mocking voice says, “Couldn’t even wait for me to get back, could you?” In his imagination, he gives James the finger, but dreams about his hand being held.

“You’re not authorised to drive this any more.” Robbie stops beside his official BMW a day later, hesitating as James opens the passenger door for him.

James raises an eyebrow at Robbie and silently gestures for him to get into the car and stop arguing. “It’s fine. Innocent approved it. Said she was pretty sure you’d refuse to be driven home in a uniform car, and I had to agree.” Of course, Lockhart could have come to take her governor home, but neither he nor Innocent had suggested that logical solution.

Robbie gets in, a bit stiffly as he favours his injured thigh. “She’s right there, but how can she approve it?”

“She told me she’d just list me as a family member, for insurance purposes.” James starts the engine as Robbie buckles himself in.

“Well, she’s not wrong there, either.” At that comment, James glances sharply at Robbie. He’d thought it was a bit of a stretch when Innocent suggested it, and hadn’t remotely expected Robbie to endorse it. He didn’t argue too much, all the same, because Robbie’s going to need someone to drive him around for a bit, and do his shopping and so on, and James would rather it be him than anyone else. “Ye daft bugger,” Robbie adds, clearly seeing his surprise. “You’re as much family to me as Lyn is. And don’t imagine that means I think of you as a son, because I don’t.”

So how does Robbie think of him? A friend, yes; no surprise there. Obviously a close friend, given the offer to stay with him for the week or so until he moves into his college rooms, and occasionally in the future – and, of course, listing him as his emergency contact. But how does that equate to considering him family?

He doesn’t ask. It’s not the sort of thing they talk about, it is? Instead, he concentrates on driving.

“Here, this isn’t the way home,” Robbie objects a couple of minutes later when James takes an unexpected turning.

“Taking a detour first,” he says, without explaining further. Two minutes later, he pulls into the cemetery car park. Robbie gives him a sharp glance. “Thought you might want to come here first,” James says, getting out of the car. It’s the nineteenth, after all; the worst of the anniversaries.

“Should’ve known you’d remember,” Robbie says, accepting the hand James offers him as he gets awkwardly to his feet. “Thanks, mate. I was thinking of asking you if you wouldn’t mind, later...” Abruptly, Robbie looks as if he’s remembered something and it’s made him unhappy. “Ah well, let’s go in anyway,” he says after a moment, pushing the car door shut.

“Just a sec.” Loosening his grip on Robbie’s arm, James opens the back door of the BMW and reaches inside, bringing out a bouquet of winter roses and lilies.

Robbie stares, brows creased in surprise – and something else. “You–” he begins, then trails off, clearly moved.

“They’re from Lyn too,” James says quickly, just in case this is too much of an intrusion. He knows Robbie never visits his wife’s grave without bringing flowers, though, and James had no intention of making this the first omission.
Robbie just looks at him for a long moment, then touches his arm. “Thank you.”

Robbie leans heavily on his arm as they walk into the cemetery, but once they’re at Val’s grave James steps away to give him privacy, going back outside the gate and smoking while he waits, but still keeping an eye on Robbie so he can be ready when his friend wants to leave.

James parks outside Robbie’s building and turns to him. “I’m afraid I’ve taken a couple of liberties.”

Robbie quirks an eyebrow. He’s pretty sure he’s not going to have a problem with whatever it is, especially after what James has just done for him, but nervous James is generally amusing to watch.

“I got some shopping in before coming to pick you up.” Robbie barely resists the temptation to roll his eyes. Does James seriously think he’d be upset about that? “Also, considering the injuries to your leg and hand, I thought I should stay with you for a few days to make sure you’re okay. Before you say it, I will endeavour not to fuss. Too much,” he adds, the corners of his mouth twitching.

“Fine with me,” Robbie says, and enjoys the reaction his casual tone has on James, who was clearly expecting to be told off. “In fact, you might as well move in now instead of when your lease is up. It’s only a couple of weeks, and what else would you be doing for Christmas anyway?”

James pauses in the act of getting out of the car. “I assumed you’d be going to Manchester.”

“Assumed wrong, didn’t you? Not that I’d be fit to drive by next week anyway, but I wasn’t going up this year.” And he’d intended to tell James that, and invite him over for Christmas, but he hadn’t got around to it, had he? Typical.

