



It wasn't exactly a usual place to have your throat cut. Not that there were set venues for it, but Cheval Place in Knightsbridge had to be about as far from non-metaphorical throat-cutting country as it got.

James parked his car behind an open-doored ambulance and looked around carefully as he stepped out into the damp London night air.

The quiet, innocuous, very expensive cul-de-sac sat tucked away behind the flashy roar of Brompton Road: on one side, an elegantly painted Georgian mews terrace, on the other, a red-brick monstrosity of doubtful lineage. Now though, two silent blue-flashing patrol cars disfigured the subdued wealth of the street. Garish-yellow crime-scene tape cordoned off a large area of the pavement in front of a shiny, black front door. All very vulgar.

James opened the boot of his Honda and dug into the plastic box of equipment there, full of tools, polythene bags, and a white forensic containment suit which he awkwardly shouldered into. For his muscular, six-foot-one frame, the suits never seemed big enough. The final touches were paper overshoes and a pair of violently lilac, nitrile surgical gloves. Then he pulled up the suit hood to cover his thick, light hair.

James didn't recognize the uniformed PC standing in front of the house, so he flashed his warrant card before ducking under the tape across the entrance, onto the single front step. That was as far as he needed to go to find the reason for the callout.

A woman lay sprawled facedown in the hall, her feet close to the door. Silky, dark, shoulder-length hair obscured most of her face and stuck to the large pool of coagulating scarlet beneath her upper body. Her coat and skirt were tangled at the top of her thighs. But from where James stood, her black tights didn't appear to have been interfered with.

"Evening, Sameera."

Detective Constable Sameera Kaur stood near the head of the corpse, strong, handsome features peering out from her own white

paper hood. She'd proved to be one of the best DCs they had, a Sikh girl from Birmingham, desperately in love with the job.

"Evening, Sarge," she returned. "Looking very nifty. You should wear that on the telly."

"Uh-huh. Can't help noticing we have the same stylist. What've you got?"

"There's no sign of forced entry. Seems like she opened her front door, and the assailant subdued her from behind, then slashed her throat." Kaur had a strong Midlands accent, her tone never less than imperturbable. "No sign of a significant struggle. Probably quick."

"Who found her?"

"A neighbor. Wally's calmin' her down. She noticed the door a little ajar around..." Kaur consulted a small black notebook, "...19:30 on her way to Brompton Road, then again just before 20:00 when she got back. She left it for a while then decided to take a nose around."

James nodded toward the corpse on the floor. "Any clue to identity?"

Kaur consulted her notebook again. "The neighbor says the house owner's Maria Curzon-Whyte. Same name on the driver's license and the ID in her bag."

So, James calculated, time of death would have been sometime before seven thirty, and probably after dark. And in London, in February, it got dark by five.

He frowned down at the dead woman, at the huge, bright-red peony of blood sinking obscenely into the pile of her expensive cream hall carpet.

Not a cat's chance now of making his flat-viewing, he thought resentfully. And at once, decent guilt scurried in behind.

From the start he'd sworn to himself that the job would never make him callous. But here he was, annoyed at someone for having the gall to get murdered when he had other plans.

"Robbery?" he asked levelly.

"Haven't seen any signs so far," Kaur replied. "Her bag and briefcase are still there an' they seem undisturbed."

And indeed, both were lying further into the hall, as if they'd been flung there when the woman fell. They appeared expensive, like the woman's clothes, like the house.

Maybe it would be a nice, straightforward domestic. Most murders were.

James crouched lower, careful not to lean too close to the body, in case some of his DNA—a hair or a skin particle—contaminated it. And as he did so, he noticed something—an object—lying close to the woman's head, caught in the shadow of the hallway wall.

"What's that?"

Kaur peered down. "Yeah, I saw it. It's a piece of chain."

Heavy duty. A short length of steel chain with no lock on either end.

James chewed his lip thoughtfully.

It most likely had nothing to do with this. It appeared far too short to have been of any use to strangle or subdue the victim, and too sturdy to have broken without extreme force. But anything was possible in this game; he'd learned that quickly enough.

"Okay." James straightened and sidled round the body to join Kaur, careful to walk on the same thin edge of carpet as she had. "Let's see what we can turn up before Herself gets here."

He found an incredibly narrow house, like a very tall flat, old and quirky and set on three levels. The basement held a study; the ground floor, a sitting room with a TV and a generously sized, scrupulously clear aquarium, a tiny kitchen and toilet; and there were two modest bedrooms on the top floor. In reality, it was cramped, but James knew it would set a buyer back a couple of million pounds at least, in this part of town. You paid through the nose to have Harrods as your corner shop.

Books lined the small basement study, and an open, antique, roll-top desk rested against the wall opposite the door, the top of it laden with framed photographs. Most of them featured a dark-haired girl. Posing with what appeared to be a well-heeled family. Sitting astride an impressive grey horse. Grinning joyfully in her graduation robes.

She looked...interesting, somehow, James thought. Intelligent, challenging. And oddly familiar.

He frowned down at the photographs for some time, wrestling with that sense of vague recognition, but the longer he stared, the further away it seemed to slip.

He began to study the paperwork piled neatly on the desk.

It became evident almost immediately what the woman had done for a living, and with the realization came a needle-sharp stab of apprehension. There were case notes, a pile of opened letters addressed to Maria Curzon-Whyte at her chambers and, now James paid more attention to them, mainly law books on the shelves.

She'd been relatively young to be a criminal barrister, though just leafing through her correspondence, he got the impression of a sharp mind, of extreme competence. But for all they prettied it up with gowns and horsehair wigs, someone wading in the sewers, just like him. There were so many more possibilities now he didn't know whether to feel excited or appalled.

He blew out a tense breath and extracted his phone from his jacket pocket to take some detailed shots of the desk before the SOCO Team arrived. But as he did, he spotted the corner of a small white notepad sticking out from underneath the pile of case notes. He crouched down and edged part of it toward him carefully with a nitrile-covered forefinger.

It was blank, the kind of sticky-backed pad hotels provided for their guests, and sure enough, he could see the edge of a brand logo on it. Ideas and wild speculations darted into his mind as he began to maneuver it out—forbidden liaisons, seedy affairs, murderous consequences. He moved his phone close hopefully, to photograph the pad as it slid out.

Raffles in Singapore.

He sighed heavily and lowered the phone. Definitely a bit far to go for a shag.

But as he moved his head back and started to rise, the light fell on the top page of the pad in a certain way, and he could see an obvious indent. Whatever had been written above it had been written heavily. He didn't even have to rub a pencil over it—just as well because Forensics would have eviscerated him if he'd tried. He just had to squint at it from the right angle...

He copied what he found into his notebook. An address in London.

It could be anything, of course. A hairdresser. A nail salon. The place her murderer lived, with the murder weapon conveniently placed for easy discovery by an enterprising detective sergeant.

He gave a huff of dark amusement and straightened up from the desk.

Maria's excited eyes met his, blazing dark and happy; triumphant at her graduation, her whole brilliant, glittering life laid out in front of her like a carpet of flowers. She smiled at him expectantly, with all the blind arrogance of beauty and youth, daring him not to admire her.

He wanted to smile back. He felt a sudden unwelcome tug of emotion, almost of loss.

How the fuck did you end like that, Maria? he asked those clever eyes. "Jamie. Anything?"

James drew in a quick, shocked breath and whirled round.

His Detective Chief Inspector—also known as Herself—stood in the doorway, looking exactly like a woman who'd just hurtled halfway across London on a Sunday to attend one murder scene—a stabbing outside a nightclub in Vauxhall—then been required to turn and hurtle back to this one. She wore a white forensic suit too, but the hood remained down, revealing her disastrously disordered corkscrew curls. She raised a mocking eyebrow at James's badly covered startlement, and he could only shrug wryly in acknowledgement.

