Reading Between the Lines

by BourbonNeat

Summary

The boys are filming series 21 and James refuses to fall for Jeremy’s latest line.

Notes

Bitten by a particularly silly bunny – this was a late entry written for the TGS Spring Challenge, End of the Month Bonus Prompt #1, “Series 21,” that utterly failed at being a drabble.

Disclaimer: This is fiction. It never happened and is not meant to imply anything about the people featured in the story. Complete unreality from a fanciful mind.

Jeremy surprised James with the first of his truly terrible chat up lines right after they finished filming their 80s hot hatch, ‘don’t try this at home’ nostalgia trip. Leaving the track at the end of the day, James was still uncharacteristically excited, flushed and practically gushing about how brilliant the day had been.

“Honestly, that was the most fun I’ve had on the track in years! And you,” he continued, turning eyes still bright and sparkling from hours of laughter on Jeremy. “You won’t hear me say this often, but that was fantastic, Jez. I wouldn’t have bet you could move that quickly ten years ago, let alone get those long legs of yours in and out of the bloody windows.”
Jeremy shrugged as if to dismiss his antics as nothing out of the ordinary but, as always, could not keep from smiling warmly in the face of a genuine compliment. The moment they reached their cars, however, Jeremy’s demeanor abruptly shifted to smug telly confidence as he reached around James to lean up against the Panda, effectively trapping him against the door without actually touching him.

“Yes, well I can certainly think of a few other positions I’d like to get into, Slow,” he said with an almost predatory grin, eyebrows waggling suggestively. “That is, if you’d care to pop over to mine?”

James couldn’t help himself. He started to laugh. Because, well, this was Jeremy and Jeremy usually had that effect on him, getting him to laugh louder and more easily than anyone else he knew. Even in situations like this where there actually were a few reasons why the joke really wasn’t very funny at all. Not that Jeremy knew any of those reasons. James had always taken pains to make sure that *no one* knew those reasons, especially not Jeremy. And, come to think of it, didn’t that just add another layer of absurd hilarity to the whole situation?

Jeremy responded with a look that James could not for the life of him decipher, which virtually guaranteed that he was taking the piss and James just wasn’t picking up on the joke yet. So he fell back on sarcasm, as he’d done so many times in the past, one of the few ways James could guarantee he wouldn’t wind up looking like a complete arse on telly when Jeremy eventually sprang the punchline on him.

“With your knackered back, Jezza? I suspect the only positions left for you this evening involve paracetamol and ice.”

For a split second James almost thought he saw disappointment flicker in Jeremy’s eyes. But that made no sense at all, especially not when Jeremy was laughing too, that loud, infectious, rumbling laugh that shook his entire frame and sent him collapsing onto James’ shoulder.

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Jeremy finally managed. “Pub then?”

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However, to James’ increasing confusion, that was not the end of things. The truly terrible chat up lines continued off and on throughout filming for series 21. Indeed their small fuel-efficient vehicle road trip across Ukraine found Jeremy in rare form.

As far as James was concerned, one of the best things about this particular trip was the opportunity to let his inner history geek out to play, especially because Jeremy’s own inner history geek liked to come out and play with him. The disused Soviet submarine base was brilliant fun, but he and Jeremy were being so – knowledgeable or obnoxious depending on one’s perspective – with the James Bond references and their cold war history zeal that Richard and the crew abandoned them both to it as soon as they finished filming.

James was leaning over the roof of his Dacia on his elbows, head propped in both hands surveying the sheer scope of the cavernous space around them when he felt Jeremy behind him. The taller man placed one hand on either side of James, once again carefully not actually touching him, and leaned in until his lips practically brushed his ear and James could feel the warmth of his body.

“Caught skulking in top secret submarine base, Mr. May,” Jeremy rumbled in his ridiculous Russian accent that James had somehow always found kind of adorable. “This will not do. I think
I should take you back to my room for interrogation.”

James spun around within the wide circle made by Jeremy’s arms with a wry smile on his lips and a host of questions in his eyes that seemed unlikely to be answered any time soon.

“No, Mr. Clarkson, I expect you to die…from shame with lines like that.”

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James was a lucky man. As a Top Gear presenter, he had travelled through some of the most beautiful parts of the world and done amazing things. But even on his rather impressive list, Chernobyl might actually have been the most extraordinary place he’d ever seen – eerily pretty, with an almost fairytale worthy sense of foreboding in the creeping vegetation and the oppressive silence pervading outside his vehicle.

When Jeremy’s Volkswagen Up inevitably sputtered and ground to a halt, still well within the borders of the abandoned city, James stopped just off camera and waited for him. Theirs was hardly the first group to venture here over the last several years – And Anthony Bordain had actually spent time walking around the abandoned playground! – and the camera assistants who agreed to film their Chernobyl trek after the main camera crew bowed out were ready with a jerry can of petrol as soon as they finished getting the footage they needed. But even so, the idea of abiding by the well-established rules of the Top Gear Brotherhood here, of all places, just felt wrong somehow.

James and Jeremy stood near the Dacia, studiously avoiding actually leaning on it just in case, while the camera assistants quickly filmed the Up’s dashboard with the fuel gage showing empty and a few of the artier shots Andy might use for the final film. They were speaking in hushed, almost awed tones, like children exploring a haunted house, when Jeremy apparently decided that the tension was in desperate need of breaking.