James is a trouble-free guest, not to mention handy to have around, given Robbie’s injuries, and within a couple of days it feels completely normal to have him around the flat all the time. They’re not doing things together constantly — James has his laptop and spends a few hours each day absorbed in some work or other, no doubt to do with his research proposal. Robbie finds himself napping some of the time on the first day, and in the morning of the second Innocent phones. After she’s asked how he is, she gets to the point. “I’m sending around some cold cases for you to review. Knowing you, I’m guessing you’re already bored senseless, and I’m not having you trying to come into work. Just do me one favour.”

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“If James Hathaway happens to be with you, please try to remember that he’s a civilian now and therefore not entitled to be privy to confidential police files?”

Robbie gives appropriate reassurances, though he decides as he’s working through the cases that asking James for his opinion on certain details doesn’t really count. Nor does summarising information for him so that they can discuss the case. After all, as long as he doesn’t actually allow James to read the file, he’s still obeying Innocent’s injunction, right?

By the day before Christmas Eve, it feels so natural and right to have James living in the flat with him that he’s seriously thinking again about an idle thought he’s had now and again since deciding to move to this place. But he holds back; best to be absolutely sure, isn’t it? And anyway, how does he know what James’s likely answer would be? Does he view their current living
arrangements the same way Robbie does?

Best to wait until after Christmas, really.

It’s mid-afternoon on Christmas Eve, and James is out shopping to get the last few fresh items he wants for the Christmas dinner the two of them have planned together, when his mobile rings. Lyn. Surprised, he answers. “Hi, Lyn. Are you looking for your dad? You’ve got my phone, not his, and I’m in Sainsbury’s.”

“Oh, no, it’s you I want, and I’m glad I’ve got you alone.” Lyn’s sounding cheerful and excited. “I couldn’t tell you before I was certain I could get the time. But I did, and I’m off until the 27th. Tim and I are driving down to Oxford this evening.”

“That’s great.” He tries to inject enthusiasm into his voice. Robbie will be ecstatic, James knows that. “I’ll tell Robbie when I get back to the fla–”

“No, don’t!” she insists immediately. “I’m just telling you because – well, I know you’ve been coming over and taking care of him, which is really nice of you, but I know you must have other things you want to be doing, especially with it being Christmas. Except that we’ll be there by around eight, and I hope you’ve got time to come over for a coffee this evening? I can’t wait to meet you in person.”

“Of course I’ll be there,” James promises her, managing to maintain a steady voice. “I’ll see you this evening.”

He abandons the search for the perfect bottle of wine to accompany Christmas dinner, and finishes the shopping with distinctly less enthusiasm than before, all the while telling himself off for being selfish. So what if he was looking forward to spending the time with Robbie, cooking dinner together and exchanging presents afterwards while sharing a brandy? Robbie would far rather have his family around him, and he should be happy at the way things are working out for his friend.

Back at the flat, he puts the shopping away and then goes and strips the spare bed – and then Robbie’s bed as well, because Robbie’s going to think it odd if he just washes one set of sheets. He’ll think it odd anyway, since James has only slept in that bed a few nights, but that can’t be helped.

He also gathers up the items of his that have accumulated in the spare bedroom and bathroom – books and his guitar as well as clothes and toiletries – and puts them away in the hall cupboard, leaving the room empty and tidy for Lyn and her partner. A little late, he takes advantage of Robbie going to the loo to slip his Christmas present to Robbie under the tree, towards the back and so out of casual sight. It’s an Android tablet, a seven-inch version; Robbie’d been fascinated by one in Curry’s a couple of weeks ago when they’d gone to get him a new DVD player. It is a bit of an expensive present, given James’s currently unemployed status, but Robbie’s more than worth it. He’s just disappointed that he won’t get to see his friend’s face when he opens it.

They eat dinner while watching some mindless telly that they both enjoy mocking, and they’ve just finished clearing things away when Lyn and Tim arrive. Robbie’s face is a beautiful sight to behold; James hangs back, slouching against the living-room doorway as Robbie fires multiple questions at Lyn without giving her a chance to answer. A few minutes later, Robbie’s pride as he introduces his daughter to James makes James’s heart swell.