They got on well, he and Jo Ingham.

She was a small, plump, half-Jamaican woman in her forties from Essex, with a gratifyingly foul mouth, a husband in the force, and no kids. Everyone knew she could easily have reached a higher rank if she'd wished—she had more than enough intelligence and political savvy—but she had no real desire to climb any further up the greasy pole. She wanted to solve crimes.

James knew that, having come up the hard way herself, Ingham could easily have disdained a fast-track recruit like him, but she'd chosen to nurture his potential. In turn he felt a fierce loyalty to her, drawn to her no-nonsense decency like a moth to the light.

"Ma'am. Assuming she's the resident, she seems to have lived alone. And she was a criminal barrister."

Ingham glanced at one of the photographs on the desk behind James, closed her eyes and blew out a despairing breath.

Inevitably this would be high profile. A young, beautiful, rich, professional woman involved in the criminal-justice system, murdered

brutally on her own doorstep, and more than that, a woman very probably personally known to crime reporters. Most of all, though, the important words for the front pages would be *beautiful* and *rich*.

"Shit," she spat.

James grimaced in solidarity. Everyone in the South Kensington Murder Investigation Team knew the kind of pressure Ingham labored under, the grinding politics of trying to make a case against budget cutbacks, like every other head of an MIT in London.

Unfortunately though, the argument for any murder team would always be tricky to make. As part of the West London group of MITs, Ingham's unit took a week's turn on call for the whole West London area, and in that week, any unexplained deaths on that patch became their cases. But that meant that, by the luck of the draw, their unit at existing levels—roughly thirty strong—could be alternately worked to exhaustion or stultifyingly bored. Impossible to predict.

Just that afternoon, James and his fellow DS, Alec Scrivenor, had been bitching in their dead office like a pair of adolescents on a message board—all about how fucking unlucky the unit had been with their last turns on call, how the famine in homicide had been telling on morale and much-needed overtime, how bored they were working files on dead cases. They'd been reduced to throwing darts at an ancient board propped against a waste-bin.

Now, on the first night of their on-call week, they had two murders to solve, Ingham had no time, and James understood too well the wisdom of the old warning to be careful what you wished for.

He followed Ingham silently, almost guiltily, up past Scenes of Crime Officers hovering round the corpse and outside, two doors along the damp, now grotesquely busy mews, to the woman who'd discovered the body.

Mrs. Alice Cordiner sat perched at the edge of a pristine Chesterfield sofa in her fantastically elegant, expensively scented lounge. A fine-boned, exquisitely groomed woman of indeterminate age, she appeared to be exactly the kind of person who could afford to live in Cheval Place.

"Mrs. Cordiner?" The woman glanced up from her dazed contemplation of a half-full cup of tea to regard Ingham with large, watery

eyes. "I understand you must be very upset." Mrs. Cordiner let loose a snort of desperate amusement. Ingham continued, unperturbed. "But perhaps you can tell us what happened."

"I didn't know her," Alice Cordiner said at once. Her cultured voice sounded thin and high and defensive, as if she were making an excuse for unpardonable behavior. "Well, just to say hello to. You know how it is. I used to see her coming and going."

"Did she have a partner?" Ingham's voice remained conversational.

"I don't know." But then, almost compulsively, "She had some visitors. Men and women."

"But you saw no one around tonight?"

"No! I just saw the door open on my way to Marks...Marks and Spencer, you know? On Brompton Road. There were no lights on, and normally... Well, one doesn't like to be nosy. But it would have been an invitation to theft! Or maybe she'd actually *been* burgled. So I pushed the door, but I could feel something behind it." She lifted a thin, trembling hand to her mouth, breathing becoming more audible; incipient hysteria barely banished and slithering back in at the edges. "And when I put my head round... I have a torch on my phone. There was...so much...blood...and it seemed so bright. I didn't know it would be such a bright...red. On the television it's..."

She visibly forced herself to stop, shaking fingers pressed tight against her lips.

"Did you notice anything?" James put in gently. "Anything unusual? Any detail, however small, that might be of help?"

"*God!* I just saw *her*, lying there, and I ran." She paused, a few shuddering seconds, then she offered to James, tearfully, hopefully, "I did notice she had on Jimmy Choos. New season."

James didn't allow his expression to change. Shock did odd things to people and—he'd asked.

"You've been very helpful, Mrs. Cordiner," James reassured her. She nodded sharply, like a shocked bird, then dropped her eyes back to the safe familiarity of her tea.

As James and Ingham walked back slowly to the now-bustling crime scene, they were both subdued.

"No magic bullet then," James ventured, just to break the silence.

"I stopped believing in Santa when I turned thirty-five," Ingham snapped. "I'm not sure what I'll do if the Tooth Fairy isn't real." She made a hugely impatient sound. "Fuck, we're not gonna get much breathing space on this one."

James nodded wordlessly. But then, as suddenly as if she'd hit a wall, Ingham stopped walking. James, startled, stopped too, a few feet from the scene-of-crime tape.

She faced him full-on, all her focus on him. Her eyes were large and dark, slightly protuberant, and the expectant light in them made James's gut clench nervously.

"How does it feel to you?" Ingham asked. And James realized he'd been waiting for exactly that question, in exactly that tone. How it felt to him.

Because much to his own embarrassment, the leaps of intuition and logic he'd made in the past, which had paid off—had earned James a worrying reputation with Ingham, and Scrivenor for that matter, as somehow...a bit psychic. That unnerved him more than a bit. He appreciated the fact that Ingham took his opinion into account, but even the way she phrased the question felt redolent of crystal balls and communing with the spirits.

All he'd ever done was go with logic and his gut feeling, which had been a new experience for a man brought up to fit into a very tight box. *Feelings* hadn't been welcome in his house.

Still, he tried to give her what he could. How it felt. To him. "Not a domestic... Not at first glance. No sense it's a robbery. As far as we can tell, no obvious sexual motive."

Ingham didn't say a word, just waited.

"Domestic..." James went on. "Well, it'd have to be someone in her life who planned it, someone so full of rage, he, or she, would watch Maria get out of her car and unlock the door, then grab her and cut her throat on the spot. That's a really *intimate* way of killing someone. Unless you're a pro, you'd have to hate her. But I didn't get a feeling of rage. Just the one wound."

Ingham nodded slowly. "So?"

He shrugged, hating that he had so little. "Someone just...needed her dead."

"It could still be domestic. But I take your point. Her job has to be the best lead." Ingham frowned. "Prevention. Or vengeance." A short, tense pause, and she seemed to be bracing herself. "Jamie. I'm going to need you to take the lead on this one."

James stilled, and stared at her blankly. He'd heard the words clearly enough, but he couldn't be sure he'd understood them all the same.

He was a detective sergeant, far down the pecking order. More than that, he was the least experienced DS in their unit. He couldn't *take the lead* on a major investigation.

Ingham grimaced. "Look, I know it's asking a lot. And yeah, I could shift DI Mulligan from the Albert Embankment stabbing, but...I really get the feeling this one's gonna be a bastard."

James gazed at her wordlessly, and her mouth twisted.

"Fuck. Don't look at me like that. I'm not hangin' you out to dry. It's still my case. But I'm not gonna be able to do the legwork, and there's no one I trust more to dig out the obscure details. You've a copper's nose, Jamie."

"But..." James protested weakly. "Alec..." Because Scrivenor had more than two decades experience over him. In fact, he'd shown James the ropes as a detective.

"I need Alec to manage the office, with two cases going." Ingham said. "I know it's unorthodox, but you'll be a DI soon enough, an' frankly, I've got no options. I *know* you can do it. Just don't go off half-cocked. Come to me with everythin' you get."

She waited expectantly for a second or two, then, with a gusty sigh, she strode off toward the forensics team, working, efficiently silent, in the eerie, winking-blue light.

