Bricks and Mortar

by Rector

Summary

For a long time now, I've had requests for a Greg Lestrade story. I felt the time was right to write.
Gregory Lestrade never really knew how his life had suddenly become so bloody complicated. One minute, he was your average, run-of-the mill divorcé; unmarried, unloved, unhappy but not completely broke. The next ... well, it was a long story, and he had a pretty good idea Mike Stamford was to blame. Best to start at the beginning, really.

The final separation and inevitable divorce from Cathy happened in a surprisingly short period of time. They'd been arguing about the situation since forever, but he hadn't really thought either of them would reach the point where the angry words would become something more; where threats and warnings turned into packed suitcases and slammed doors. After that, of course, it was all down to solicitors and sending documents by registered mail; estate agents' phone calls and ultimately, a long depressing silence. It wasn't that he'd fought terribly hard to save his marriage which, in hindsight, had been describing a downwards curve for the last five years or more. No, it wasn't the marriage itself Greg found himself missing, but rather, the lack of being married, of having a place to be, of having some shape and form to his life. He'd been married for so long that he couldn't even remember what kind of a person he'd been before he'd put that plain gold ring on his wedding finger.

The house sale went through with dramatic swiftness and profit thanks to London's spiralling residential demand and rising house prices. The bland, three-bedroomed terraced house he and Cath had bought more than twenty years before in Camden for just under two-hundred grand, had, according to their Estate Agent, magicked itself into a beautifully appointed Victorian property with an abundance of period features and two new bathrooms. No mention of all the weekends he and Cathy had spent doing up an old dump of a house into something that, though he said it himself, wasn't half bad. Especially not when the final offer they accepted on the place was well over a million pounds. Greg had never ever thought he'd have that much cash to his name, free and clear and with no fear of the Professional Standards Directorate checking over his bank balance suspecting some very funny business. Naturally, after all the bills had been paid and the various professionals had each taken their cut, the final amount was a fair bit smaller, but still left both he and Cath, his now ex-wife, with a little over five-hundred thousand each in the bank.

Not that that kind of spending money went anywhere in London, these days. Even a reasonable, one-bedroom flat near the middle of town cost a hell of a lot more than that. The Ex had gone off with her PE teacher and were now probably booking all sorts of cruises and long-distance travel arrangements with the money earned by all those lost weekends. Yes, he could move further out, maybe to somewhere like Sevenoaks. Apparently, you could find yourself a half-decent semi out there with half-a-mil in your pocket. But ... Sevenoaks? For someone who'd spent his entire adult life working and living in Central London, a place like Sevenoaks was the dark side of the Moon. A nice place for sure, but it wasn't him. It just wasn't.

Which sort of left Greg in a bit of a bind. Yes, he could rent, and with a chunk of cash that big, he could probably rent somewhere pretty damn good for the rest of his natural, if he invested the money carefully and if that was what he wanted to do. But it was hard to go back to renting and the lack of real privacy and absence of red tape that went with it when you'd been your own master for the last twenty years. Renting was a definite possibility but it wasn't high up on Greg's list of preferred options. Next, he could see if he might be able to find a really small flat closer to the centre of town and use the half-mil as a deposit. It was certainly doable. He was a DI, standing in good stead with his employer and was on a pretty good wicket. His pay and London allowance meant he brought home a decent wage. Not only that, most of the major lenders knew a copper was a good bet when it came to lending money for a mortgage and, often as not, something of a sweetheart deal might be arranged. However, he didn't much fancy taking on another big mortgage only a few years after he'd
finished paying off the first one. Besides which, he wasn't getting any younger; the banks might not want to lend him the kind of sum he'd need.

Greg sighed as he thought his way through this; he'd met a few people in the mortgage business over the years and there was a reasonable chance he might be able to swing a fair interest rate for one of London's Finest. Even though he knew he'd be stretching everything to the absolute limit, Greg felt happier with that idea than the one about going off and finding some posh rented flat somewhere in Islington or even closer in. The only real drawback was that when he and Cath had bought the place in Rousden Street back in the mid-Nineties, they had both been a lot younger and a hell of a lot more enthusiastic about lugging buckets of cement and tins of paint around at the weekends. Not only did he not have the same energy now as he did then, but he had a lot less spare time. He sighed again.

This was probably one of the reasons he and Cath had hung on as long as they had; it took a lot of effort to even think about starting again and neither of them was what you might call a spring chicken. He sniffed moodily. Not that that had seemed to stop Cath from gathering her nuts in May. Ah well.

In the meantime, he needed to find some cheap digs until he was able to make longer-term plans. It didn't matter what sort of place he got for a few weeks; as soon as he'd got all the finances worked out and had looked around to see what he fancied in terms of real-estate, Greg was confident he'd have himself properly set up within, oh, a few months at most. Of course, that was before he started looking for an new place to call his own.

Looking for a place to live is a miserable occupation when your heart isn't really in the task. Still, Greg knew he didn't have much of a choice in the matter and began spending increasing chunks of his scant free time online, chasing down one potential sale after the next, only to find he was too late, too poor, too fussy or simply too jaded to be charmed by the estate agents' increasingly flamboyant claims for their properties. He had no interest at all in tiny, one-bed flats with a great view of a brick wall ten feet away from the window. Nor was he particularly keen on the crumbling end-of terrace in Poplar where the rats could be heard in the walls and the stink of decaying wood made him step outside for a breath of fresh air. What he wanted, what he really wanted ...

Somewhere central and easy for work. That was essential for someone in his line of business. He needed to be able to get to a crime scene within minutes, not hours. He also wanted the city around him, but not anywhere so badly damaged by neglect and gang-crime that the roof was in danger of landing on his head in the middle of the night. Greg realised he wanted a place that had a bit of age to it, something recognisably London rather than any of this Modernist crap with flat roofs, flat windows and a total absence of charm. He didn't necessarily expect to find a place as good as the house in Camden, but he liked some of the leafier roads and found himself driving around the nicer streets after work simply to prove to himself that such places still existed.

After the fourth month passed and he was no further forward than he had been at the start, Greg couldn't deny the fact that he was starting to feel somewhat disillusioned about the whole song and dance of buying a property in London. Everything was too hard and took too much time and was just plain too disappointing at the end of it all. He was royally fed up and, bumping into Mike Stamford at Bart's after chasing Molly for a swift word one a recent Thames drowning, the idea of a pint or three sounded exactly what he needed.

"But everything's either the size of a small hamster cage, with literally everything in the one room, including the bloody toilet," Greg waved his arms indignantly over his head. "Or it's out in the middle of nowhere, where the locals drink seventeen different kinds of cider and are unnaturally serious about seasonal weather patterns. And if it's neither of those, it's in a nice spot and costs more than I'd ever make in a million years." Greg quaffed his bitter and sighed gloomily into the half-empty glass. "It's all a bit much," he added, grimly. "I may have no choice but to find a place to rent
until someone dies and leaves me a hamster cage in their will."

Mike laughed. It was easy to make light of another's misery when it was so obviously self-inflicted. But then, he remembered a conversation he'd had the previous weekend and he stood, holding his glass motionless as his brain replayed the event. It probably wouldn't be worth the effort of mentioning anything ... but he'd been right about John Watson and Sherlock Holmes, hadn't he? Was it even possible that ...

"What?" Greg observed the pregnant pause and the fact his drinking partner had ceased involvement in one of those crucial elements. "What?" he asked again, turning to assess the doctor's fixed facial expression. There was usually only one reason people stopped talking and looked like that. "You've had an idea, haven't you?" there was an accusatory tone in Greg's words. "Come on then ... out with it, man."

Mike shook his head and sipped his beer. It wasn't even a fully-fledged consideration, more a fragment of reflection where two unlikely people could make something work. "Not really an idea," he shook his head again. "Just an odd thought."

"Significant enough to stop you drinking and talking," Greg pointed out. "I'm not a copper for nothing, y'know," he looked arch and tapped a finger against his glass. "Spill."

Shrugging and examining the remains of his pint, Mike wrinkled his nose. "I have a friend," he said, apropos of nothing in particular.

"And?" Greg raised his eyebrows.

"And this friend is looking for someone with a bit of spare cash to invest in a small property development here in London," Mike finished his ale, fishing in a jacket pocket for his wallet. Opening the folded leather, he hunted for a few seconds before extracting a worn business card bearing the image of a single fern strand above three simple words.

**Freddy Kerr. Gardener.**

"Your mate's a gardener?" Greg frowned down at the battered bit of card in his fingers as he knocked back the last of his beer. "It's your round, anyway," he added, gesturing towards Mike's still-open wallet.

"Yes, a gardener and a posh one too," Mike plonked a fresh beer in front of Lestrade as he retook his seat. "And not only that, but a bloody good one; lots of clients in Kensington and some of the big houses in the Home Counties."

Greg sat back and thought. "So this mate of yours wants someone to go in with him on a small development ... I'm thinking this would be some kind of house refurbish?"

"I think so," Mike screwed up his face, trying to remember the exact details. "Might be best if you had a word with Freddy to find out what's what," he added. There were a couple of things Mike felt best not to mention until Greg and Freddy made contact ... assuming they ever did, of course. Freddy was, well, Freddy was a bit different from other people.

"Yeah well, I'm not that desperate yet that I've entirely given up on the house-buying scene," Greg waved the card away as he swigged down the chilled beer. "I'm bound to find something that suits me if I keep at it a bit longer, but thanks for the thought."
Three weeks later, Greg called Mike back. "That friend of yours still looking for a partner in their house refurb?" he asked. "Frankly, I'm open to almost any suggestion right now that doesn't involve entire bathrooms smaller than an aeroplane toilet, or sheds masquerading as a three-bedroom house."

"Want me to set up a meet?" Mike sounded amused. "At the pub?"

"Is he the kind of bloke who comes to normal pubs?" Greg wondered if maybe a wine bar might not be a better place.

"Freddy's good with pubs, have no fear," Mike laughed. "I'll make a call and organise something. I'll text," he added, ending the call.

The text arrived the following evening, just as Greg was about to sink down into the cheap and lumpy settee in his massively expensive rented bedsit. He hoped to Christ he could get some kind of arrangement off the ground; if he spent too much time in a dump like this one, he'd lose whatever sense of normality he had. Bedsit living was great for students, but he'd come to appreciate something with a little more substance and comfort. He really was too old for this.

The meeting was arranged for eight o'clock at the White Ferry House in Pimlico; an old Victorian drinking hole which now sported cheap accommodation for backpackers and visiting students. Consequently, the pub was pretty packed by the early evening. Undaunted, Mike guided Greg through the long main bar towards the back of the big saloon where a series of neatly upholstered booths were already occupied. Pointing out the biggest nook in the corner, Mike indicated Greg should take a seat. As he approached, Greg saw someone was already there; a pair of hands rested on the table. He slid into the opposite leather bench before looking up and freezing.

"Oh God, sorry," he was already half standing again in preparation for leaving the booth to its solitary occupant. "My mistake. I was supposed to meet someone here ... sorry," he smiled, resting a hand on the table top as he angled his legs out from between the bench-seat. Mike stopped him with a hand to the shoulder.

"Greg, meet Freddy Kerr," he said smiling broadly. "Freddy, this is the old friend I was telling you about the other night. Greg's got a bit of cash but can't find the right kind of property to buy. I thought the two of you might be able to work something out. Sit," he said to Greg, pushing him back towards the seat. "I'll get the drinks in." He was off to the bar before any resistance could be offered.