Lyn and her partner are lovely, which really isn’t surprising; James knows that Robbie is the nicest
and most genuine bloke anyone could meet, and everything he’s heard about Valerie Lewis suggests the same. Any daughter of theirs couldn’t possibly be unlikeable – and is also not likely to choose a bastard for a partner.

James makes coffee, and later Robbie opens some wine and puts on music, and they talk; at first about Robbie’s injuries and recovery, though he deflects quickly by asking Lyn about the pregnancy and how the baby’s room is coming along. It gives James a chance to observe all three of them without having attention focused on himself. Robbie, the fond dad who clearly can’t wait to be a granddad; Lyn, the nurse who’s a bit of a mother hen as far as her dad’s concerned, though also very much in love with her partner and, probably, at present not focused on much more than the baby who’s due in four or five months. And Tim, the physio turned financial analyst, sitting next to Lyn with his arm protectively around her and who can barely keep his eyes off her slightly-swelled stomach. They’re a lovely family, and James is genuinely happy that Robbie has them with him for Christmas.

Not long after ten, he judges that it’s time to make his exit, and he slips out discreetly to get his coat. It would be rude to leave without saying goodnight, at least, so reluctantly he returns and leans in the living-room doorway again.

Robbie notices him almost immediately. “Where are you going at this hour?”

“Midnight Mass,” James says smoothly. It’s not entirely a lie – he will go – but it’s not the truth either. But if it hasn’t already dawned on Robbie that James can’t stay while his family is here, James doesn’t want him realising now and making a fuss in front of Lyn.

“Ah.” Robbie nods. “I won’t wait up, then.”

“No, don’t,” he urges smoothly. “Goodnight.” Happy Christmas, he almost says, but that would be a giveaway. Instead, he looks towards the sofa and catches Lyn’s eye. “Night, Lyn, Tim. Nice to meet you both.”

“Oh! Goodnight, James!” Lyn calls. “It’s been so lovely to meet you at last.”

He leaves before anything else can be said, and outside hesitates. He could walk home, but Robbie might be suspicious if he doesn’t hear the car starting. The BMW it is; he can drive it back over some time tomorrow and leave the keys in Robbie’s postbox, and send him a text to let him know. Robbie certainly won’t need it before then.

“The flat’s lovely, Dad. Tim and I were really comfortable last night. And you’ve done a great job with the decorations.”

“I’m glad.” He hugs her and kisses her cheek. “Happy Christmas, pet.” He extends his hand – now mostly healed – to her partner. “And you, Tim.”

He looks past the two of them, searching the kitchen for the other occupant who should be somewhere around. Some time during the night, Robbie had realised that James would have to sleep on the couch – how it hadn’t occurred to him sooner, he doesn’t know. But there’s no sign of James now, and the couch has no signs of having being slept on.

He probably went home after Mass, so as not to disturb anyone. He’ll be over soon.

But the hours tick by, and the turkey goes into the oven, without any sign of James. Robbie’s trying not to obsess about it, though he can’t help going to the window every so often to see if
there’s any sign of the BMW coming down the road. Nothing.

By shortly after noon, he’s concerned, and Lyn’s noticed. She pauses in the act of peeling potatoes. “Is something wrong, Dad?”

He pulls a face. “Just wondering where James has got to.”

“James?” She seems surprised. “Why?”

Robbie frowns and looks more closely at his daughter. She’s definitely starting to look a little bit embarrassed, and that’s when he remembers that James knew she and Tim were coming. He tried to hide it last night when they got here, but Robbie could see he wasn’t surprised, and then of course the lad’s sudden bout of enthusiasm for laundry had made sense. Lyn must have phoned James to tell him she and Tim were on their way.

“Lyn, what did you say to him?”

She lays the knife down and turns to look straight at Robbie. “Just that I appreciated him looking after you, but that we’d be here and he didn’t have to worry about you any more. And that I was sure there’s somewhere else he’d prefer to be instead of having to check on you.” Robbie doesn’t answer immediately, and her brow furrows in concern. “Did I say something wrong?”

“Lyn, pet, he doesn’t have anywhere else to be.” Her mouth forms a slight O. “We’d made arrangements to spend Christmas together. Not that it’s not lovely to see you an’ Tim and I’m glad you’re both here, but James was supposed to be here.”