To James, that sigh felt like a reproach.

He watched her edge inside the hallway, but he found himself slowing deliberately, then stopping, trying to wrestle down his warring emotions.

Had she expected more enthusiasm? That he'd be gung-ho at the unprecedented chance she'd decided to give him?

He'd only been a copper for two and a bit years. And he'd been a uniformed PC for one of them. All his time at the MIT had basically involved acting as Ingham's sidekick—exactly the role detective

sergeants were meant to play. Bag carriers. Organizers. Assistants. Sounding boards.

Now Ingham expected him to coordinate a major murder case with no formal acknowledgement and no rank to back him up?

He drew a deep breath, trying to calm himself down. It could be ruinous.

And yet—hadn't Ingham also paid him a huge compliment? She could have moved him to the straightforward stabbing case in Vauxhall, but she'd left that with the senior officer, and chosen *James* to shoulder the hard-core investigation. Rationally, her head would be on the chopping block too.

Fuck! At times like this, James wished bitterly that he smoked.

He gazed restlessly along the mews, noting lights were now on in most of the houses, but then anyone would find it bloody hard to sleep through the aftermath of a murder. All the residents would have to be interviewed anyway, as soon as possible.

Deliberately, he relaxed his shoulders and moved to follow Ingham.

He felt almost comically far from fully engaged now, but even so, as he neared Maria's door, something made him glance to the left, into the deep shadows outside the semicircle of powerful lights shining on the crime scene. It took a second to register it but, as he peered into the gloom, he saw a slightly darker blob a few feet away, almost closer to the neighbor's door. He thought his eyes were probably playing tricks on him, but he strode over to investigate anyway, glad of the diversion.

What he discovered, when he shone his phone torch on it, proved a total anticlimax. A small bag of pebbles rested pointlessly against the house wall—clear polythene, tied at the top with an elastic band, and filled with smooth, white, sea-washed stones.

James frowned almost offended by it, trying to make sense of its presence in a London side street. Maybe someone had left the stones for Maria's fish tank. Or maybe they had nothing to do with her. Maybe they belonged to her neighbor. Or the building work, going on in a house a few doors down.

He told SOCO to document the bag anyway, since this seemed to be his case now. Then the diversion ended.

Grimly, he watched an officer photographing the bag and another

dabbing it for fingerprints. And when Ingham reappeared, he managed to find a smile for her before they headed to their respective cars to drive the short distance to the station.

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James followed Ingham into the station briefing room just after one a.m., and the contrast from the peaceful state in which he'd left it felt staggering—from zero to full, reckless throttle, in just a few hours.

Ingham headed straight for Detective Inspector Mulligan holding forth at the far side of the room to Charlie Brent, his unfortunate DS, and when he saw her, Mulligan snapped to attention before her like a squaddie on parade.

James watched and felt a bolstering stab of contempt. Because—fuck it—whatever the restrictions of leading an investigation with his present rank and inexperience, he knew he could do a better job than Mulligan, a career cop so pedantic and ponderous that James had come close to committing homicide himself on the few occasions he'd worked for him.

The Albert Embankment case—Mulligan's case—rested on CCTV and the hope of eyewitness cooperation. Maria's would be a mystery, James could feel it, real old-fashioned detective work.

And then the remnants of civilian shame tempered that burst of professional excitement—and curdled in with that, realism.

He *had* to get it right. Not just for Ingham, or even himself, but for Maria, for the people who loved her. He didn't want to end up as one of those old cops with a filing cabinet full of the guilty souvenirs of failure.

He tore his gaze away from Mulligan and Ingham and, with a jolt of relief, found Scrivenor sitting off to one side, looking as if he'd been running his hands through his sparse hair for hours. It stood up in tiny tufts now, like the feathers of a pissed-off owl.

Alec was old school—a big, ginger, balding, mustachioed Glaswegian in his late forties, who'd come up through the ranks over twenty-eight years to the plum job of DS in an MIT. He'd spent his entire adult life in London, yet his Glasgow accent hadn't softened by a syllable. He and James were polar opposites, yet they fitted together like puzzle pieces. Within the MIT, they were their own mini-unit.

"Like fuckin' buses," Scrivenor sniffed, as James slid into the seat beside him. "Nothing till yiv given up, an' then two come along at once. An' then it's crazy town."

James huffed a laugh. "It could be worse. We could be Charlie."

Scrivenor grunted with amused malice. "Poor bastard." They sat in silent accord as the rest of the unit shuffled and gossiped in the seats and tables around them, waiting with eager tension for Ingham to begin the show. And as they waited, James worried at how to tell Scrivenor he'd been chosen to lead a murder investigation with just one, single year's CID experience behind him.

It wasn't that Scrivenor had ever showed a molecule of resentment of James and the way he'd been parachuted in from the outside. He'd always been totally accepting of the fact the DS to whom he'd once shown the ropes would be a detective inspector soon, when he'd never had that option. When it had taken *him* sixteen years of hard slog to make sergeant.

James had been in awe of his generosity, but Scrivenor had confided that the endless reforms imposed by the Met since he'd joined had long since left him ready to accept his career could be leapfrogged by an influx of prima ballerinas at any moment.

But still...

"Any joy wi' findin' a flat?" Scrivenor asked idly.

James accepted the escape, though he couldn't call it a restful subject either. "Not so far. There're twenty people after every decent room."

He tried to sound unbothered, but in reality, before this case hit, he'd been manically dedicated to the project of reclaiming a life for himself. Only—London hadn't been cooperating, and now work had kicked him in the bollocks too.

It had all been sparked six weeks before, by one of those epiphanies that usually came in the dead hours of the night. This one, though, had come with James's alarm clock. It had woken him in his lumpy single bed, and he'd stared at the brown-stained paint on the bedroom ceiling, smelled the eternal stink of cabbage, heavily underlaid by damp, and all at once, he'd felt as if he were suffocating.

It'd been a quick, terrifying surge of panic that had sent his heart rate galloping—triggered by one of those too clear-sighted moments no one wanted to have.

The realization that he had no life, any more. No real friends. He had nothing outside of work, because work had become his one refuge and certainty. Being a good policeman provided all his self-belief and pride.

At twenty-eight, he existed and little more, in a rented hovel of a bedsit, furnished with landlord's tat. And he didn't even need to. Poverty hadn't forced him this low. He didn't *have* to live alone like a hermit in a cell. He didn't have to smell fucking cabbage all the time. What he'd done, what he *was*, didn't actually require a hair shirt.

It had been a ludicrous kind of insight—he hadn't even been aware he'd been hiding. But once the awakening had come, his need to get out of that flat had grown manic.

"I've seen fourteen already," James confided gloomily. "I had a viewing tomorrow in Earls Court as well. It looked good."

Scrivenor's bushy ginger eyebrows headed toward his receding hairline. "Earls Court? Ah remember when that wiz affordable."

"No...this one's pretty reasonable," James protested. "That's why I'm so pissed off I'm going to miss a chance at it."

But deep down, he knew he'd have gone for something more modest if the wording of the advert hadn't pulled him in.

Wanted: flatmate for 2-bed frst flr in S Ken. Prkg. Can be M or F. Must be employed, solvent, civil, gay friendly.

Well, he'd thought at the time, excitement beginning to buzz, he fit all of them. Most importantly, he fit the last bit. It had been a major part of James's resolution to change, after all—forcing himself to finally...try. Make his publicly accepted sexuality more than theory. Make some gay friends for a start.

So much for that.

Scrivenor seemed to sense his need to sulk, so they both silently watched Ingham as she finished her finessing of Mulligan, and called the briefing to order.

She rattled through the nightclub stabbing without calling Mulligan to make any kind of contribution. Obviously, her focus lay with the bigger case.