Taking the hint, Greg did what was expected and slid into the long seat. "I'm Greg," he said, reaching a hand across the table.

"I'm Freddy." A woman in her late thirties shook his hand. "Mike speaks highly of you," she added, sitting back and folding her arms. "He says you're very trustworthy."

"Yeah, well," Greg shrugged, sitting. Part of him was already regretting coming here tonight. Getting involved in a property deal was one thing, but with a woman? He'd need to be well convinced before things went any further. "We sometimes end up working in the same line of business."

"Police?" the woman smiled as Mike slid a pint glass in front of each of them, placing a third on the table as he sat. "You look more like you'd be in banking or perhaps government."

"You're not far off there," Greg smiled politely. "Met Police."

"Police?" Freddy Kerr raised a very direct gaze to Mike sitting opposite and drinking his beer. "Mike didn't say."

Greg blinked down at his glass. "There were a couple of things he neglected to tell me about too," he
smiled, taking a good look at Freddy Kerr, Gardener.

Mid-height, the woman was dressed in boxy dark clothing that disguised her shape but by the narrowness of her wrists and neck, she was thin to the point of being wiry. Her nails were short, clean and unvarnished. She wore little makeup; a touch of lipstick and mascara as a nod to the social niceties. Her skin was tanned and there was a bridge of freckles across her narrow nose. She had short, almost ragged dark hair with threads of silvery-grey already making themselves at home in the heavy sweep that tucked itself away behind her right ear. Tiny gold studs in her freckled earlobes and a man's heavy signet ring was all the jewellery she wore. A black t-shirt under a loose dark grey jacket hid everything else from inspection. Not that he was inspecting her, of course.

Her eyes were dark hazel and acutely intelligent. Greg felt the heat of embarrassment rise as he realised the woman had been observing him observing her.

"Seen everything you want?" she asked, sipping her lager.

"Sorry," Greg owned up manfully. "Not only am I a copper, but I don't meet women called Freddy every day, is all," he swallowed more beer. "You don't look like a gardener, for starters," he added. "More like a doctor, maybe?"

Freddy shrugged inside her shapeless clothes. "I was one of Mike's students briefly," she said. "It's how we met."

"But not a doctor now?" Greg was curious. Few people with the ability to become a doctor changed their vocation. Certainly not to that of gardening. Not unless there was a reason. A serious reason. Greg narrowed his eyes uncertainly as he looked across the table.

"In case you're wondering, Freddy gave up the medical profession because she found the emotional side of things a bit ... difficult," Mike knew what Greg's expression meant. "You've got to be pretty tough in the ..."

"Yes, well," the woman interrupted. "Ancient history and all that."

"Freddy?" Greg sipped his beer some more. "Odd name for a girl."

"Far better than Frederica," she grimaced. "Among others. Greg ... Gregory Lestrade?"

"My parents nearly called me Godfrey," Greg grinned at the awful memory. "Old French, but they saw the error of their ways in the nick of time," he lifted his glass again, shaking his head at the close call. "The things parents do to innocent children."

"Tell me about it," Freddy rolled her eyes.

"So tell Greg about the place on Sussex Street," Mike prompted. "It sounds to me that you need a trustworthy partner with a bit of liquid cash."

"True," Freddy sucked down some of the frothy beer and nodded sharply. "Though the situation's slightly more complicated than just money."

"I'm listening," Greg felt he might as well hear the proposition while he was here. He doubted it would be anything he'd really want to get involved with, but hey, you never knew these days.

"I inherited an old house with a bit of a garden, at the corner of Sussex Street and Westmoreland Place," Freddy arched her eyebrows and heaved a sigh. "The building itself is structurally sound though the house is in significant disrepair," she paused, sipping her lager. "My problem is
threefold," she continued. "The land alone is worth millions, but if I demolish the house try and sell the plot as vacant land, I'll lose the majority of it to Capital gains tax, old death duties and other fees, which does me no good at all. The other problem is the bequest states that if I attempt to sell the house without living in it for at least a year, all profits revert to an old family trust and I'll not see a penny of it. The other part of the problem, of course, is that to do the house up to anywhere near a liveable standard is going to cost in the hundreds of thousands of pounds; money I simply don't have."

"The banks won't lend you the money with the house as collateral?" Mike sounded curious.

"Mike, I'm a gardener, a freelance gardener," Freddy sounded weary. "Even with collateral, no bank is going to risk half-a-mil on me if I can't demonstrate at least some kind of steady income and an ability to make regular loan repayments."

"Which is where you need a financial partner," Greg nodded thoughtfully. "So, what's the plan?"

"Well," leaning forward on the table, Freddy's expression became genuinely animated for the first time. "It's a large house, with three big floors and a full-size cellar. I can get planning permission to remodel it into three decent-sized apartments. I want to keep the ground floor and most of the garden for myself, offer one of the other two apartments to my partner and sell the third, splitting the money equally between us," she fixed her eyes on Greg's face. "Does that sound like something you'd be interested in doing?"

Greg felt the air whoosh out of him. Invest in a redevelopment scheme and end up with both a decent place to live and a reasonable financial return? It sounded a little too good to be true. "What's the catch?" There had to be a catch.

"The bequest also states that whoever is to live in the house for the year has to be personally involved in its upkeep and improvement," Freddy looked unsure. "It means that we'd have to at least get our hands dirty with the renovations to a certain degree," she said. "Of course, I'm happy to take the garden on, and I can scrub and wield a paintbrush with the best of them, but I know nothing about plumbing or electrical stuff. Do you?"

"A bit," Greg made a face. "But not to the point that I'd trust myself to do more than rewire a plug. I know you need to get any major plumbing and electrical work signed off before you can onward sell a developed property, so I can't see that would invalidate your bequest or trust or whatever," he rested his chin on a hand. "Depends on the exact wording of the inheritance, I suppose."

"I've got a solicitor looking at the details right now. I hope to have a clearer picture by tomorrow at the latest."

"It would be good to actually see the place," Greg stroked a fingertip down the cold surface of his empty glass, keeping his tone vague and neutral, even though something inside him tingled at the idea. It might be exactly what he needed to get himself out of his rut.

Freddy grinned cheerfully. "Which is why I suggested we meet at this pub," she laughed. "The house is less than five minutes' walk away."

"But won't the place be locked up? Don't you need a key to get in?" Greg sat back, keen despite himself.

Grinning again, Freddy pulled an old fashioned big brass key from her coat pocket and waved it in the air. "I came prepared."
"It's getting a bit dark out," Mike glanced through the window as the dusk gathered.

"I said I came prepared," Freddy laughed again as she pulled a small torch from her other pocket. "Shall we go?"

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The streets were fairly wide and in good order, and the pavement was well tended, Greg looked around with his policeman's eye as he and Mike walked briskly along behind a very spritely Freddy. Now he could see all of her, Greg confirmed his earlier estimations. He was an inch shy of six feet and Freddy was at least six inches shorter than him. She also had small feet to match her narrow wrists, though she moved with long strides and was very light on her pins. Her accent was educated London and her voice was well-modulated; he could definitely see her as a doctor. Greg wondered what it was she'd cut Mike off from saying back in the pub. Something she'd rather not dwell on, obviously. He wondered at her odd haircut and baggy clothing; you'd think a woman with her education and individual style would take more care in her personal appearance. He shrugged mentally; different people, different ways. If Mike said she was OK, then his word was good enough.

"There," Freddy stopped them at the edge of the pavement and pointed across the road. A high wall, at least fifteen feet tall, enclosed the entire triangular-shaped junction where Sussex Street joined into Westmoreland Place. Scanning the approximate dimensions of the old red-brick boundary, Greg realised he was looking at a massive and completely enclosed space. *A walled garden in Pimlico.* There weren't many old houses left in London with a walled garden; people made a hell of a lot more money by simply knocking the things down, selling off the bricks to a recycler and turning the house and garden inside into a tall block of flats. Even if the house inside was a wreck, the site had to be worth a mint. He remembered Freddy had said the land alone was worth millions. In this area, he wasn't surprised.

"The main gates are over on this side," Freddy jogged across the road, pulling the heavy old key from her trouser pocket. Mike puffed a bit as he joined them.

"Too old and fat to keep up with you lot," he said, leaning against the wall. "I'll just come inside but I'll leave you two do the exploring."

"There's a garden seat near the front, Mike," Freddy wrestled the key into the lock. It was stiff and wouldn't turn.

"Let me," Greg rattled the solid oak and iron gate a few times, banging off any loose debris inside the lock. The key turned then, though slowly and reluctantly. Pushing the heavy gate inwards, he pushed high creeping weeds aside with his shoe, opening the gate wide enough that they could all come inside before he closed it to. Focused on shutting the gate, Greg heard Mike's low whistle and soft swearing, but it was only when he turned around that he saw for himself what all the fuss was about.

Firstly, the place was enormous. The garden inside the tall walls, and which ran around three sides of the house, was at least an acre or more. It was simply huge. The old Victorian house stood squarely with its front facing south, surrounded by overgrown jungle. For some reason, it felt a lot warmer inside the walls, even though it was only just starting to get dark. Freddy flicked her torch on, not that it was necessary, but the pale light helped pick out the borders of a long-forgotten pathway. An ancient wooden bench stood above the weeds not ten feet away. Mike tested it with his foot and, finding it as solid as a rock, gratefully sat down.

"Off you go, you two," he waved them away. "I'll stay here and guard the gate."
"Let me show you around the outside of the house to give you an idea of the scale of the place," Freddy touched his arm, pointing Greg towards a slightly less weeded area closer to the building. "It's probably best that we don't go inside tonight as the electricity isn't on and it gets a bit dark, but this should give you an idea of the size of the project."

Greg was already fairly clear on the project's scope. It was going to be huge. The garden alone was an enormous undertaking, though he appreciated it would be a labour of love for a professional gardener. He looked up at the highest windows as they approached the front of the house.

The place had good bones and classic lines. In the plethora of his recent house hunts, Greg has seen just about every type of dwelling it was possible to see in Greater London. He had seen classic Georgian buildings bastardised into pokey little flats and solid Victorian conversions stripped of all their high ceilings and period features until all that remained were expressionless little boxes. But this house, this house, was magnificent. Even in the dimming light of the day, he could see how untouched and special it was, and there was no reason to suspect the interior was any different. A great love of old London buildings and the light of challenge entered his heart and he already knew what he wanted to do.

"I want to come back tomorrow during the day to have a look inside, if I can," he turned to Freddy who had been watching his expression. "I would also like to see the designs up for Council's planning consideration and any other drawings you might have drawn up for the house and surrounds," Greg turned and scanned the open garden space once more. "This place is brilliant," he murmured, knowing he'd be happy to put his nest-egg to good use here. "I already like it."

"Yes, it has that effect on one," Freddy folded her arms and grinned up at him. "It was the garden that grabbed me first, but the house has its own special attractions too, you'll see."

"Tomorrow?" Greg pulled a business card from his wallet.

"Tomorrow," Freddy took the card and turned back to gaze at something that was a great deal more than bricks and mortar.
Chapter 2

Even though it was a Friday and difficult to be away from the office, Lestrade had luck on his side in that no pressing cases mandated his presence. On top of that, his team was intimately aware of his ongoing house-hunting frustrations and not one of them raised an eyebrow when he declared he was going to look at a place in Pimlico and to call him if anything came up. A chorus of weary acknowledgements greeted his announcement. Sally Donovan stopped him by the door.