“So, when we get to the hotel, what do you think, James? You. Me. A nice bottle of vodka. See if anything glows in the dark?”

“Sounds more like a potential meltdown, to me,” a flustered James replied somewhat lamely.

“But what is all this…?”

But he wasn’t able to finish his question before the camera assistants, who lacked the carefully honed ‘James and Jezza are being intense again and I want no part of it,’ sense of their more senior colleagues, were walking toward them, eager to get everyone moving again and out of the danger zone.

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As filming for series 21 continued, James grew increasingly perplexed by Jeremy’s behavior. Yes, the man had cracked jokes about the fact that James liked men at least as much as women since the day they met, and James had never really minded, mostly found it funny, in fact. But this was not the same thing at all.

Jeremy finally shocked James speechless by hitting a little too close to home with one of his chat up lines as they stretched following the final leg of their bike ride through London.

“You know these bloody things can play hell with your gentleman’s vegetables, don’t you?”
Jeremy asked with a broad wave of his hand in the general direction of the bicycles.

James laughed. “Well, yes, but that’s something only extreme cyclists need to worry about,” he replied, placing mocking emphasis on the word extreme.

“Still,” Jeremy continued, face long with mock solemnity. “I think it’s vitally important that I suck you off tonight. For your own wellbeing, May. Make sure everything’s functioning properly.”

Bloody Nora, that was… James had been guiltily wanking to fantasies of Jeremy’s clever mouth applied to deliciously sinful use for years. Naturally Jeremy had no way of knowing this, but for him to take the piss like this… It was too much. All James could do in response was blush furiously while trying to hide behind hair no longer of sufficient length for the task.

Just what was Jeremy playing at anyway? Very little of this was on camera, certainly not enough to mock him with in front of their audience at Dunsfold. And he didn’t seem to take any pleasure in finally flustering James to such an obvious degree. Surely there should have been a punchline by now. James quickly made his excuses and left for home.

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James’ lorry was an utter piece of crap, and that was being kind. Burma, on the other hand, was almost indescribably gorgeous and this was rapidly shaping up to be one of the best specials they’d ever filmed. Pleasantly clattered on local beer, James drifted on the edges of the party. He was thoroughly enjoying himself, but found it necessary to take periodic breaks whenever the press of people, music, laughter and smells threatened to overload his senses.

The movement James noticed out of the corner of one eye turned out to be Jeremy beckoning to him from the lorries. With a smile, James walked over to join him, hoping that Clarkson still had a few cigarettes left to share as he seemed to have smoked all of his or given them away. To his surprise, Jeremy pulled him gently but insistently deeper into the shadows behind the lorries and into what, under almost any other circumstances, James would have considered a rather fantastic first kiss.

Under these circumstances, however, James was shocked and flustered and more than a little tired of whatever this game was that Jeremy was playing.

“Fuck, Jeremy,” he growled as he pulled away, managing to keep his voice low to avoid drawing any outside attention. “What the hell do you think you’re doing, man? I don’t know if you’re just winding me up or if this is a set up for something else, but I do know that it’s getting really bloody old and it has got to stop.”

Jeremy went pale and then he said the most surprising thing yet. “James, I’m sorry.” He shoved both hands moodily into the pockets of his jeans and rocked back on his heels. “I’ve not thought this through. Should’ve known you wouldn’t like… It’s just – Every time I open my mouth to tell you, I cock everything up…”

James tilted his head, remarkably spaniel-like, studying Jeremy as if barely understanding the words coming out of the man’s mouth. “Jezza, what are you saying?”

Jeremy ran one large hand down his face, sucking his lips into a thin, mournful line and sighed. “I just thought that this year… My life’s all sorted again and you seemed to’ve finally gotten over…”

He trailed off with a sad shake of his head. “I’m sorry. I know what you’re going to say and you’re probably right. I’ve not thought this through.”
Suddenly all of the puzzling pieces from the last few months were falling into place and forming a larger picture that James quite liked. But he wasn’t ready to fully believe, not just yet. “You mean you’re not just taking the piss? You’re actually serious?” He asked, part hopeful, part incredulous.

“Yes I’m serious,” Jeremy said, cautious hope creeping back into his voice. He looked thoughtful for a long moment before apparently reaching a decision. “I’ve fancied the arse off of you for - for years, James.”

James couldn’t help himself. He started to laugh. But it wasn’t a humorous laugh, nor was it taking the piss. It was a joyful laugh. Because, well, this was Jeremy and never once in all the time that James had known him had he dared to think that Jeremy might want him too.

“Jeremy,” James asked, having reached a decision of his own. “Your sports lorry?”

“Yes?” He responded, confused but still hopeful.

“Have you really tested the suspension yet? I mean, properly?” James asked, voice low, melodic and dropping down into sultry at the end.

“No,” Jeremy said, positively beaming now. “No, I have not.”

“We should really see to that, don’t you think? Now even. Safety first, right?”

This time the kiss was perfect. Soft and tender and searching. Then heated and desperate and full of filthy promise. And, best of all, utterly, brilliantly mutual.

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