"Right. The second one tonight. Cheval Place—our own backyard. We're treating the house as the primary crime scene until we know different. Going by ID, the victim appears to be Maria Curzon-Whyte, aged twenty-five, a barrister at Blackheath Chambers."

A loud collective groan echoed round the room. They all knew how the press operated.

Ingham ignored them. “She lived alone but she may have had boyfriends, or indeed girlfriends. Sameera and Wally have started door to door. We haven’t got a time of death yet, but the assailant used a risky method...body left right in the front hall of a mews house with the door ajar. Jamie...get me a name an’ address for next of kin. Barry...find as much info as possible about her chambers.” She rattled off more tasks and directions then stalked off to her office.

James realized only at that moment that he hadn’t seen her crack a smile in days.

The briefing broke up with a cacophony of scraping chairs and chatter, and everyone trailed down the corridor to the big, open-plan office-come-Incident Room—bleak and grey and filled with ragged furniture and stone-age equipment. James’s and Scrivenor’s battered chipboard desks were set out face to face in a small island, both half-covered with ancient bulky computer monitors normal people would have laughed at.

James automatically switched on his monitor when he reached his rickety swivel chair, and as he sat down, he pressed the button on a massive, even more elderly computer beside his legs. On a very good day it took just ten minutes to power up, and he had it lucky. Some of the terminals in the office took half an hour to come on. Scrivenor had appropriated this one for James on the quiet, one of the many things he’d done to subtly help him since he’d arrived, though Scrivenor’d be appalled to be called on it.

“Fuck, what I would nae give for a Costa coffee right now.” Scrivenor thumped down a pile of files. “An’ a muffin.” He grinned at James slyly. “All you overprivileged English bastards should come wi’ a butler.”

James met his eyes expressionlessly.

“Tae go tae Costa for us,” Scrivenor finished innocently.

Unfortunately for him, James’s attempt at cultivating a “just another copper” demeanor had never quite recovered from the ingratiating gesture he’d made on his first day at the MIT, when he’d made the basic mistake of buying a pair of expensive lattes for Scrivenor and himself, from a branch of Costa on the way to work, rather than grabbing two

bog-standard coffees from the vending machine in the corridor. From that moment, it had become a thing between them, proving, Scrivenor claimed, how unutterably posh he really was. James still brought in a cup for Alec regularly, just to enjoy the abuse.

"But...ah gotta go an' see Herself." Scrivenor winked, and he headed for Ingham's office, moving with impressive speed for all his bulk.

James waited for his computer to stagger to life, gazing idly at the hyperactivity around him. Then, for variety, he dutifully studied the all-too-familiar detail of a postcard Scrivenor had carefully sellotaped to the back of his own monitor to "add interest" to James's office landscape—Salvador Dali's *Christ of Saint John of the Cross*. James had returned the favor by taping a portrait photograph of the Chief Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police to "add interest" to the back of his.

James would be contemplating that cross for the next few days with not a lot of respite, so it seemed only fair Scrivenor should spend an equal amount of time with the commissioner.

He sighed and stretched, impatient to get going. With any investigation, the first hours were the most crucial. Evidence had to be found before the crime scene could be opened, and subsequently destroyed, by inexperienced people blundering about on it. Witness statements must be taken before time blurred memory. Next of kin had to be interviewed and consoled before the death became general knowledge.

James rarely saw his own bed for the first forty-eight hours after a murder. In fact, he'd been on investigations where he'd been on duty for four solid days. There had been a collection to buy some camp beds the year before, and everyone kept changes of clothes and toiletries at the station.

He stared at the surreal intricacies of Dali and tried not to imagine what Ingham might be telling Scrivenor until, just when he'd almost forgotten what he'd been waiting for, the monitor on his desk lit up with a discordant clang of chords. He checked his watch. Nine minutes and thirty-two seconds. A record. Maybe it was a sign.

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It didn't take James long to pull up the information he needed on Maria's next of kin, and as he read, his heart plummeted. If she had

any respect at all for career politics, he thought, this should be enough to change Ingham's mind on giving him the lead.

He grimaced and stood up, details in hand.

Ingham had been chatting with Scrivenor when he reached her glass box of an office, but she waved him in.

"Parents, ma'am," he offered apologetically. She caught his tone immediately and her eyes narrowed. "Father is Sir George Curzon, chairman of Grosvenor Properties and Chair of the British Property Federation. Mother...the Honorable Lady Justice Cordelia Whyte." He blew out a regretful breath. "DBE."

Dame Cordelia Whyte.

Every policeman in London had heard of her. A rebellious cornerstone of the criminal-justice system, a constant critic of the Met, a thorn in every government's side.

"Fuck," Scrivenor said succinctly. He spoke, indeed, for them all.

Ingham let her head drop as she ran a hand through her rumpled curls. Then she looked up. "Right. We have at most...thirty-six hours before the suits totally lose their shit. Jamie...you'll do the usual for the press."

James scowled.

Ingham made him do most public-appeal TV appearances with her because, she said, people paid more attention to Pretty, especially Posh Pretty. He fucking hated it. Press briefings, press conferences to appeal for witnesses, and worst of all the BBC's dreaded help-the-police program, *Crimewatch*.

He'd been arm-twisted into that after a TV producer spotted him when he went in with Ingham as bag carrier. And, since Ingham was too nervous to perform confidently on live TV herself, James had found himself in makeup and on the studio floor beside her before he could fully understand what had happened. Unfortunately, thanks to Oxbridge and his father, he'd received solid training in presenting a facade of self-confidence, and his appearance had been seen as a roaring success, not least because the program got a lot of embarrassing tweets from women who fancied him.

"Yes," he gritted. "Ma'am."

Scrivenor grinned at him maliciously through nicotine-stained teeth.

"I've got an address for their London house, ma'am," James went on. "They have a manor house in Oxfordshire too."

Ingham sighed. "Of course they do. Let's try here first."

There would be no question of James making the visit alone, not with people like this. Instead he followed silently as he and Ingham trudged out into the dark, wet car park to her police Vauxhall, leaving Scrivenor behind to coordinate the office. James seriously envied him.

—||—||—||—||—

James loathed first visits to bereaved families—and worst of all, middle-of-the-night visits—more than any other aspect of the job. Hell, who wouldn't? He sat grimly in the passenger seat, staring out at the wet, empty, shop-lit pavements flashing by, dreading what they were about to do.

Eaton Square was one of the best addresses in London, all grand Victorian terraced houses: tall, white limestone, three bay windows wide, sitting across from a splendid central garden. Many of the houses had been converted into flats, each worth a few million pounds in themselves, but this address—the Curzon-Whyte's—appeared to be the original house in its entirety.

The February predawn felt poisonously cold when James emerged into it, and oddly he noticed the lack of smell—no rubbish, no fumes, no flowers, just the scent of expensive neutrality.

It took a good ten minutes of ringing the round brass bell, nerves thrumming in his stomach, before the house could be roused and a disgruntled man in his fifties opened the door to glare at them—of all things, a butler. Scrivenor leapt inappropriately to James's mind.

James couldn't imagine what the man thought could be going on; why anyone would be ringing the doorbell after two a.m. without urgent news. But the butler's lofty aggression didn't diminish until Ingham pulled out her warrant card, and the horror of the visit began in earnest.

The man showed them into a medium-sized sitting room and scuttled off to wake Maria's parents, while James stood with Ingham, contemplating family photographs of happy children and proud adults dotted everywhere. The tension in his gut stretched board tight.

James felt as he always felt waiting to deliver this kind of news: like an emotional mugger, smashing into other people's calm lives, leaving agony and loss behind. The aloofness of his role built his guilt, his

distance from their pain. That he could introduce himself to people to deliver news that ruined them, with no wounds of his own to show in solidarity. He was the professional, like a doctor, slicing through their existence then going back to his own clean life.