"Pimlico?" she asked, folding her arms. "Bit posh, innit?"

"I might have a bit of a deal going on, not sure yet," Greg checked he had his phone in his jacket pocket. It was as lovely day and far too warm to wear an overcoat. "I had a quick look last night but wanted to see the whole thing in broad daylight," he nodded towards the rest of the office. "You okay with me taking off for a couple of hours?"

"Yeah, there's nothing happening here so you might as well go and do whatever it is you need to do," Sally waved him towards the exit as she walked back to her desk. "And don't come back until you've got a decent place to live," she called over her shoulder. Greg was a solid supervisor and a good friend, but he'd been so grumpy recently, Sally hoped this time he might return with good news instead of yet another disappointment.

In his car Greg tapped 51 Sussex Street into his Satnav, pleased when the plotted route ran straight down the Embankment from the Yard's new premises in the Curtis Green Building. He was even more pleased when the travel time from the one location to the other came up as less than ten minutes. A ten-minute drive to work in central London would be a dream realised. Firing up his silver-blue BMW, Greg edged the car out of the carpark and set off, his spirits rising with the clear sky and the gleam of warm Autumn sunshine. It was a good day to be in London, and he was off on what might become a major adventure. In the privacy of his car, he whooped loudly, a silly grin on his face.

Though the area in front of the gates remained free of stationary cars, the rest of the space around the outside of the wall in Sussex Street was well parked up. There was a battered old Landrover of indeterminable colour near the gates and Greg assumed this belonged to Freddy, an appropriate vehicle for a gardener and a glorious contrast to the shiny new Merc parked just beyond. Sliding the BMW into the remaining free space, he pulled out a pair of old work boots, heading in through the same gate as last night. It was already slightly ajar making entry a great deal easier. Inside the high walls, the temperature was again warmer than outside and Greg shrugged his jacket off, rolling up his shirt sleeves. He could see two people near the front of the house bending over what looked like a picnic table covered in papers. Greg sat on the old bench near the gate to change his shoes and took his first really good look at the place that might, if all went to plan, become his new home.

All around him, easily to head height and above in some places, the remains of what had once been a lush and diverse garden stood lank and neglected. Dead and broken trees sprawled drunkenly against the inside of the wall, and pathways and borders had entirely vanished beneath the thick, clumping undergrowth of dead grass and sprawling weeds. Odd-shaped bushes grew in wild clusters and the occasional flash of vivid colour accompanied the low hum of bees. There was a madness of butterflies and the scent of hay and old flowers. The ground was a little clearer closer to the building, though not by much and Greg decided he would be entirely happy to leave the wilderness of garden to Freddy. This close to the building, the place loomed above him. He remembered it was only three stories tall, but this house had been erected in Victoria's heyday, when the size and quality of one's dwelling directly reflected the status of the individual having it built. At a rough guess,
informed by the dozens and dozens of houses he'd swanned through in the last few months, he imagined the ceilings in the house would be at least twelve feet high, maybe even a little more. It was hard to be certain from the outside but he'd expect nothing less, given the overall height of the house. It towered.

It was also wide and built substantially in beautiful red-grey brick matching the great surrounding wall. There was a broken limestone coping along the top of the wall itself, as well as on various parts of the house's façade. The proportions were elegant and nothing major seemed to be missing. Other than most of the boarded-up windows, great expanses of tarp-covered slate roof, and nearly all the external woodwork. If the inside was anywhere near as dilapidated as the outside, they had their work cut out for them. Greg realised he was grinning quite madly again as he stood up in his boots, a sense of excitement tingling inside his chest.

"Hi," Freddy smiled at him as he approached, the man she was with looking up from the papers on the table. By the dark suit, shiny black shoes and open black briefcase lying on the flimsy table, Greg's first thought was solicitor and Mercedes. "Meet Alex Harper, my family's legal advisor," Freddy made the introductions and the men shook hands. "Alex has been clarifying the terms of the bequest, so that I can decide if this project is even feasible," she indicated several of the spread-out sheets of closely-typed pages. Greg felt his heart sink. It would be just his luck for things to be snookered before they got off the ground.

"But not to worry," Freddy noticed the flattening of his expression. "By the sound of it, the terms are simple and unambiguous."

"As long as Ms Kerr remains resident for a minimum of one year prior to the sale of part or all of the property and can demonstrate she has taken an active role in the upkeep and repair of said property, all should be well," Harper tapped a forefinger on a sheaf of folded papers. The deeds for this place are free and clear of any outstanding disbursements or covenants that might restrict your development plans. I'm sure the family will be pleased to hear you are planning on living here once the renovations have been completed," he nodded at Freddy as he began collecting the papers together.

"Family?" Greg knew a capitalised word when he heard one. "You've got a large family?"

Alex Harper started to laugh. "Ms Kerr's family is ..."

"My family are in no position to interfere with this bequest, which is all anyone needs to worry about," Freddy stopped him abruptly. Turning to Greg, she shrugged inside the baggy jacket she had worn the previous evening, though today's t-shirt was a faded khaki. "I have a few elderly cousins and relatives who like to think Britain still rules the waves," she rolled her eyes. "I'm just delighted that the terms of this inheritance are so clear that nobody is going to be able to mess anything up."

Greg's own family were still in Dorset and Bristol; he'd been the first to move to London when he joined the police as a trainee immediately after his seventeenth birthday. He knew exactly how interfering family could be. But still, Freddy's mob had to have been in the money at some point to own a place like this.

"Your father isn't a Duke or something, is he?" Greg watched as the 'family' advisor packed up his case, lifted a hand in farewell and headed towards the gate.

"My father died several years ago and no," Freddy frowned. "Daddy was certainly not a Duke."

Feeling as if he'd really put his foot in things, Greg was about to apologise when Freddy grabbed his arm and pulled him towards the main entrance of the old house.
"Come and have a look inside," though she was significantly smaller than he, Greg found he had to move it some to keep up with her swift pace. Clearly the woman was a bundle of frenetic energy, which, he supposed, boded well for getting work done.

The main front door was a wondrous expression of the stonemason’s art and it did Greg’s heart good to see such unspoiled Victorian craftsmanship. In the last few weeks he had seen too many horrifying things done to old houses and he wanted to yell at people for their stupidity. It was brilliant to see something despoilers might never get their hands on. The entrance stood as a grand central archway made up of superbly mitred limestone blocks, each end of the arch resting on two tall, narrow limestone columns. The columns themselves rested upon two enormous pedestals, framing the four wide stones steps from the doorway down to the faint remnants of a driveway. Looking back toward the double-width main gate, the much larger brother of the smaller gate they’d been using as an entrance, Greg fancied he could just about make out a curving line that might have been the edge of a driveway. The arch was several feet deep and acted as a porch. Though the stone structure itself was complete, Greg noted the whole thing was in desperate need of repointing and there were several cracks in the stones themselves. The porch framed a suitably solid oak and iron door that bore a striking similarity to the two gates in the outer wall. The whole entryway resonated old imperial architectures; Greek and Roman as well as British. He rested a hand on the warm, worn stone and smiled inwardly. This deal simply had to work.

"Well, don't just stand there gazing rapturously at the doorway, come inside," Freddy half-smiled as she shook her head and summoned him in through the open door. "Some of the stuff in here is both ancient and hideous, but I’m almost certain I can sell the worst bits to a recycling company."

"Isn't it a good idea to keep as many of the original features as possible if we're thinking of selling at least one of the flats?" Greg walked in gingerly, taking care to place his feet only in clear patches and not on the general tide of detritus that seemed to lie everywhere.

"That would normally be the case, yes," Freddy stopped and gestured ahead some twenty feet or so. "Though one is compelled to draw the line at some point. What lay in Greg's direct line-of-sight was something dark, unshapely and huge. He saw stairs and balustrades, so assumed the term staircase might be legitimate at some point, though not quite yet. It was, as his potential partner suggested, hideous.

"What is it?" narrowing his eyes, he tilted his head to get a different perspective. "Is it dangerous?"

"Only to one’s aesthetic sensibilities," Freddy walked forward with folded arms. "I feel whichever of my ancestors commissioned this must have suffered some unfortunate head injury or delirious fever about the time they approved the design," she rested her hands on her hips. "This beast goes all the way to the top floor, which makes it both dreadful and inconvenient. It has to come down."

Unwilling to make his first decision one involving destruction, Greg closed in on the spectacle of over-carved Victorian artistry. There was no getting away from the fact that it was, indeed, horrible.

"Not to worry," Freddy's tone was bright. "I know someone who'll not only pay us at least fifteen-thousand for this enormous piece of mahogany tat, but will also dismantle it and take it away for free," she turned, shrugging. "And I, for one, will not look a gift horse in the mouth."

"Is it safe to go up?" Greg peered up into the semi-darkness.

"The staircase and the floors are solid," Freddy pointed down to her feet. "Some of these oak boards have been hand sawn and are inches thick," she stamped her boot. "It's the windows and the ornamental things that have deteriorated the most. And the plumbing and the electricity. And the damp-proofing and the drains. Those and the roof, of course."
"Yeah, what happened to the roof?" Greg asked absently as his eyes scanned higher and his feet were already following on the stairs. His gaze identified strange and slightly unpleasant carved shapes in the over-ornate staircase; leering fairies and pustulous toads among others.

"Wild storm and large, flying branches," Freddy jogged up the remaining stairs to the first floor. "The underlying beams are fine apparently, but the rest of the main roof is almost completely shot."

The first floor had the same graceful dimensions as the floor below though the rooms were less extravagant. The ceilings remained airy and Greg could imagine, once the boards were off the windows, that the house would be full of light.

"It's like this all the way up to the attics," Freddy stood in the centre of what was likely a drawing room, stretching her arms out and swivelling slowly. The entire place is solid though you can see, an awful lot needs to be done before anyone could live here again."

"You're not joking," Greg nodded, half to himself, a growing certainty of purpose making his heart beat faster. Despite its present neglect and dilapidation, the house called to him on a visceral level. There was no question what he wanted.

"Come and see the rest of the downstairs."

It was dark at the back of the house with so many of the large windows covered up, but there was still sufficient light to make out and admire the enormous kitchens and ice-room and scullery, anticipated high ceilings evident everywhere – fifteen feet if they were an inch. Patches of wide hardwood flooring showed here too under swathes of old lino and rotted carpet. Though dim, the elegance and space of the rooms could not be hidden as the original architectural dignity made itself evident. Other than the ghastly old staircase.

"Did you say you had drawings and plans for council approval?" Greg managed to keep his voice neutral but it was all he could do to stop himself from finding a shovel and a bucket that very second.

"Outside on the table. I've got some lemonade. Come on," she beckoned and headed to the open door.

The drawings were not precisely architectural renderings though they had clearly been made by someone who knew what they were doing. Greg took a seat on one of the two plastic milk crates Freddy produced and peered down at the long rolled images as she handed him a glass of something icy-cold and cloudy from a thermos flask. He sipped automatically, stopping to lift his head in surprise. This was genuine, home-made lemonade, the old-fashioned stuff, not the fizzy kind. It tasted tart and refreshing and reminded him of summer afternoons at his Nan's house when he was a tacker.

"This is great," he tried some more. "Did you make this?"