“I didn’t know. He never said a word.” And now she’s chewing her lip, looking anxious and a little upset. “Dad, I’m really sorry. It never occurred to me... He never said a word,” she repeats.

“He wouldn’t.” That’s James, always putting his own interests subordinate to whatever he thinks Robbie wants or needs. “So, anyway, there’ll be four for dinner, all right?” Without waiting for Lyn to agree or disagree, Robbie picks up the phone.

James answers after a couple of rings. “Happy Christmas, Robbie. How is everything chez Lewis? All under control?”

“No, an’ it won’t be until you get your arse over here. What were you thinkin’ of?”

“That you might want to be alone with your family?” James retorts, the comment sharply pointed.

“Ye daft sod, you’re family! Told you that not even a week ago!” He sighs. “Now, are you gonna get over here, or do I have to come and get you?”

“I have your car,” James points out. “And you still can’t drive, anyway.”

“But Tim and Lyn’s car is here, and they both drive.”

“Tell him I’ll be over for him if he doesn’t get a move on,” Lyn says, glancing up from the vegetables. “And he really doesn’t want to face the wrath of a pregnant woman.”

“Especially not one with a paring knife!” Tim comments dryly. The sharp bark of laughter on the other end of the phone says James heard that.

“Ye coming, then?”

“On my way, sir,” James says smartly, and hangs up.
Lyn opens the door when he knocks, feeling that using his key may not be entirely appropriate in
the circumstances. She hugs him the instant he steps inside. “I’m so sorry, James. I must have
made you feel so unwelcome, and I didn’t mean that at all.”

“It’s fine, really,” he assures her. “Of course you wanted to be with your dad.”

“Yes, but you’re his best friend and I should have realised the two of you’d made arrangements.”
She slips her hand through his arm. “Come on through. Tim’s opening some wine.”

The first person he sees when he enters the kitchen is Robbie, who immediately holds out a glass
of wine to him. The pleasure in Robbie’s eyes as James looks at him is startling – and warming.
Their fingers brush as he accepts the glass, and James has to resist the temptation to reach out and
touch.

It’s the first proper Christmas celebration James has been part of for more years than he can
remember. He relieves Lyn of vegetable duty, assuring her that he is an expert when it comes to
vegetable dissection. Later, while everything’s cooking, he takes Tim on at Scrabble, with Robbie
and Lyn cheering and mocking in the background. And then, once dinner’s ready, he and Tim deal
with the carving and serving up of turkey in a perfectly-choreographed fashion, as if they’ve done
it for years, while Lyn adds potatoes and vegetables to every plate and Robbie opens more wine,
limping very effectively around the kitchen with no sign of pain.

And through it all, James is conscious of Robbie watching him at odd moments, usually with a
fond smile and occasionally something more than fondness in his eyes.

If he can’t have what he wants most in the world – and, being honest with himself (as he is not
always), he knows he was never going to have it – then this *belonging* is a second-best he’s more
than happy to settle for.

It’s the best Christmas he’s had in years.

He’d been looking forward to spending his couple of days off with James, of course, but it’s a real
treat to have Lyn and Tim here as well, and all of them getting on so well. Lyn’s blooming, looking
as healthy and happy in her pregnancy as Val ever did, and it’s just lovely to see. James, rather than
retreating into polite formality as he often does around people he doesn’t know very well, is
relaxing and chatting with the other two, and giving every appearance of enjoying himself.

It’s bloody marvellous to have his family – blood and adopted – around him. Shame Mark can’t be
here, but then he’s built a life for himself in Australia and if Robbie wants to see him, then he’s just
going to have to go there, isn’t he? When he retires, if not before. Maybe James would go with
him? He’ll have to ask the lad.

James, he notices towards the early evening, is watching him, stealing covert glances every so
often when he thinks no-one’s looking. His overall demeanour is happy, with quick smiles and
even outright grins in evidence, but when he looks at Robbie there’s a wistfulness in his expression
that makes Robbie ponder.

Nothing he can do about it now, but once Lyn and Tim have left...
“Peace at last,” Robbie says, closing the door once they’ve waved the visitors off the following evening. “I love me daughter, an’ I like her bloke, of course, but it’ll be nice to have a bit of time to ourselves before I have to go back to work.”