He'd been studying a photograph of what appeared to be Maria as a child when, at last, a man and woman entered the room, both grey-haired, slender and exquisitely poised, even in dressing gowns, woken in the middle of the night.

Ingham told them as economically as she could.

"But...I talked to her." Maria's mother spoke in clear, cut-glass tones. She sounded firm and reasonable, entirely self-possessed, a woman trained in control. She wore her hair in a stylish iron-grey crop; her eyes were large and dark and hooded. "I spoke to her this evening. She's going to try to come to The Grange. She has a case first, and then...she's going to come."

Her husband already wept silently. He reached out a shaking hand to grasp her upper arm.

"Darling..."

His wife shook her head sharply. "No. I was short with her, because she couldn't come tomorrow. That can't be the last time. That's simply not possible."

It felt brutal, watching her try to instinctively hold on to dignity as she fought not to surrender and believe, but all her wealth and influence and worldliness made no difference. She and her husband were simply two people who'd lost a child.

"When you're ready, sir," James said quietly to Sir George. "We'll send a car to collect you." At least he didn't have to say the words; they all knew the body had to be identified.

"How?" Sir George asked suddenly, voice thick with grief. He asked James, not Ingham. "How did he do it?"

James didn't even consider pointing out that they knew nothing as yet about the gender of the killer. He forced himself to meet the man's eyes.

"Her throat had been cut. Sir."

Silence blanketed the room, a layer of shock, torn suddenly by the kind of weak, wounded noise a small animal might make. But it rose and it rose, more and more, in volume and agony, until the uncontrolled

screams and howls of Maria's mother echoed unbearably around them, a sound so primal that James felt it in his bones, in his elevated heartbeat.

He didn't know what he'd expected from her, an appeal-court judge who'd heard and seen so much. The continuation, perhaps, of her facade of icy calm? But she'd proved no calmer, no less melted to the heart, than the very first mother he'd had to tell about the death of a child, stabbed through the heart in a gang fight.

There could be no point to this now. He glanced urgently at Ingham, and she nodded as if he'd spoken aloud.

"Please call when you're ready to come in, Sir George." Horribly, Ingham had to shout to be heard over the clamor in the room. "Family Liaison officers will be in touch."

"We don't want Family Liaison!" Dame Cordelia roared, her voice hoarse and thick and venomous.

Every stunned eye in the room locked on to her. Tears poured relentlessly down her ashen cheeks, and she reminded James of nothing so much as a figure in some towering Shakespearean tragedy. But somehow in the midst of her hysteria, she had willed herself, forced herself back to them, alert and present. It felt almost unnatural.

Ingham said cautiously, "Family Liaison officers are there to make sure you're informed of everything that's..."

"Don't patronize me!" Dame Cordelia snapped, and life had returned to her eyes, even as they still wept: fire and steel and outrage. "I know exactly what they're for, and I know how you use them. We don't need people hanging around us, trying to dig for information under the guise of a shoulder to lean on."

Another short, shocked silence followed as Ingham visibly searched for a diplomatic reply to Dame Cordelia's unexpected aggression. She could hardly deny the professional truth of what the woman had said—Family Liaison, otherwise known as FLOs, had an ambivalent role—but in James's experience, most bereaved families at this point greeted a dedicated link to the murder investigation without question. Then again, as a murder detective, he'd never before dealt with a family like this.

In the end Sir George saved the moment. "Darling, I'm sure they'd just be there to help." He held both his wife's hands in one of his, and James noted that he had not stopped shaking. "They'll help."

Ingham made some noise of agreement and tried to hand him her card, but he stared at it as if he'd never seen such a thing before in his life, so she set it on the low table in front of the grand fireplace.

"I'm...terribly sorry," Ingham said, and with a quick, gathering look at James, she headed for the door. Within seconds they'd burst out into the cold night air.

They made their way to the car and fastened their seatbelts in a kind of shocked quiet.

Then Ingham burst out, "*God*. This is going to be a sodding nightmare unless something falls in our laps."

James darted a glance at her frustrated profile as she pulled the car away from the curb.

"It could be something to do with either one of them," he tried. "Their enemies." Then, carefully, "Reacting to having FLOs around like that... Isn't that strange?"

Ingham glowered out of the windscreen. "Maybe. But she isn't exactly a fan of the Met, is she?"

James didn't bother to reply. The reflective lull between them stretched.

James ventured then, "If it's okay with you, ma'am, I've got a lead I want to take a quick glance at. I found an address on a pad on Maria's desk. It's in South Kensington."

"All right." Ingham sounded beyond weary. "Check it out later this morning."

"Right."

"And...pray for a miracle, Sergeant, or we're gonna be poking at a nest of very well-connected snakes."



The windows caught his attention as he pulled his car into a parking space, several yards along from No. 22 Selworth Gardens.

They were huge, multipaned, Georgian, and James could tell that they would drench the space behind them in pure, bright light.

No. 22 proved to be part of a terrace, built of yellow-brown London brick. Like all its neighbors, it had three floors of windows, no

basement and a painted, paneled door, surrounded by a whitewashed portico. And on the first floor, those amazing windows were decorated with finely wrought mock balconies made of iron, gazing across to the twee, pretty little Georgian houses peering out from behind their privet hedges on the other side of the road.

This would be prime real estate. And, James knew, sadly unlikely to sport external CCTV cameras. They tended to sit on new apartment blocks and commercial buildings. But hell—no one could blame him for dreaming of finding incriminating footage of Maria arriving for afternoon liaisons with an obvious suspect, could they? He still hoped in his heart of hearts that it could be that easy.

James stretched carefully as he slammed the door of the car, a loud, obtrusive noise in the comparative quiet of the street. He felt surprisingly alert given he'd spent the night at the station, but he'd caught three hours of sleep on one of the office camp beds. It would never be a comfortable fit for his frame, but by four a.m. he'd have slept on a bed of nails. He'd even managed to fit in a shower and a shave before setting off here.

On the whole, he'd done considerably better than Scrivenor, who'd resembled an exploded mattress when James left the office. On the *whole*, he thought, he'd best make an emergency visit to Costa for a takeout, before he got back to the station.

He stretched again as he walked along the pavement until he reached the pale-grey front door of No. 22. A brass plate was fixed to the brickwork with three buttons, placed vertically very close together, and an intercom. There was every likelihood that no one would be in at this time of day, but then again, maybe some of the residents were too rich to need to work. James started, methodically, at the bottom. The name beside the button read *Nicholas*.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he fumbled for it as he pressed the door button blindly.

He glanced at the screen and sighed. He'd set an alarm a couple of days before, to remind him of his viewing appointment at the Earls Court flat, in half an hour. He'd already phoned that morning to cancel, but the guy had sounded unconcerned; he thought he'd found someone anyway. It didn't ease James's restless conviction, though, that he'd missed out on something good.

Beside him, the intercom crackled into life.

“Okay. You’re really early, I’m afraid.” An attractive, cultured male voice, which managed to sound, somehow, both friendly and politely accusing. “I’ll let you in, but the guy before you’s still here. Can you just come up and wait in the hallway? First floor.”

James blinked at the brass plate for a confused second. First floor. He’d pressed the wrong bell. But as he opened his mouth to identify himself, the intercom shut off with a loud buzz.

He frowned and pushed the heavy door, which opened at once into a well-decorated, artificially lit hall. A flat door stood to his left, and fresh white paint covered all the woodwork and walls. None of the communal hall smells he’d become used to were in evidence—no stale smoke or urine, and definitely no cabbage. Instead, the place smelled of expensive polish and new carpet. There was no room for a concierge and, as he expected, no CCTV. Obviously, it had once been an old house, converted into flats.

He eyed the door beside him, the one he’d meant to start off with, and deliberated taking his opportunity now and knocking. But the man on the first floor would be expecting him.

His feet made no sound on the bouncy thickness of the dark-blue carpet.