"Don't sound so surprised," Freddy looked at him severely. "It can still be made, you know."

Greg sighed, put the glass down and stood, extending his hand. "Greg Lestrade," he said. "Detective Inspector of the Met, based at Scotland Yard. Thrilled to be here, looking at your house and apologetic for putting my foot in it at least twice in the last half-hour." He stood, waiting.

Sighing herself and scratching her head in wry amusement, Freddy took his hand. "Freddy Kerr. Freelance gardener, recent inheritor of Victorian wreck. Looking for sensible financial partner who can tolerate my overly-sensitive, manic personality at least until we can work out if this project is viable or not."
Greg retook his crate and raised his glass. "To Victorian wrecks and viable plans."

Clinking her glass to his, Freddy wrinkled her nose and looked rueful. "Wrecks and plans," she echoed.

"OK then," Greg rubbed his hands together, turning back to the drawings. "Let's do some scheming."

###

The flask of lemonade was long gone when they called an end to the meeting. Freddy had rolled out some basic estimations of costs for an almost complete make-over of the house, which would first need to be cleared and cleaned of all the debris presently lying about the place. After that was done, the first big critical stage would be to render the house watertight. This meant either a completely new roof or significant repairs to the old one. It also meant new windows and new woodwork for just about every window and door in the house, and there were a great many of both. It was going to cost a fortune.

Even as they began drawing up a rough initial budget, Freddy winced every time the total went up by another ten-thousand. "This is going to be hugely expensive," she said, increasingly apprehensive.

Greg hadn't touched the lump sum of money he'd received from the sale of the Camden place, so it wasn't as if he'd miss it. A serious chunk of cash was needed to rescue this place and that's exactly what he wanted to do. "I have half-a-mil from the sale of my own house," he said calmly, looking straight across the makeshift table into a pair of dark, troubled eyes. "Now that I've seen your house, I cannot honestly think of anything I'd rather spend it on," he said. "I'd like to have some sort of legal agreement setting out each of our responsibilities and accountabilities," he added, swivelling around to gaze at the smoothed stone of the grand doorway. "But I want to do this if you do."

Freddy sucked down a deep breath and seemed to relax inside her clothes. "I was frightened you'd say no," she exhaled slowly. "Of course, I'll have Alex draw up clear documents itemising your involvement and risk," she spoke precisely. "Even if the worst comes to the worst and we have to scrap the place half-way through, I can still sell the land and make sure you get every penny of your investment back."

"Thought you said you'd lose most of the money to tax and death duties if you sold it for the land-value only?" Greg frowned.

"I would," Freddy nodded. "But if you're willing to risk everything on this deal with me, I can hardly expect to do less now, can I?"

"Noblesse oblige?" Greg grinned widely, finding it impossible not to tease just a little.

"Something along those lines," Freddy sniffed and raised her eyebrows before looking up to the sky. "I hope you weren't expected back at the office," she said. "You realise it's nearly six?"

"Shit, is it?" Greg stared urgently at his watch before yanking out his phone and dialling in. The central office phone that somebody always answered rang for a while before heading to voicemail. Ignoring the directions telling him what to do if he was calling about an emergency, he ended the call and nibbled his bottom lip. Clearly nothing new had come in that afternoon and everyone had either piled down the pub or gone home at their normal time. Greg experienced a small rush of guilt. But only a small one. *Screw it.*
Fancy heading back to the pub to toast our new partnership?" he asked, standing slowly and stretching his back. Sitting on milk crates was fine for teenagers. "I am experiencing an unusual desire to celebrate."

"Aren't we both driving?" Freddy rested her hands in her lap and looked aristocratic. "Besides, I'm filthy and need a shower."

She didn't look that bad to him, but still. "Yeah, right. Okay then," Greg nodded. "How about we meet up somewhere later in town for a drink?" he asked cheerily. "Come on, don't be a party-pooper. This has made me feel good about something for the first time in ages."

Looking as if she were about to refuse, Freddy relented. "Oh, very well," she agreed. "Given that you seem to like Victoriana so much, there's a pleasant little pub in Thurloe Place. The food they do is quite reasonable too. Shall we dine?"

"Kensington, eh?" Greg nodded slowly. The fact that she knew the pub well enough to comment on its food meant she was at least a semi-regular patron and most people tended to frequent pubs in their physical locale. Kensington ... hmm. "Sounds great. Shall we meet there? What time?"

"Make it at eight," Freddy rolled the drawings up into a canvas bag as Greg folded up the lightweight table. "I'll reserve a table near the back."

"You sound pretty sure of getting in at such short notice," he grinned as he slung his jacket over his shoulder. "What's your secret?"

"Now, where would the fun be in me telling you that?" Freddy placed the little table inside the front door and closed it with a heavy bang. The roll of papers she tucked beneath her arm. "Seeing that you're about to spend a great deal of money on our joint venture, I feel the least I can do is offer you a decent supper."

Joint venture. Greg liked the sound of that.

Nearly two-hours later, tubbed and scrubbed, Greg stepped out of his taxi wearing a light grey sports jacket over an expensive white t-shirt he'd bought in a mad moment after the divorce, with a pair of pale fawn Oliver Spencer chinos. Too casual for work, yet too posh to wear anywhere else, they'd been hanging in his wardrobe waiting for an appropriate moment. It felt that tonight was the night. Something inside him was as excited as he could remember feeling. There was a sense of elation in his steps ... he almost waltzed into the pub.

Already busy, the pub was a decent size, with extravagantly blooming scented flowerboxes on the windows outside and nice fittings and a comfortable feel inside. There was no live music but a softly playing medley of lilting guitars lent a feeling of life to the place. Not that it needed enlivening, really. The patrons were all reasonably well-dressed, much as Greg would expect for this part of the city. Walking through towards the back, he kept his eyes open for ... and there she was.

Cloistered in an alcove for two, Freddy Kerr sat in regal splendour, sipping on what looked like a gin-and-tonic, watching the crowd go by without being an integral part of it. She wore the same baggy dark jacket, though beneath it tonight, she wore a silky ruby-coloured top that allowed a little more of her smooth skin to see the light of day. The rich colour suited her intensity and Greg realised that Freddy was a very striking woman.

"As I'm on my feet, shall I get the drinks in?" Greg hitched a thumb back at the bar, only to look
down to where she pointed, to see a silver ice-bucket and an untouched bottle of champagne.

"The fizzy should be nicely chilled by now," she smiled cheerfully. "I can call one of the waiters over ..."

"Not on your Nellie," Greg noted the chateau; not one of the *Grande Marques*, but a good house nevertheless. If there had been one thing his grandfather brought with him from France, it had been his knowledge of the vine. Removing the foil and loosening the cage, he reached for the small white towel draped over the handle of the ice-bucket and held it over the cork. Holding everything at the top still with one hand, he twisted the bottle with the other. With the faintest *ffssss*, the wine was ready to be poured. Pushing forward the two flutes waiting for just such a purpose, Freddy waited until Greg sat with a glass of champagne in his hand.

"To a successful partnership," she proposed, her dark eyes glinting in the pub lights.

"I haven't felt this excited since I was six and it was Christmas Eve," Greg grinned again, clinking his glass to hers.

"Have you thought which of the flats you'd like to have for your own?" Freddy sipped the golden bubbles and sat back against the high cushioned seat. "I've always wanted the ground floor and the garden, for obvious reasons. I'm also going to be using whatever space I can salvage in the basement," she added. "For my lab."

"Lab?" Greg paused, feeling the faintest prickle of uncertainty.

"I make things with plants," Freddy laughed, reading the question in his eyes. "I like playing with herbal recipes and making stuff. I made that lemonade by adapting an old recipe using lemons, to one using lemon balm. It tasted good, didn't it?"

"Tasted great," Greg resumed enjoying the fizzy. "Which makes me realise I haven't eaten anything apart from half a cheese sandwich since breakfast," he picked up a menu. "Can we order? I'm famished."

"May I suggest something I think you'll like?" Freddy leaned forward and laid a hand over the menu. "I promise, you'll enjoy it. The food here is quite substantial."

Sitting back and swallowing more of the light golden wine, Greg felt the excitement rise again, though he had no real idea why. Maybe it was because he was finally starting his life again as of now. Perhaps it was the idea of the magnificent house waiting for him inside that mighty walled garden. Greg had no solid explanation but he felt more like his old self than he had in … yes, in years. Time to live a little dangerously, in that case.

"Yeah, go on then," he raised his eyebrows in a semi-dare.

"Right. I'll go and order, and you can pour us both some more of that lovely stuff," Freddy swung her feet over the edge of the seat and stalked over to the counter, pulling a man's wallet from her jacket pocket.

Relaxing back in the booth, sipping a bloody good drop of champagne and knowing his dinner was being bought for him by an unusual, but definitely classy sort of woman, had Greg grinning again as he thought about Freddy's question. Which flat did he want for himself? If he took the top one, he'd probably be able to use the attics; there had to be attics of some description in a house of that size. But then, that also meant more expenses in terms of heating. It also meant he'd have to lump everything up and down two flights of stairs, as he doubted they'd ever have enough money to pay
for the installation of a lift.

If he took the middle floor, he might not have quite as much space as either the upper or the lower floors, but he'd be well insulated during the winter and with only a single flight of stairs from his car. This might be important if he was called out in the middle of the night, half asleep as he sometimes was. He savoured another mouthful of the chilled fizzy. Besides which, he wasn't getting any younger. One flight of stairs might be more than enough before too long.

"Dinner will be with us shortly," Freddy returned and grabbed her glass. "I confess to feeling in rather a girlish mood this evening," she flung herself back against the seat. "I believe we shall deal well together," she nodded, pouring herself another glass and giving Greg a top-up. "I can already tell you've fallen for the house, exactly as I did."

Shrugging but denying nothing, Greg rested his arms on the table. "Tell me more about this lab of yours," he realised he was more curious than concerned. "What kind of things do you make with plants?"

"Well," Freddy mirrored his posture, leaning her own arms on the table between them. "I once wanted to be an old-fashioned kind of apothecary. I collect old herbals," she added, "Really ancient books about herb-lore and early medicine. It's something of an interest of mine."

"And so you grow the herbs and plants and what-not, and then what?"

"You've obviously noticed how much warmer it is inside the wall, haven't you? It's perfectly designed for all sorts of delicate shrubs and herbs. Even tropical fruit trees without a greenhouse." Freddy was about to pour them both another glass of wine, only to find the bottle was empty. "Fancy knocking off another or do you turn into a pumpkin at midnight?" she asked.

"I'll get this one," Greg realised he was grinning again. He hadn't enjoyed himself this much in a very long time. Returning with a second chilled bottle of the same, he rolled it deep into the remaining ice in the bucket and retook his seat, only to find a small twist of white paper. "What's this?"

"Don't take it now," Freddy took care of opening the heavy bottle this time, her small wrists surprisingly strong. "It's an old remedy for headaches."

Carefully undoing the twist of paper to reveal about a teaspoon of pale, crushed powder with a strongly minty smell, he paused. "What's in it?"

Shaking her head as his suspicious tone, Freddy sighed. "Dried Coriander for Magnesium," she said. "Essence of Peppermint to ease muscle contractions. Lemon Balm to give your body some useful antioxidants and Feverfew to reduce nausea and pain. It's also good at preventing vomiting," she added, refilling her glass.