James lays a hand against Robbie’s back as they walk back to the living-room. “I’m glad I got a chance to meet them. You have a lovely daughter.”

“I’m glad they met you.” Robbie’s hand brushes his arm. “We’ll have to sort out your bed in a bit, but have a drink first?”

Ah, so he’s staying. James had suspected that was the plan, but he wasn’t assuming anything. “Sure. I’ll get them.”

Once they’re on the couch and they’ve toasted each other and drunk, Robbie gestures towards his tablet, lying on the coffee-table. “Thanks again for that, man. I really didn’t expect... You shouldn’t have, but I’m made up to have it.”

“I’m glad.” James smiles back, and dares to reach out and brush the back of Robbie’s hand with his fingertips. “Thank you, too. The pen’s perfect. Just the right image, too, if I’m going to be a fusty academic scratching away in a corner of the Bodleian all day.” It’s a Pelikan fountain pen, clearly very expensive, with a gold nib, and his initials discreetly engraved on the cap.

“I know you’re more into computers,” Robbie says, “but, yeah, thought it might fit the image.”

He turns again to look at Robbie, just as Robbie’s set his beer-bottle down on the table, and at that same moment Robbie meets his gaze. There’s the same fondness that James noticed yesterday, and more – something that seems to take James’s breath away. He can’t tear his gaze away from Robbie, and for what seems like an age neither of them move.

James has no idea what to say, what to do – what if he gets it wrong again? What if this is just his imagination and Robbie’s only staring at him because he’s got something stuck between his teeth?

So he doesn’t move – can’t move – and yet Robbie’s coming closer, until abruptly he’s not. Robbie swallows. “James.” His voice sounds as if his throat’s dry, too.

“Yeah?” James whispers.

“I don’t want to mess this up again, like last time. I need to know – do you want this?”

James has to swallow before he can speak. “I – I’ve always wanted it. But I wasn’t sure – I didn’t think you did.”

“Bloody hell, man, did you not feel my tongue down your throat? Or my hand on your cock?”

His lips twitch in an involuntary smile. “I assumed you’d just got carried away by... well, it’d been a stressful night.”

Robbie huffs, shaking his head. “Suppose I can’t blame you too much. I thought the same about you.” His mouth turns down at the corners. “In the car, I thought you were going to say you regretted it, that it shouldn’t have happened. That’s why I said to forget it.”

Relief and sheer joy is making James light-headed, and he has to take a breath to steady himself. “I don’t want to forget it. I want to do it again, only a lot less rushed and with considerably fewer clothes.”
Robbie shifts closer to James, and then takes his hand, gripping it tightly. “Sounds appealing.”

James reaches up to Robbie’s face, realising as he does that his hand’s actually shaking. He lays his fingertips against Robbie’s cheek before leaning in and pressing their lips together. Robbie kisses back, and it’s nothing like the frenzied, out-of-control kisses in the kitchen in Abbotsbury. It’s so much better. Long, lingering, loving kisses, hands gripping as if letting go is an impossibility. Initially tentative, then increasingly assured slow strokes of tongue against tongue, bodies moving closer together.

Robbie breaks the kiss, bringing his head to rest against James’s shoulder. “That’s lovely, bonny lad.”

“Yeah.” James presses kisses to the side of Robbie’s face. He wants to pinch himself, just to be certain that this is really happening.

“Might want to move, though,” Robbie says, his voice rumbling against James’s body. “Bedroom’d be more comfortable. An’ you know what?” he adds, straightening.

“What?”

“Means we don’t need to bother making up the spare room.”

James laughs softly as he stands and accepts Robbie’s hand, and they walk together to Robbie’s bedroom, turning off lights on their way.

“About that scholarship,” Robbie says, stopping and turning to James as they’re just inside the bedroom.

“Yes?”

“You don’t have to live in college, do you?”

James tilts his head to one side. “Not if I have a better offer.”

Robbie reaches up, tugs James’s head down and kisses him firmly, leaving no doubt as to his intentions. “How’s that for a better offer?”

James just can’t stop smiling. “Sounds like the best I’ll ever have.”
Works inspired by this one: [Artwork] Terra Incognita by wallflowering, [Podfic] Terra Incognita by wendymr by fire_juggler

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!