The door on the left at the top of the first flight of stairs appeared identical to the one on the ground floor—paneled and freshly glossed white. But though James knocked on it, ignoring the intercom-man’s instructions, and though he definitely heard voices behind it, it remained stubbornly closed. He knocked again. The door didn’t open. The man had meant what he said.

James had no real reason to feel as pissed off as he did. The man inside couldn’t know he was a detective investigating a murder. He wasn’t purposely disrespecting the police. Yet, as James lurked, frustrated, in the plush hallway, stealing irritated glances at his watch, he found himself almost deliberately pushing himself to conclusions.

The visitor in there had an appointment. And the man who’d answered had said there’d be another right after James.

So. What kind of men were most likely to have serial “appointments” at expensive residential addresses? High-end hookers.

He glowered at the pristine door, copper's imagination running with it.

Fuck—the last thing he needed was a vice collar right now, but he couldn't exactly ignore a high-class prostitute operating under his nose.

Or maybe—he could. He really didn't have time for this.

He frowned fiercely, slumped against the opposite wall. Then, without warning, the door to the flat opened with a shocking blaze of light, and a man slipped out into the hall.

James, as he straightened, could hardly fail to notice the guy was flamboyantly good looking—all extravagant cheekbones and pouty lips, like a catwalk model—and to all appearances, extremely pleased with himself. As he strutted past, he gave James a quick once-over and a knowing smirk, then he trotted down the stairs and out of sight.

James stared after him. He didn't look like the kind of man who paid for it, but if police-work had taught him anything, it'd be that people rarely obliged by fitting their stereotypes. Whatever the guy had been there for, he'd emerged appearing very satisfied indeed. James's suspicions solidified.

"Sorry about that, mate. Overran a bit."

James snapped his head back to stare at the figure now standing in the open doorway of the flat, assessing him in turn.

The man was startling. Caucasian, round about James's height, but with a more slender build and thick, dark, shoulder-length hair in silky, loose curls. He had a fine bone structure, straight black brows and large, dark eyes whose color James couldn't determine in the dimness of the hall. If the guy fucked for money, James thought in those first moments, he could fully understand how he could afford to live in Selworth Gardens.

Suddenly James felt very aware that, while he was wearing a very nice Paul Smith suit from his old life, it needed a good pressing. And after only three hours' sleep, he could do with the equivalent himself.

The man smiled brilliantly, which rendered him even more startlingly attractive.

James found himself fighting not to blush. It was his fatal emotional tell and he hated it—a lifetime of self-discipline, and he still colored up like an adolescent.

"Hey," the man said. "Come in."

He backed into the well-lit hallway of the flat, and James followed him inside, turning to close the glossy front door behind him.

"I'm Ben Morgan. And you're Jim, yeah?" the man asked cheerfully behind him. "And in a bit of a rush."

Jim'd be a new client then, James supposed. He sighed and turned round.

"Detective Sergeant James Henderson, I'm afraid."

Morgan stilled, and his smile froze. James gave an almost rueful little moue.

He wanted this accidental collar, probably not much more than Mr. Morgan wanted to be collared.

"Right." Morgan blinked and frowned, but James thought that he seemed more confused and appalled than frightened. "Right. Well. That's...nice. So. Anyway. You'll want to see the room."

Another short silence followed.

"The room," James repeated.

Morgan regarded him carefully, as if he half-expected him to pull a knife.

"That's why you're here," he said cautiously. "Maybe...I could see some ID?"

They stared at each other for another second, then James reached into the inside pocket of his suit jacket to extract the warrant card he should have shown the instant he introduced himself. The card he *always* automatically showed.

Except, not this time.

As the other man studied it, James took the chance to pull himself together.

Morgan had thrown him, he could hardly deny it, and he felt embarrassingly aware of the reason why. *And* he'd jumped to conclusions. Scrivenor had never stopped warning him against that. Yet he found himself unnervingly glad that the guy probably wasn't a prostitute after all, and not, he had to acknowledge, just to save himself the paperwork.

"So, you're renting out a room, sir?" he clarified all the same. He'd check it out later... Search for an advert.

Morgan handed him back the card. He'd stopped smiling. "Yeah. I get the feeling that isn't why you're here, though, Sergeant. I mean, you're not Jim, are you?"

James tilted his head apologetically. "Not as such, no sir. I'm investigating a murder."

Morgan's eyes widened with shock which, to be fair, did tend to be the usual reaction to that statement. He had very thick, long, dark lashes, and James could see now that his eyes were blue. A dark, jewel blue.

"*Murder?*"

"Do you know a woman named Maria Curzon-Whyte?"

Morgan stared at him for a moment longer. "Curzon-Whyte." His voice sounded hushed. "No. I don't."

James pulled out a photograph. "Are you sure, sir?" Morgan took it and studied it with a frown. "She worked as a barrister at Blackheath Chambers," James prompted.

"Wow, she's gorgeous," Morgan said softly, and, irrationally, James felt a jolt of something unwelcome, something like disappointment, at the reverence in his tone. Maybe, James recognized with brutal self-knowledge, his assumption that Morgan might be a hooker had created some sort of unconscious supposition about his sexuality. That must be it, because there had been no helpful stereotypical hints, no breath of campness, nothing. He clenched his jaw as Morgan handed back the photograph. "She looks...sort of familiar. But no...sorry. I've never needed a barrister. You said *worked*. Is she the victim?"

"We found a note of this address at her home, sir."

"*Here?*" Morgan seemed shocked but focused. "This flat?"

"This building," James conceded. Morgan relaxed minutely.

"You'd better come in properly, Sergeant." He turned without waiting for a reply and led the way from the hall through an open door into a huge, bright living room, with a kitchenette tucked at the far end of it. "Can I get you anything? A coffee?"

There were used mugs on the surface of the black-granite-topped breakfast bar, presumably from the last visitor, whose smugness James now entirely understood. Who wouldn't be smug if they had the chance of living in a place like this?

He clocked it all surreptitiously, not just the two huge, floor-length windows complete with shutters and iron balcony, which he'd seen from the street, but the polished wooden floors, the white walls and the bright cushions and rugs; the beautiful, framed, black-and-white photographs on the walls—landscape and still life. It was tasteful and definitely a male space. It even smelled attractive, a clever balance of sandalwood and ginger.

"No, thank you." Though coffee was exactly what he needed. That and a few hours' sleep, to get Ben Morgan and his lovely flat into perspective.

"Take a seat, then." Morgan gestured to a comfortable sofa set back from a large, wall-mounted TV.

James sat and pulled out his notebook and pen. Morgan sank down into an adjacent plumped-up leather armchair, long legs stretched out in front of him, and ran a hand back through his tousled dark curls.

"Can you give me some details about yourself, sir?" James began.

"Me? Right. Well. You know my name. I'm twenty-eight. I'm a photographer."

James wrote it down, but he felt pretty sure most photographers made a living through channeling twee, and it certainly wouldn't be easy to afford a place like this on wedding portraits, and definitely not at twenty-eight.

"Is that your work?" he asked, when he looked up again. "On the walls?" He nodded toward a monochrome still life of a stream, the light caught and twisted, glinting gorgeously.

Morgan frowned. "Yeah." He sounded almost surprised, as if James had wrong footed him somehow, though he continued easily, "Well spotted." But James could sense some nervousness there—some tiny tension. Maybe all artists were like that when their work came up for judgment.

"It's very good. The kind of thing people'd pay serious money for, I'd imagine."

Morgan grinned suddenly, wide and gleeful. "Well, thank *you*, Sergeant! And beautifully done! A compliment and a tasteful probe into my finances in one go. Very smooth!"

James felt his color rise again, like a schoolboy reacting to beauty, but despite himself his mouth twisted into a crooked grin of his own. "Are you the owner of this flat, sir?"