About to admire her knowledge of herbs, Greg was interrupted when dinner was served. Two enormous plates of sausages and mash with onion gravy. Bangers and mash and champagne. Well, there were certainly worse things he could be doing tonight.
He'd done as he'd been advised and taken the tiny ration of herbal remedy in a small glass of water before going to bed. Greg had then slept like a felled Redwood until the bedroom's morning light grew warm on his face. Peering at the bedside clock with blinking eyes, he saw it was well after nine. He'd not slept so many unbroken hours in months. Not since the divorce. Lying back, remembering the previous night, he couldn't help starting to grin all over again. For a small woman, Freddy could hold her drink better than a lot of blokes, though even she had ended the night giggling helplessly as he told her stories of arrests that had gone embarrassingly wrong. She had countered his tales of woe with some of the things she'd seen while working in people's gardens: lovers leaping over hedges when spouses came unexpectedly home; naked tennis lessons, bacchanalia on a Shakespearean scale. They had laughed and sipped fine cognac until Freddy deemed it time to call it a night. Reminding him to take her headache remedy before he went to bed, they split up at a nearby taxi-rank as she said they were going in opposite directions. Greg's temporary bedsit was in Clapham and since Freddy hadn't said where she was currently living, he felt it wrong to ask. She would tell him what she wanted him to know when she was ready.

Sitting up, he tested his head and stomach for any fallout after last night's drinking session. Pleasingly, he felt absolutely fine. The acid test would be when he considered breakfast, which he did with an odd passion this morning. Normally, a slice of toast and a cup of tea was all he had time for, but today being a Saturday and after a great night's sleep, he felt up to something a little more robust. An idea grabbed him and he reached for his phone.

"You awake yet?" he swung his legs out of bed and perched on the edge, waiting for a response.

"I'm a gardener," Freddy's words were tart. "I'm usually up with the sun. What about you? Any after-effects from last night?"

"Nary a one," Greg yawned and scratched his bare chest. "Though I find myself on the hungry side of a fried breakfast. Fancy meeting at the house and having breakfast there? I'll bring it."

"I have a Thermos of hot coffee," Freddy offered in a moderately superior tone. "And I'm already at the house, unlike a laggardly police inspector of my acquaintance."

"I'll be there with breakfast in thirty minutes," he said, laughing. "Don't drink all the coffee."

In the next heartbeat, he was rummaging in his wallet for the number of a café he and his people often used for meals at all hours of the day and night. The police were so well known there now, they could even order ahead.

"Mornin' Colleen, and how's my favourite Irish rose this fine day?"

Recognising the caller instantly, the café proprietor told him to hush his flannel and let her know what was wanted and when by. With his order firmly in the best of hands, Greg threw himself into the shower before digging out the most disreputable pair of old jeans he possessed, alongside a short-sleeved polo shirt, an old canvas jacket and the work boots from the previous day. By the time he presented himself at the café to collect his ordered food, less than twenty minutes had passed. And, given the house in Pimlico was now less than ten-minutes' drive away, he grinned at his triumph of planning.

The old Landrover was there of course, leaving just sufficient space for his own vehicle to park. They would need a sign to have this area kept clear in future. Pulling his gear from the car, he locked
up and walked through the smaller of the two main gates. It opened more easily beneath his hand this morning and on investigation, Greg saw the three heavy hinges had been wire-brushed to remove the rust and thoroughly oiled. He assumed the lock had received a similar treatment. The long grass and weeds clinging to the path around the gate itself had also been partially cleared. Not by much, but enough to come in and out without having to fight your way through with a machete.

The picnic table was back where it had been the previous day, but this time, instead of piles of drawings, Greg saw two large notebooks. A lonely Thermos flask stood in the centre of the table. Freddy was nowhere to be seen.

"Oi! Freddy!" Greg shouted, carefully placing his bags on the table and looking around for signs of life.

"Over here," a somewhat muted response to his call came from beyond the far corner of the building. He'd not yet had an opportunity to see what lay on the other side of the house but today he would.

"Come and get your breakfast while it's hot," he yelled back. God only knew what the woman was doing messing about on the far side of the building. Unless there was a large patch of untamed jungle requiring her immediate attentions, he could easily imagine Freddy wielding a razor-sharp machete with the gleam of discovery in her eyes. He began pulling polystyrene boxes from the plastic bags. He'd also got more coffee. There were only disposable plates and plastic cutlery, but that's what you had on a picnic, wasn't it?

The sound of booted feet brushing heavily through tall grass caught his ear and he looked up to see a kitted-out Freddy marching towards him in full gardening mode. Throwing a pair of well-used gardening gloves onto the table, she looked flushed and excited. "There's the remains of a magnificent kitchen garden around the far side of the house," she wiped the back of a wrist across her forehead. "And I've found the most glorious clump of Jerusalem artichoke," she sounded as thrilled and breathless as if she'd just won an Oscar. "There's all sorts of fantastic stuff back there; you must come and look."

"After breakfast, if you don't mind," Greg tilted his head, dropping a sideways glance at the bounty he'd laid out. The beguiling scent of fresh coffee hung in the air as he started opening the thermal boxes. "Scrambled eggs, toast, grilled tomatoes, mushrooms, bacon, followed by fruit and yoghurt. I think I saw some small bottles of fresh orange juice in here as well," he frowned, poking into the bags.

"Fabulous," Freddy plonked herself down on a milk crate, grabbing a plate, waiting until Greg sat before helping herself to eggs and toast. "I don't usually have time for such largesse," she crunched around a piece of toast. "But I seem to be filled with energy this morning," she stabbed a forkful of mushrooms. "Must be the combination of all that champagne and peasant food from last night," she grinned teasingly, uncapping one of the two large cups of coffee.

"I wasn't sure how you drank it," Greg dropped a handful of sugar packets on the table between them. "Hope it's okay."

"We Gardeners are a hardy breed," Freddy sampled the hot drink exactly as it was with evident pleasure. "Out in the wilds of darkest Surrey, you quickly learn to make do with whatever supplies are in camp."

"And I thought I was the daft one," Greg observed placidly, attacking the bacon.

"I was wondering how the two of us were going to be able to project-manage events here between us," Freddy was thoughtful for a moment. "You work full-time, don't you?"
"Yeah," Greg paused in his chewing. "But someone's going to need to be here pretty much the whole time, especially if there's contractors working on something major."

"I can probably organise my new projects so that I can take on commissions in between working here, which I can plan to coincide with any on-site work," she spoke slowly, waving a plastic fork, sipping her coffee again. "But if I land a sizeable contract, I have to go wherever it is and could be away for days," Freddy looked at him across their impromptu breakfast table. "How are you going to be fixed for time?"

Greg sat back, resting his hands on his hips, a pensive expression on his face as he stared down into the coffee. "I've got a pile of annual leave due," he said, trying the hot drink. "I've got to take some of it at some time, or the Staff department start sending me snarky emails," he looked up, grinning. "Looks like I'm going to be taking a few weeks leave in the foreseeable future."

"Oh, that would be helpful." Clearly relieved, Freddy dug in one of the bags for a tub of yoghurt, peeling back the lid and peering at the contents. "I make better yoghurt than this," she commented, digging in to the blandly creamy substance.

"You'll be telling me next that there's a yoghurt plant," Greg laughed at the notion of a milk product growing in the garden. He stopped once he saw Freddy raise her eyebrows. "You're kidding?" he stopped, the last piece of bacon hanging in mid-air.

"Once the house is put to rights, I'll get a Kifir plant going, and then you'll see," Freddy arched her eyebrows again as she finished eating. "Are you done now? Can I show you what I found this morning?"

"I am," Greg stood; wiping his hands on a serviette and was already heading the way Freddy had arrived earlier, before she'd had a chance to stand. "Unlike a certain gardener I know." He grinned to himself as he heard her racing along behind to catch up. Following the faint track of flattened grass, Greg walked through the overgrowth to the corner of the house, and then he stopped, waiting. "After you, M'Lady," he swept a low bow, laughing quietly at her derisive huff.

This side of the house was entirely different from the front and side closest to the main gates. This part of the house and garden had clearly been for the servants, as a set of wide doors let out into what had clearly been a working area.

"That's the piggery, over there," Freddy pointed to a small and dilapidated brick building furthest away from the door. Then there's the coal house and the wood store," she pointed to several adjacent sheds, almost all of them gone to ruin. Greg saw that there were also a number of smallish trees, covered in ripe fruit. Pears, apples ... there was even a tree which was covered in something resembling peaches. Peaches? Growing in London?

"This entire area was once a productive kitchen garden which fed the household," Freddy was full of admiration. "There would be sufficient food grown here to store over winter, requiring only the purchase of animal protein to nourish an entire family," she nodded, almost to herself. "They'd be able to cure their own bacon. There'd be chickens for eggs and meat and feathers, and they probably had bees in hives somewhere under all that," she waved at the morass of dried and dead undergrowth near the walls. "This would have been an amazingly useful piece of land."

"Are those fruit trees, over there?" Greg pointed. "Is that fruit hanging on the branches?"

"Yes, of course," Freddy turned to look at him. "Fancy some fresh fruit to finish off your breakfast?" she grinned for a moment, before thrusting her way through the binding weeds and grass.
Greg had never seen such amounts of fruit outside a fruit stall in one of the supermarkets. There were two different apple trees that he could see, two pears, a peach, an apricot, a fig and, right down in the corner of the great wall, some weird-looking things that Freddy pronounced as Quince. Whatever that was.

"They would have had small orange and lemon trees in greenhouses, over here," she pointed to the nearby portion of wall where the remains of a long low greenhouse could be seen resting against the bricks. Looking around, she smiled as Greg twisted a ripe peach off a branch. Ensuring the skin was clean; he bit into it, sticking out his chin as sweet juices overflowed his mouth.

"This is amazing," he mumbled through a mouthful of perfect peach. "Can we keep this one?"

Freddy laughed. "If you like, we can keep all of them," she looked around. "Though you'll have to promise to eat a lot of fruit; I cannot abide waste. These should have been picked weeks ago; they're already falling."

"Can I pick some and take them back with me?" Greg fished out a handkerchief to wipe his face and hands of the sticky-sweet peach nectar. He'd adored peaches since he was a child. Peaches and Nectarines were his weakness and he couldn't get enough of the things in season.

"Yes, but not until we're ready to leave or they'll simply rot in the heat," Freddy turned her attention away from the fruit trees towards a more central area. It was difficult to see what was there because of the overabundance of weeds and low-growing wild shrubs, but Greg could hear her murmuring a litany of names as she gazed across the overgrown garden. *Onions, potatoes, swedes, carrots, beans, peas, cabbages, chard, broccoli, rhubarb...* she paused, smiled... *artichokes.*

Even if he hadn't know it before, Greg could have told anyone that Freddy was a real gardener. The dreamy look on her face as she contemplated bringing this patch of land back to its glory days was a pleasure to see. He watched as she walked over to the side of one of the tumbled outbuildings, observing as she leaned over and tugged a large terracotta pot out from beneath the weeds, brushing off cobwebs and grit.

"Hand thrown," she said, bringing the slightly uneven pot over for him to see. "Everything around here was handmade. It must have been wonderful in its day."

With the warming sun on his shoulders and the sweet taste of peach on his tongue, Greg wanted to see the place as she did. Even if he had to dig some of the damn ground himself, it would be worth it.

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He had one of the notebooks in his hand. And a heavy black felt pen. He had been entrusted with these sacred items and sent up the ugly staircase to the top floor, with instructions to make a list of everything he saw that needed work and to draw a floorplan of where he was when he wrote about the attention-needing things. When he had completed a tour of the top floor, he would be permitted to move down to the middle level and thence to the ground floor. Freddy informed him that they should be able to spot most of the key problems between them.

"It's not only the obvious major things that we need to have on the list, but anything we can see that isn't right," she'd argued in what Greg was coming to recognise as her *logical* tone of voice. And as two pairs of eyes were apparently better than one, here he was, up on the top floor. Not that he minded; having a good look around the two upper floors would help him decide which one he would take for himself before all the work started.
Greg stepped off the grand central staircase onto a wide landing; he saw there were three smaller passageways. East, West and South. South took him towards the front of the house where the large windows would let in the best of the winter light – when they had glass in them, of course. There was a slight elongation of the landing towards the front, as if the architect expected people or things to be here on a regular basis. Greg wondered why.

Until he walked into the long room across the front of the house. It had four wide windows, currently all boarded up. The light in this room must have been spectacular when the windows were in good order, but why have such a big room on the top floor? The answer lay in the several small wooden dividers reaching out from the room's rear wall. This room would have been the sleeping quarters for female staff. They would probably have been young and unmarried and thus deemed without a need for privacy. Greg's practised eye made out room for at least four single beds in this one room.

Imagining the view through the windows, Greg realised he'd be looking down into the garden in front of the house and out over the wall to the streetscape beyond. Not knowing what Freddy had in mind for the garden, he imagined it would be something appropriate, something formal, maybe. It would be a great view from up here. Turning, he left the room, heading back towards the stairwell which finished up here with an extravagant mahogany railing where he took the Eastern passage. The ceilings weren't quite as majestic up here, but they were still high, at least twelve feet or so. The floorboards were the same heavy oak planking as the rest of the house and the several rooms opening off the passage were all of a reasonable size. There were also two antiquated bathrooms, probably for the staff. Greg scribbled down the things he saw as he went, a rough but clear floorplan arising from his investigations. Thank god for all those scene-of-crime exercises at Hendon back in the day.

About to retrace his steps, he noticed a carving tucked in around the end of the great staircase's railing. He bent, brushing off dust and grime to see a deeply carved coat of arms on a shield. Peering closer, he could just make out what looked like two men supporting a smaller shield between them, with a couple of horses heads at the top. The carving seemed as old as the staircase and it was difficult to make out any other details, but he had a copper's eye for particulars and a copper's memory for them. Standing, he moved towards the Western opening off the stairwell. Like the last one, this way had several rooms opening off the main corridor; if a couple of these could be knocked in together, there'd be some very sizeable living space up here. At the very end of the passage were two heavy doors. One faced outwards, as if opening onto a balcony, but it was barred and locked. The other door a few feet away, opened into the adjacent wall. It was stiff and reluctant to move, but not locked. Opening it, he felt a gust of cooler air and slightly more light. He was looking up into the attics.

Not wanting to leave any stone unturned, he made his way carefully up the heavy wooden stairs until he found himself on yet another landing, though this one was plain and looked across the wide empty spaces of the attics, for there were several different spaces up here. He paused, observing. It wouldn't take a lot of extra work to convert the attic into additional living space. A couple of dormer windows and there could be at least two substantial bedrooms up here. Food for thought.

Heading back down the stairs to the middle floor, Greg realised he was finally getting a feel for the place. It would have been very light and airy in its heyday, which might go some way to explaining the monstrosity of the central staircase. Perhaps it wouldn't have looked quite so terrible in the broad light of day. As he was heading down, he heard Freddy's boots heading up and he paused on the landing until she all but bumped into him.

"Is this house haunted?" he asked in a very serious tone. "It strikes me as being the sort of place that could well have a spirit or two floating around in locked secret rooms."

"To my knowledge, there are no secret rooms, locked or otherwise and most of my ancestors expired
in the fullness of their years." Freddy blinked slowly, wrinkling her forehead at his question.

"Is that a posh way of saying they got old and died?" Greg wondered if he was getting a feel for Freddy as well as her house. Yes, sure, she was a bit uptight at times, but that was hardly surprising under the circumstances. She was also a clever and determined woman, willing to take on a project that would have a lot of men shying away. On top of that, she liked proper food and could drink her own weight in alcohol. All in all, she was a good sort.

"Yes, they got old and died," she glared at him mildly, stepping up to stand on the landing at his side. As with the floor above, this one had passageways heading East and West, though not South this time. The ceilings were as high here as they were on the Ground floor, which suggested that, like the floor below, this one had also been occupied by the family. All the rooms here were sizeable, with tall doorways though most of the doors themselves were missing. This central floor had two large rooms stretching across the front of the house, each with three tall windows. Greg wished he could take down some of the boards and let the light in, but there was no point doing anything until they were ready to install new windows. This floor also had three bathrooms which made it fairly clear this was the bedroom area. It made sense. Ground floor for public life, middle floor for private live and the basement and top floor for the servants, storage and workrooms.

"The attics are spacious," he said, making a note in his book about looking for reclaimed doors for all the rooms. "With a little bit of extra work, there could be a master suite up there at the very least."

"Is that the one you want for yourself?" Freddy stared around at the pressed tin ceilings mostly obscured by cobwebs, dirt and mould.

"Actually, I was thinking of having this one," he said, folding his arms and leaning back against an open doorway. "There's more than enough room here for me to have a very decent flat, and if we decided to put dormers in the roof, we might easily end up with a three bedroom apartment up there. If we did the whole place up with a bit of style and taste, we could be onto a real winner. Flats around here go for millions in their own right."

"Millions?" Freddy frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Zoopla or Foxton's online," Greg spoke with the authority of one who knew both these real estate institutions intimately. "See for yourself."

"And when you say 'style and taste' ..?" Freddy paused delicately, holding his gaze with unblinking eyes. "Whose taste are we discussing?"

Recognising a piece of bait when it was dangled in front of him, Greg raised his eyebrows and made a slow and deliberate note in his book, "style and taste."

"If there's no ghosts in the attics, want to see if there are any in the cellar?" Freddy was already on the way down the stairs.

"It's going to be dark down there, do we have a ..." Greg stopped talking as a torch was handed to him over Freddy's shoulder, a twin to the second torch she carried in her other hand. "Were you ever in the scouts?" he asked, interestedly.

"I took ballet lessons for a while and then archery, but neither truly appealed." Greg heard the smile in her voice as they walked to a door set into the wall behind the base of the staircase. Freddy flicked on the light of her own torch. "The stairs here are stone and may be covered in loose grit, so take care where you put your feet," she advised.
There were twelve steps in all going down into a large dark space smelling of rotting wood and fungus though there was no real stench of decay. Freddy’s light illuminated several windows, high up on the walls, all boarded, of course. Greg switched on his own torch, tracing the plain brick walls at the far end of the lengthy open space. There was a lot of old piping on the walls.

"This would have been where the household laundry was done, and probably held the ice room, the game room and the creamery; it would stay cool down here even in the height of summer," Freddy’s torch beam flickered around a collection of ancient stone sinks in one corner. "There was likely a massive boiler down here at some time," she observed the complicated nexus of pipes. "This means there are holes going all the way to the top of the house, which is excellent news."

Of course, Greg nodded his understanding. If there had been pipes all over the place, then it would be easy to repurpose the holes for wiring and various other services, including new water pipes. He realised they were going to be putting a great deal of trust in their electrical and plumbing contractors and smiled quietly. One of the few perks of being an officer with the Yard is that you almost never got done over with dodgy deals or shonky work. Everyone involved knew that a pissed-off copper was not a good enemy to have, not in London.

Exiting the basement with Freddy leading the way, Greg wandered slowly after, absorbing the lines and spaces of this increasingly fascinating building. On either side of the staircase stood an enormous pillar of the same mahogany wood, a solid column of the stuff, carefully carved into a barley-sugar twist. The Victorians dearly loved their ornamentation. Greg smiled and was about to head back outside when his eye was caught by the faintest outline of carving on each of the pedestals on which the columns rested. Crouching, he saw it was the same shield design he’d seen on the banner rail upstairs, larger but less distinct. Two male figures holding a small shield between them. The small shield was divided into quarters but the design was still too blurry to see. Something that looked like a crown rested on top of the shield and above the men sat two horses’ heads. A crown? Just who were Freddy's family? Living in London and often brought into all manner of work involving the British aristocracy, one thing Greg knew was that you didn't get to have a crown in the family coat-of-arms unless you had some very heavy connections. He made a quick sketch in his notebook.

Heading outside into the pleasing September sunshine, he saw Freddy was back at their makeshift office adding a number of things to her list, her phone resting on the table.

"Alex just phoned," she lifted her head to look at him. "He's made up the draft contracts and I asked if he'd mind awfully dropping them off here for us," she smiled, clearly pleased. "I think it would be wise for us to read them, have a bit of a think and then meet to discuss any queries. How does that sound?"

"Sounds great to me," Greg also sat. "Is that coffee still good?"

"It's all yours," she said, waving his towards the Thermos as she flipped through her written notes.

"Hey," Greg remembered the locked external door on the top floor. "The outside door near the attic entrance," he asked. "Where does it go?"

Frowning as she recalled exactly which door he meant, Freddy quickly nodded. "The two main family gates are the ones we'll be using mostly," she waved at the gate they were using that stood slightly ajar. "But there's also a service-gate to the kitchen garden and a staircase built through the wall itself at the back of the house which has its own entrance," she said. "There's an external door to it on the middle floor as well, though you must have missed it."

"What was it for?" Greg wanted to go and look at the hidden staircase immediately. It sounded interesting. "Fire exit?"
"Probably for servants who needed to leave the house without coming down to the Ground floor via the kitchen stairs."

"There's another staircase in the kitchen?" Greg paused, perplexed. "Three staircases?"

"Only senior staff would use the main stairs," Freddy looked amused. "There are standards, you know."

Realising he was being properly wound up, he was about to respond when a call from the gate caught Greg's attention as Alex Harper followed the growing track between gate and house. As before, the man was dressed in a fancy Savile Row suit and smart, shiny shoes. No doubt the shiny new Mercedes was parked somewhere near. Alex nodded politely at Greg then ignored him.

"Freddy! How are you today? I have the contracts you requested. Three copies." Freddy permitted a kiss brushed against her cheek which to Greg looked like a politeness on her part.

"That's wonderful Alex, thank you. Given that only Greg and I are involved, this should be relatively easy to sort out," she turned and treated Greg to an unaffected smile. "I suggest we take a day or so to confirm that things are the way we would want them to be and then meet to discuss the details. How does that suit?" her hopeful gaze met his.

It suited Greg just fine. There were several legal advisers in the Yard who owed him a favour or three, so he'd be able to get a heads-up if anything was odd. Not that he expected there would be. Interestingly, Alex Harper appeared to be ever so slightly nettled. This might possibly be explained by the second interesting thing Greg noted, which was that the solicitor seemed very attracted to Freddy Kerr, Gardener.
October

They'd agreed to take a week to go over the contract and have time to consider the arrangement in all its minutiae before meeting again. While Greg couldn't ignore the feeling that Alex Harper wasn't overly keen on Freddy's involvement in the project, he appeared to have done a smooth enough job with the contract itself.