"Yep. And..." Morgan continued primly. "I rent out the second room to help pay the mortgage. Though I make most of my money working on fashion shoots and commercials."

When James darted a glance up from his notebook, the other man's eyes were sparkling, teasing, as if he was actually enjoying this.

"Who else lives in the building? Anyone who might have known Ms. Curzon-Whyte, in your estimation?"

Morgan sobered. "Well...there's Steggie downstairs, but I doubt he'd have known her."

James thought about the brass plate outside. "Mr. Nicholas."

"Yeah. He's a mate. I can't imagine he'd know a barrister, unless he had a lawsuit he didn't tell me about. He's...um...he's an adult actor."

James frowned. "As opposed to...a child actor?"

Morgan barked a delighted laugh. "No! Sergeant. Sorry. I meant...in adult films. I was trying to be tasteful."

"Oh." James knew his instant, mortified flush must be visible from space, but Morgan just kept wrong-footing him.

Fuck. The naive innocent was not a good look on a murder-squad detective.

"And upstairs?" he gritted.

"That's Irina. Her surname...there're a lot of consonants involved. All I really know is she's a model and she's Russian and her father's *really* rich. She's hardly ever here. In fact, she caught a red-eye somewhere this morning...and I know *that* because her driver pressed the wrong bell when he came to pick her up. It's always happening. The buttons are too close together. Hang on, I've got her details."

He extracted his wallet, rummaged in it, and handed a business card to James.

Irina Pozdnyakova. Models Select.

James noted it all down, before he went for the obvious.

"We don't know yet why Ms. Curzon-Whyte had this address, but it may not have to do with her professional life. Is there a possibility

you might have met her socially, sir? Possibly in a situation you don't... recall all that well?"

Morgan frowned, then his mouth twisted into wryness.

"Ah. You mean, if I got guttered out of my mind? Did I chat her up, take her here, shag her, then forget all about her? But...she may not have been as casual as me, and kept the address?"

James shrugged carefully, but the fact that he hadn't had to spell it out intrigued him. Or maybe it should concern him.

"Well, Sergeant," Morgan went on calmly. "Possibly I could go with some of that, except for the very *pertinent* fact that I'm gay." He met and held James's eyes. "Not even a *bit* bisexual." As if he were spelling something out to a particularly dense child. "*Totally* gay."

James opened his mouth then closed it again. He wasn't sure what he felt. Awe, perhaps, at the absolute confidence with which Morgan had proclaimed his sexuality. And a disturbing, unwanted surge of pure excitement. He nodded and wrote down the details.

"What were your movements yesterday in the early evening?" He made a show of studying his notebook. Avoidance. Unquestionably. "Between five and seven thirty."

Morgan sighed. "I stayed at my studio until...I don't know...half past six? Then I went to a friend's house."

"Can you give me a name, sir?" He glanced up at last. "Just routine."

Morgan raised a cynical eyebrow, but he pulled his phone out of his jeans pocket and rattled off a name—Matthew Hollister—an address and a phone number, as James wrote.

The door buzzer rang, loud and sharp. They both gave a small, shocked jolt.

Morgan huffed a laugh. "That'll be Jim."

James smiled in acknowledgement, and their eyes locked and held, as if, James thought with a kind of vague panic, they were magnetized. He could feel his stomach tensing, his breath catching in his lungs.

His phone buzzed loudly in his pocket, and to add to the destruction of the moment, the door buzzed loudly again in concert.

They both stood as if they'd been prodded with sticks. James put away his notebook and pulled out his vibrating phone. It was the

calendar alarm again. He should have been at the Earls Court flat, at that exact moment.

But instead...fate had brought him here, to the nicest living space he'd seen since he'd been expelled from his own, two and a half years before.

He chewed his lip, all too aware of the odd urgency churning in his middle. When he glanced up, he found Morgan studying him, and he seemed restless too somehow, discontented, as if he wanted to say something but hadn't decided what. Or maybe, James was projecting.

The buzzer sounded again, like a warning that James's time was up.

"Look," he said in a rush, and he hadn't thought it out. "This is a bit...irregular, but...assuming everything checks out..." Morgan's eyebrows rose. *Shit. This is ridiculous!* "By coincidence, I'm trying to find a room myself, in this area. So, if you could tolerate a policeman in the place, maybe I could add my name to the list of...applicants?" he finished weakly.

Morgan's expression didn't change, but James could almost see defensive walls slamming into place around him.

No chance then.

He felt alarmed by the extent of his own disappointment, when he *should* be feeling relief at being saved from his own folly.

"I'm not sure that would work out, Sergeant." Morgan, as expected, sounded coolly apologetic. "If you lived here, I'm afraid you'd inevitably have to deal with The Gay."

He thinks I'm a homophobe! James realized, outraged. And then quickly, reviewing his own external reactions, *Of course he does.*

His heart sped up as it always did at this point. He still wasn't used to being open with strangers. It still felt like a huge leap of courage. But, he managed, "It'd be a bit...hypocritical of me, if that were an issue." He thought he even contrived to sound cool.

Morgan frowned, not getting it for a second, then his eyes widened as he did.

"Oh," he said flatly. "Right." He seemed thrown, but as the buzzer sounded yet again, he smiled, and James thought it had a subtly different quality to it, a tiny, extra layer of warmth.

The buzzer squawked once more, and now it sounded almost personally offended.

"You have a lot of people after the room," James said hurriedly. "So I understand if it goes fast, but...here's my card. I'm a bit busy right now, but maybe you could text me with an appointment or something? If *Jim* doesn't work out."

Fuck. This was so irregular. But...

Morgan took the card, his plump bottom lip caught between even, white teeth. He had an unusually gorgeous mouth, James noticed, full and beautifully defined. It didn't help.

He nodded once then turned without another word and led James back into the hall. He used the intercom to buzz in the new applicant from the street, then opened the flat door.

Definitely James's cue to leave. No question about it. But still, he stood there for another few, tense seconds, eyes on his shoes, waiting for something he didn't understand.

When he forced himself to glance up, Morgan's eyes were fixed on his face. In the poor light, James couldn't see the blue in them any more, and the intensity of his gaze felt just the wrong side of polite.

"I'll be in touch, Detective Sergeant," he said quietly.

James nodded. "Good morning, Mr. Morgan," he returned.

He marched across the small hall to the stairs, self-consciously sure he could feel Morgan watching him as he went. And as he began to descend, Jim—a small, attractive and clearly irritated blond man—trotted past him near the top of the carpeted steps. James couldn't help hoping he'd behave like a total dick.

Despite himself, while he jogged down to the ground floor, he listened to Morgan's voice above him as he smoothed the visitor's ruffled feathers, then the sound of the flat door closing behind them. And he wondered if Morgan's advert had spelled out his sexuality, as the Earls Court one had, and if all the applicants were gay men.

He glanced over his shoulder, up to the shadows on the first floor, fighting an odd, restless sense of threat, a need to act. He felt unsettled, as if something important had been forced out of place.

Bloody hell! You're absurd!

It had only been twenty minutes.

But in that time, he'd come out to a possible witness and suggested sharing a flat with him.

Put like that, he wanted to bang his head off one of the pristine white walls.

Fuck, he'd better hope Morgan came up clean. And he'd also better hope the room got snapped up, and Morgan realized what a stupid, fucking idea sharing a flat with a copper would be.

James firmed his jaw and forced his mind back to business, to the flat in front of him, which he'd intended to visit first, before accident had presented him with Ben Morgan.

He knocked on the door, waited a minute before knocking again, and then again. Just as he began to turn away, it opened.

The man in front of him appeared to be roughly his own age. Caucasian again. Maybe five feet eleven—a couple of inches shorter than James anyway. Though the fact he wore no shoes or socks had to be taken into account. He had a slim build, a thin, clever, pretty face with bright hazel-green eyes and golden-brown wavy hair cut into a careful tousle. He wore sweat pants and a loose black T-shirt, and he seemed tired and out of sorts. But still, there was something stylized about him, James thought...as if every detail counted. As if his appearance was all of him.