"It's a lot of money, Greg," Jean Robington, one of the Yard's forensic lawyers tapped the contract on the table in front of them. "But the way this is worded, you wouldn't actually lose out on anything if the agreement was terminated prior to project completion, not even the potential interest. The way this is written if the deal goes south, you're get any expended capital back plus a sum of money equivalent to your investing the cash in a 12-month term deposit at current rates," Jean arched her eyebrows. "This is not a terribly complex contract and about the only thing I can see that you might be at risk of losing is a year of your time," she paused. "You do realise that you are committing the entirety of your funds and your personal involvement for up to a year?"

Nodding, Greg leaned back in the seat, staring up at the sound-suppressing tiles on the ceiling of Jean's office. "If I wasn't going to use it as a deposit on a flat, I'd probably be shoving the whole lot into a savings account or something, in any case," he returned his attention to the papers. "All I really need to know is if the contract's small-print is on the up-and-up," he said. "The woman who owns the property is as straight as an arrow but I'm not too sure about her solicitor," he rubbed a hand along his jaw. "There's something about the bloke that gives me pause."

"Copper's intuition?" Jean smiled. Greg had helped her eldest son get off a dealing charge on the condition that the boy had gone immediately into rehab. That had been almost two years before and the lad had just finished his first year at university. Jean offered Greg free legal advice in perpetuity as a form of thank you.

"Something like that," Greg folded his arms. "So; nothing you can put your finger on that sounds remotely iffy?"

"Not a thing," Jean began folding the contract up. "It's a standard transactional arrangement. In return for you supplying the financial wherewithal to renovate and restore the Pimlico property and undertaking a personal involvement in the work, you are offered a one-third property ownership of the house upon completion of the works as well as a share in the proceeds of the third flat if such a sale is made," the solicitor shrugged. "If you ask me, you're getting a pretty good crack of the whip here."

"That's all I wanted to know," Greg smiled, pleased. "It's a fantastic house and I still can't believe the opportunity's come my way," he shook his head at his good fortune. "Then there's nothing stopping me from signing this baby?"

"Not a thing, as long as you have the monies available from the moment you both sign the contract."

"It's been sitting in my savings account for the last five months doing nothing," Greg stood and stretched. "Looks like it's finally got a home to go to."

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"And this is the formal building report from the Chartered surveyor," Freddy handed him a copy of yet another document. "As you can see, as well as detailing the types of construction used across different parts of the house, there doesn't appear to be any hidden nasties that he's been able to locate
other than the damp in the basement, although, like all old houses, you never really know what's going to pop up once you start pulling it apart." Remembering some of those long-ago weekends in Camden with Cathy, Greg could only agree. At least, this place was going to have a decent budget to work on.

"And this is the application for VAT concessions as the house has been empty for more than three years, and here's the Heritage grant application forms." Freddy looked at him and puffed out her cheeks in mock exhaustion. "Just as well I'm used to all the different bits of bureaucracy for major land works," she complained. "Fortunately, much of the rebuild is internal and because the house is within the garden walls and unlikely to affect any close neighbours as we don't have any, the planning permissions are equally clear and simple," she smiled. "Looks like there's nothing stopping us from getting stuck in."

"Aren't there all sorts of building regulations we have to follow?" Greg frowned, again remembering the second bathroom in the Camden house. The hoops he and Cath had to jump through to get the final nod on the second bathroom ...

"All taken care of with the planning permits," Freddy dropped another print-out in front of him. "There's a whole screed of things we'll need to have signed-off when we're done," she rustled among the various papers, pulling out a page and started reading. "Structure and Fire Safety, Contamination and damp; Toxicity; Sound; Ventilation ... the list feels endless," she rubbed her eyes. "But I'm assured that our situation is fairly unique and a lot of these are going to be a formality."

Greg certainly hoped so; he'd had enough of contracts and reports. What he really wanted to do now more than anything else was to get stuck into the clean-up that was obviously the first thing on the list. He looked out of the rear view window of Freddy's Landrover as they were using it as a makeshift office. His fingers twitched with anticipation and impatience.

"So ... where do you want to start?" It was three weeks to the day since they'd both gone around the house with the notebooks, all the details of which had been transcribed into a long list of questions for the builders. They had already been contacted by several reputable building contractors in response to a brief Alex Harper had sent out. Some of these companies used their own tradespeople, which would be immensely time-saving rather than having to hire individual trade professionals. But what everyone agreed on as being the first order of business was making the garden area ready for heavy vehicles. It was a good job the wide double gates at the front of the property had originally been built with height to accommodate all manner of tall carriages and coachmen: at least the trucks could get in and out without damaging the fine brickwork.

"Here they come," Freddy pointed over his shoulder at the two large trucks heading down the street towards the main gates which were now well and truly wide open. The first was a trailer carrying two huge skips. Since Freddy's gardening business was registered, she was able to get things at trade prices and every little helped. Right behind the trailer with the skips was a second trailer-truck with a much different cargo: two very small diggers. One was a pint-sized bulldozer and the second, an equally mini excavator, both of which Freddy said they would need for the next two days.

Greg couldn't decide which one he wanted to play with first. He was on the first day of a week's leave and planned to use every single hour in the most productive way he could. As soon as the skips had been offloaded near the gate and the two small earth working vehicles carefully deposited, Freddy closed the big carriage gates behind them so there'd be no curious bystanders.

"Right," she said. "Safety lesson first." Handing Greg a bright orange hard hat, Freddy pointed to the cab of the small bulldozer. "In you hop."

"I do know how to use one of these things, you know," he grumped, sticking the helmet on his head.
"I have been trained in operating all sorts of heavy machinery in the police."

"Really?" Freddy folded her arms. "Well, I'm a registered landscape gardener with more than ten years' experience using toys like these, what about you?"

Rolling his eyes, Greg adjusted the hard hat and got in the machine.

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He was knackered. Even his hair hurt. Everything throbbed and the bits that didn't throb felt like they were about to drop off. And they had another whole day of this tomorrow. He wasn't sure his bum could take another day of the heaving, juddering, muscle-clenching exertion of clearing swathes of open ground. He'd sweated right through his heavy work-shirt and every inch of exposed skin was gritty and rough with perspiration and dirt.

Freddy trudged wearily over to where Greg sprawled in one of the several plastic outdoor chairs he'd brought in as an improvement on the milk crates. Slumping down beside him, she tipped her head back and closed her eyes in the last of the afternoon's light.

"This was good work today," she murmured wearily. "We did better than I expected."

Between them, they'd cleared almost half of the overgrown garden, filling both of the skips in the process. Two new empty ones were coming first thing in the morning as replacements. The small diggers were safely parked and locked down for the night though it had taken a while to get into the swing of things, especially as Freddy had been determined to inspect every inch of ground before she allowed Greg to clear it. This had been a wise decision since she had uncovered four beautifully carved white stone trees, each one no bigger than the milk crates now standing beside them.

"The four seasons," Freddy named each tree with delight as she'd pulled it from underneath ancient tussocks of grass and briar: spring, a flowering cherry, carved with buds and the opening blossom; summer, an oak in broad foliage; autumn, a sycamore with leaves curled and half-fallen and finally winter, a classic conifer where the exquisite marble branches were laden with snow. The sculptures were half green with moss and mildew but this only added to their charm. "They would have been raised on pillars," she said, hunting for those as well but they had either been removed earlier or they had been made of wood and rotted back into the earth.

Once Greg got the knack of skimming the surface of the ground, scraping up weeds, wild shrubs and all sorts of debris but no more than that, he created several large heaps. Freddy had come in with the mini-excavator and transferred these heaps to the two skips. It had been slow and arduous team work, but it had gone well. Much of the garden to the east of the house was now beautifully emptied and level, apart from a narrow strip along the inside of the walls which would need to be cleared by hand.

Greg felt burning in his buttocks and thighs as he tried to move and groaned silently as his hands and arms ached at the slightest attempt to lift them. "I'm going to be in crap shape come the morning." He closed his eyes and wished he were twenty years younger.

"You need a good hot bath with lavender and rosemary," Freddy stretched out her legs. "Calendula's good too, as is chamomile and ginger and perhaps a little eucalyptus," she rubbed her shoulder. "These are terrific tonics with anti-inflammatory and counter-irritation agents. Lavender and rosemary, for example, helps bring blood to the skin surface, while ginger and chamomile reduce the muscle inflammation even more ... and eucalyptus is a penetrating oil, which stimulates the muscle, flushing out the built up lactic acid."
Despite his dying agonies, Greg found Freddy's casual recitation both interesting and oddly soothing. He only wished he could take her up on the advice. "There's no bath in the bedsit I'm renting," he sighed, "only a shower, so no soaking for me, I'm afraid."

"No bath?" he could feel Freddy's eyes swivel towards him. "That's barbaric."

"That's a cheap bedsit in Clapham," Greg shrugged painfully, wincing at the stiffness in his biceps. "It's okay," he grinned manfully. "I'll live."

By the expression on her face, it was clear Freddy was thinking. Plotting. "There's a place less than five minutes away from here which is ideal for soaking and having a massage," she stood up. "I was planning to go there this evening; I often go there when I've had a hard day;" she turned and raised her eyebrows. "Want to come with me? You'll feel much better, I promise."

It sounded pretty fantastic but also problematic.

"I'm not terribly keen on public baths, to be truthful."

"It's a private spa and one I'd recommend to my friends," Freddy was already standing, collecting her gear. "You don't imagine I'd recommend anything that wasn't totally pukka, do you? Come on, old man."

The term stung slightly and Greg pushed himself abruptly to his feet, no matter how his muscles shrieked. It was an effort to remain expressionless.

"I really don't think I need a bath, you know," though even as he said the words, Greg realised he was longing for the sensation of sliding into hot water. "And I don't have any clean clothes with me."

"They'll have clean things you can borrow," Freddy pulled her phone out and started speaking quietly as she headed towards the gate. "We both need to ease sore muscles if we're going to be of any use tomorrow," Freddy held the gate open for him. "Come on. I'll drive us there and bring you back to your car afterwards."

After a drive which was indeed, much less than five minutes from Sussex Street, the Landrover passed through a tall arch to one side of a large, red brick and Portland-stone fronted building. Dolphin Square, Spa, Health Club and Apartments. Parking the car, Freddy beckoned for Greg to get out.

"I stay here every now and again," she smiled up at him. "It's run by friends of mine and has been terrifically convenient to work on the house and do the odd contract in some of the gardens around here," she added. "It's a great place; all the mod cons."

So she was staying here? Well, that was one little mystery cleared up. But did Freddy have any idea of the Dolphin's recent past? Greg frowned a little. It had become notorious as the haunt of intelligence operatives and criminals, not to mention politicians and British nobility. The place used to belong to the Duke of Westminster, one of the richest men in the world. Freddy's little revelation simply added to her mystery. Who exactly was she?

"Come on, I'll sign you in," Freddy breezed towards the main entrance. There was a short flight of stairs, each one of which made Greg's back creak, and then they were in some sort of cool and airy lounge area. Greg felt reluctant to move, uncomfortable to be standing in such a clean and bright place looking like someone who'd slept in a ploughed field.

"Come on," Freddy sauntered down the passage without any apparent concern. "The spa's this way."
Hoping his boots weren't leaving a trail of mucky prints on the clean floor, Greg followed as quickly as he could, though things were definitely beginning to stiffen up now. Even his testicles were starting to feel a bit numb though perhaps now was not the best time to mention that fact.