Then again, considering his alleged occupation...

The man inspected James, up and down, and his distraction instantly cracked into interest.

"Well." His sculpted mouth stretched into a huge, appreciative smirk. "The day's looking up. *Don't* tell me. I'm not that lucky. Wrong door. You're *either* after Ben's spare room or you're one of his broken hearts. If it's the last one..." He raised his hand to the doorjamb and leaned in, all stagey campiness. "I'd be *very* happy to help you forget your pain."

James opened his mouth and closed it, then reached for his warrant card.

"Detective Sergeant James Henderson." He wondered, again, if he were blushing. "I'm investigating a death."

There was a short, surprised pause, then the man straightened from his pose, and his camp playfulness evaporated as quickly and

totally as mist in the sun. His hazel eyes sharpened with a different kind of interest, and James had the irresistible impression that he'd just watched a switch being pulled. From one face to another.

"Well," the man said slowly. "A fantasy cop. Do come in."

He stood back to allow James to enter the hallway, then after he shut the door, slipped round him to lead the way into his bright lounge.

The layout of the room appeared almost identical to Morgan's upstairs; presumably the building had been converted by a developer. But the windows were smaller and less grand, and the style of décor was different—glossy and minimalist, like James's old penthouse flat had been. Somehow it felt like an inferior copy of Morgan's living space. Which, James recognized, was hardly fair.

The man gestured James toward a stylish white leather-and-steel sofa that proved to be less than comfortable. A huge glass-and-metal coffee table lurked threateningly beside his knee as he sat.

"Would you like some tea?" The man sank gracefully onto the other end of the same sofa and draped himself sideways to study James as he spoke, knee up on the seat, pointed toward him. He appeared the epitome of alert relaxation. Quite a trick to pull off, if you knew how. "I have every kind under the sun."

His voice sounded light and pleasant, his accent a kind of posh-Estuary. James thought an elocution teacher might have been involved at some point.

"Er, no thank you, Mr...?"

The man's mouth twitched with politely masked amusement. "Nicholas. Emile Nicholas."

James dutifully checked the spelling and took down the details. Then he remembered. "Mr. Morgan said his neighbor is called...uh... Steggie. Is there also a...?"

"No. Just me. Steggie's a nickname. It's stuck with me since I was a kid."

He smiled sweetly, as if the memories were good ones. James noted his extreme attractiveness, very unwillingly.

It all felt too much, like a sustained assault on his professionalism after the intensity of his encounter with Morgan upstairs.

"Age and occupation?" he asked sharply.

Nicholas's pretty mouth twitched into a smirk. "You do sound *stern*, Detective Sergeant. I'm twenty-eight. And I'm a producer and actor. In film," he finished, and if he didn't intend to mention the adult part, James wasn't going to go there either, unless he had to.

He reached into the inner pocket of his suit jacket and pulled out Maria's picture.

"Do you recognize this woman, Mr. Nicholas?"

Nicholas took the photograph in a slim, long-fingered hand. His mouth pursed in consideration as he observed it. "She looks...rich. Victim or culprit?"

James brows rose minutely. *Culprit?*

He said, "Victim."

"I don't know her," Nicholas returned firmly. "Should I?"

"Her name was Maria Curzon-Whyte. We have reason to believe she may have recently visited this building." Which might be pushing it, but...

Nicholas frowned and dropped his head to one side, intent eyes fixed on James's face.

"Really?" Nicholas sounded thoughtful. "Well, maybe she knew Irina. They seem about the same age. Or maybe Ben? I don't move in these circles, I'm afraid. More of a...self-made man." His sudden grin appeared self-mocking and powerfully charming.

James ignored it and went to the default question. "Could you tell me your whereabouts yesterday, early evening? Between say, five and eight?"

Nicholas's smile faded, and he frowned, but then, that challenge always sounded like accusation.

"Here. I had a meeting in the morning, then I worked at home, going through scripts, which is what I'm still doing in fact. I meant to go out in the evening, but I felt too tired."

James glanced down at the large pile of papers on the glass coffee table. Nicholas seemed in demand all right and probably waiting to get on with it.

"Are you sure you've had no dealings with her, sir, socially or professionally? She was a barrister."

"Then I *definitely* didn't have any dealings with her professionally. I have a contracts lawyer, but that's it. And...we covered socially. Quite apart from anything else you may have gathered, she wouldn't exactly be my type."

Suddenly it felt to James like a perfect echo of his interview with Morgan and, apparently again, a dead end. Nicholas had also, most probably been spot-on. Any connection to Maria in this building would more likely lie with a woman her own age than either of two gay men.

He stood to go. "Well, thank you for your time, sir. I'm sorry to have bothered you."

Nicholas stood too, in a movement of such conspicuously fluid grace that James wondered, in an undisciplined second, exactly how flexible the man might be. Would have to be.

"God. *Please* don't apologize, Sergeant. You've been a very lovely distraction on a dull day." James did his best to ignore his renewed tone of exaggerated appreciation. "They're not exactly *The Godfather*." Nicholas nodded confidingly toward the scripts on the coffee table.

James and Nicholas were both moving around the sofa on opposite sides now, back out into the body of the room, and it struck James again how similar this layout seemed to the flat above; how Morgan and Nicholas had arranged their furniture in much the same order, in an almost identical space, yet to such different effect. It wasn't as if Nicholas's furniture appeared less expensive, or more outlandish, so James couldn't quite work out why the room seemed less attractive to him.

It was only then that he spotted a metal console table set against the wall, just along from Nicholas's TV. But it was the collection of objects arranged on top that held his attention.

There were quite a few of them pointing in different directions—all about nine inches long—bright gold phalluses mounted by their gold testicles on circular golden stands. And at the front of the grouping, like a kind of spokesman, stood an old-fashioned gold carriage clock, small pendulum swinging as it ticked. It appeared unnervingly similar to one James's grandmother had left him in her will, and crazily, comically incongruous.

James couldn't believe he'd missed the display when he came in. Now he couldn't look away.

"SHAFTAs," he heard behind him. "Gay SHAFTAs actually." James turned his head from the small forest of ornamental penises to listen to Nicholas. Somehow he managed to keep a straight face. "Soft and Hard Adult Film and Television Awards," Nicholas went on airily. "You don't get one without...*believe me, Sergeant...a lot of hard work.*"

For a long moment they regarded each other stonily, then Nicholas's facade cracked and he barked an unselfconscious, delighted laugh. James couldn't help but grin a bit wildly back.

"I knew Ben'd have told you. You're all right, *Detective Sergeant*. In fact, if you ever consider a change of career, I'm pretty sure..." he leaned in confidently, "...I could make you a star."

James puffed out his cheeks and blew out a theatrical breath. "Thank you, sir." He tried for solemnity, but he knew that he'd fallen well short. "I quite like the Met at the moment. Solid career prospects."

Nicholas's hazel eyes sparkled with delight as he hammed up a disappointed moue. "Solid, eh? Well, it's your decision. But if you change your mind, Sergeant Henderson, I really do think you have the potential to get a hold of a golden cock."

As he let himself out the front door into the thin, sharp sun of the February morning, James felt more than slightly stunned.

He'd spent his two and half years as a policeman focusing precisely on the job, on getting every single thing correct—one of the reasons he had no life.

And yet, in the course of half an hour and two interviews in that building, he'd been effortlessly dragged out of his professional comfort zone and inveigled into sliding off the policeman's mask he'd believed solidly glued on. In front of two potential witnesses in a murder case. One after the other.

But as he caught sight of his own reflection in the driver's window of his car, he realized that he was still smiling.