Stopping outside a wide arched entranceway, the first thing Greg noticed was the distinct aroma of something fragrant and vaguely spicy. He sniffed. *Patchouli? Some kind of incense?*

"In here," Freddy walked down a long shadowy passageway, the walls, ceiling and floors all done out in dark shades of bronze and gold, with dark wooden floors and latticed window shutters on the walls. Sounds of trickling water and low voices came from up ahead. Arriving at a wide and well-lit circular waiting room, there were passages going off in different directions. "This way," Freddy took the right-hand path, heading along another dark hallway, though this one had several doors on either side. At the very end, the air became warmer and moister. There was the sound of water slapping against tiles. A line of spacious wooden cubicles stood on either side of a tiled room. By the generous shower heads poised over each one, their use was obvious.

"We have to shower before they'll let us go any further," Freddy was already stepping into one of the cubicles and, by the sound of things, stripping off. "There's towels inside," she called through the closed door, before her boots thudded onto the floor and Greg heard the sound of rushing water. Not knowing who 'They' were, yet lacking much of an option at this point, he took the cubicle nearest him. Opening the door, he stepped inside, closing himself in.

Directly in front of him encased in heavy glass was a splendiferous and decidedly decadent shower. To his left was a closed, glass-doored cabinet, within which he could see stacks of thick white towels. On the right was a shallow set of glass shelves with a range of individual portions of shower gels, shampoos, conditioners and skin tonics. Whatever those were. Next to them, in small, paper-wrapped bags were a range of different-sized sponges. Below the glass shelves was a white plastic basket.

"Put your gear in the basket and take it with you when you get out of the shower," Freddy shouted over the sound of falling water.

Oh well ... in for a penny. Greg groaned, half in pain, half in exquisite relief as he peeled off his boots and socks, his jeans and pants. Finally dropping his disgracefully filthy shirt on top of it all, he grabbed some of the small tubes and a chunk of sponge and hit the shower which seemed to envelop him from all sides simultaneously. The sheer bliss of feeling the sticky grime of sweat wash away made things immediately better. Opening one of the tubes labelled 'Hair', he scrubbed his head with something that felt like sticky mud and smelled like expensive aftershave. The rich scent alone made him feel better and Greg inhaled deeply, feeling his chest open and his skin tingle. Once he'd given himself an all-over scrub, he felt increasingly vigorous; it was amazing what some hot water and nice-smelling toiletries could do. He used another tube that simply said 'Body' to scrub at his arms and legs and feet, feeling as if he was taking off at least the top layer of skin with the foaming soap. Rinsing, he felt invigorated and fresh.

Turning off the water, he roughly dried his hair and skin, wrapping the long white towel tight around his midriff. There was nothing else for him to wear, so he stepped out of the cubicle, taking the basket of soiled clothing with him.

Freddy was already there, waiting, a single white towel wrapping her from chest to knees, with not a hell of a lot left to the imagination. Greg noticed that, without the endless supply of baggy clothing she seemed to prefer, Freddy was indeed a small woman. Not that she wasn't curved in all the right places or that her gleaming skin freckled tan under the artfully dimmed lights. Not that he was looking, of course.
"Come on," Freddy turned and walked towards the far end of the room. "They'll be waiting for us."

They. Greg felt suspicious as only a copper could. Though he was ready to trust Freddy with his money and possibly his life, he wasn't quite sure how she'd treat his dignity. He walked behind her slowly, basket in hand, ready to make a dash for it if necessary. Who were They?

Out through the far end of the shower room, Greg saw that they were once more walking down a semi-dark corridor. The smooth wooden floor had given way to dark, non-slip tiles through the scent of spices and steaming water grew stronger. Emerging into a much larger space, there were several curtained-off alcoves on either side and ahead, a large, sunken plunge-pool that steamed gently. Greg realised that there were other people here. Two of them. He turned, automatically checking for unseen risk.


Left alone with Kella, although it might equally have been Tanirt, Greg clutched the plastic basket to his chest. "What now?" he asked, looking around.

Kella pointed impassively towards the nearest alcove. "Rest," she murmured, pulling the curtain aside for Greg to enter.

Inside, there was a high padded bed, covered in what looked like oiled leather but might have been plastic, though he didn't think so. There was a narrow pillow of the same material. Off to one side was a bureau covered in small pots and cloths. The light was dim but not so dark that Greg failed to see the burnished brass hot water urn on the other side of the bed, nor the stack of dark towels beside it. Kella stretched a towel over the entire bed and indicated Greg should lie down. He did, carefully, watching everything.

In the next second, he'd been flipped over onto his stomach, the big towel from the shower whipped away and a much smaller cloth laid discreetly across his buttocks. By the time he'd realised what was happening, his back was already being covered in an oily sort of goo that smelled of olives. Tarnit, or possibly Kella, spread the warm stuff up the back of his neck and all the way down to the small of his back. The back of his legs, his feet and toes were given special attention. It felt good to lie here in the semi-dark, in the warm, and Greg felt himself relax a little under the confident pressure of the woman's strong fingers. He rested the side of his head against the pillow and closed his eyes. There was the sound of water being poured into a container and suddenly the sensation of warmth flowed over his skin from top to toe. He sighed luxuriously as the action was repeated and the oily gunk washed away.

Almost immediately, the big woman returned with what looked like dark mittens on her hands, and she attacked his back and shoulders with a vigour that made him gasp. The sensation of his skin being groomed and polished and of the underlying muscles warmed and loosening was almost enough to send Greg off to sleep. More warm water was poured over him and Kella indicated he should turn onto his back. Lifting up only the corners of his modesty-preserving lap-cloth, she averted her eyes as Greg turned sluggishly over.

The application of oily goop was repeated to his front, though this time Greg saw it was a kind of thick green molasses soap that Kella spread over his flesh, massaging it deep into his skin, in all the little crevices and creases. Deciding the experience was worth a little loss of dignity; Greg closed his eyes, lay back and thought of England.

The washing and the massaging with the gloves was repeated and even his heels and the soles of his
feet were given a thorough going over. There was something distinctly hedonistic about the whole experience that Greg didn't want to think about too closely.

A final wash and he felt a light tap on his shoulder. Opening his eyes, Greg saw the big woman was holding out what seemed to be a thin pair of cotton shorts for him to wear and she averted her eyes again as he slipped them on. Beckoning him to follow her out back into the larger space, Greg wobbled out on legs that didn't seem to know what to do. He certainly felt a damn sight more relaxed than half-an-hour before.

"Feel good?" Freddy emerged from her own little alcove, wrapped in a sort of sleeveless cotton top that reached mid-thigh and did an admirable job of maintaining propriety. Smiling at him, she walked over to the plunge pool and did precisely that, jumping into the steaming water without hesitation. Greg paused. Was he supposed to do the same thing? Walking across to the pool's edge, he waited until Freddy emerged like a seal and started treading water.

"It's lovely," she flashed white teeth at him. "Come on in."

Still considering his options, Greg felt a push on his shoulder leaving him just enough off-balance that falling into the pool seemed the most logical option. He heard giggles before he hit the water. It was hot but not so hot as to be uncomfortable; like soaking in a large tub of hot water at home, though this particular tub was big enough for quite a crowd. It felt odd as he rose to the surface; the buoyancy felt strange.

"This is easier for everyone than having lots of individual tubs," Freddy spoke as if swimming virtually naked in hot water in a massive sunken tiled bath smelling of spice and citrus was the most normal thing in the world. "And as it's just you and me here for the hour, we can make the most of the facilities," she laughed. "I told you you'd enjoy it."

Feeling the very last of the sticky goo leave his skin, Greg relaxed, floating on his back. He had to admit, most of him was already feeling like new.

"What happens next?" he thought to ask as he watched Freddy swim towards a set of wide tiled stairs set into the far wall of the bath.

"Follow me and see," she smiled over her shoulder.

Reaching the bottom stair, Greg watched her climbing out of the water, the clinging shirt doing nothing to mask her body. The wet lines of her muscles gleamed sleekly in the diffused light and the round curves of her buttocks and breasts left shadowy impressions beneath the thin fabric. It was an unexpectedly erotic sight and Greg was glad the water was warm and the light was dim. His mind flashed to the scores of Greek and Roman statues in the British Museum. Those Greeks knew a thing or two about sculpting the naked female form. They would have their work cut out with Freddy.

Clearing his throat, he followed her from the bath, only to find himself wrapped in a huge warmed towel where Kella, or again, possibly Tanirt, proceeded to rub him dry. It was as if he was six and it was a Sunday bath night before school. By this time though, any will to resist had washed away in the hot water and Greg followed meekly as he was led into yet another curtained alcove.

This one had the same high bed but was dryer and there were cushions and the smell of scented oils. Gesturing for him to remove the damp shorts and lie face-down on the bed, Greg did so without hesitation. Again, a modesty towel was draped over his nethers while drizzles of warm spiced oil were trickled down his spine and along his legs. The feeling was so sensuous he almost shuddered. All he needed now was a goblet of fine wine and the orgy could begin. He sighed as his muscles were rolled and stretched and kneaded, hardly realising when he was turned over. Even his toes got
in on the act and his entire body glowed with inner fire. Lying in the semi-dark, it eventually became clear he was alone and the massage was over.

Sitting up, waiting for the aches to kick back in, Greg cheered silently when he felt nothing except a pleasing elasticity. His skin felt amazingly soft, even the skin on his feet and around his jaw. Whatever was in the stuff they used in here, it was bloody good. There were more cotton garments lying over the foot of the bed and a plastic bag resting on top of his work gear. Donning the clean clothes, Greg found he was wearing a loose pair of yoga pants and a baggy, short-sleeved tunic. It was too dark to see the colour. Stuffing his dirty clothes into the bag he opened the curtain and returned to the light of the main room.

Freddy stood in front of an ornate mirror in similar clothing to himself, drawing a comb through her short hair until it fell into a relatively neat shape.

"When you're done with that ..." Greg stood, waiting as she gave him both the comb and the mirror.

"How do you feel now, Detective Inspector?" Freddy half-smiled. "Not quite so achy?"

"Call me Greg and this place was a brainwave. " He grinned unreservedly. "I feel fantastic. Thanks for the invite. Is this going to cost you anything, because I'm more than happy to pay for ..?"

"There's no cost," Freddy raised her hand. "I do some things for the owners and they let me use the facilities for free," she shrugged. "Time I got you back to your car."

"You fancy grabbing a bite to eat?" Greg felt hungry now and there were a dozen Thai and Chinese places between Sussex Street and Vauxhall Bridge Road, none of which would so much as blink at their casual outfits.

"Not tonight," Freddy smiled as he unlocked the BMW. "I have work to do. But thank you for asking. Another time, perhaps?"

Sitting in his car, watching her drive off in the battered old Landrover, Greg found himself thinking very seriously about Freddy's unusual lifestyle and the people she knew. There was obviously a lot more there than met the eye. He wondered if he should start looking a bit more closely.
As was perfectly normal for British weather in October, for every reasonable day, there were at least two or three overcast ones with unsettled showers and, given that this was London, telling the difference between the two was not always easy. Outdoor plans at the house had to be changed; yet indoor activities couldn't be started until the outdoor stuff was taken care of. It was frustrating to waste precious time and Greg found himself impatient and a little edgy. The wilderness of land surrounding the house had been cleared of its most obvious detritus, though Freddy had adamantly refused to let him bring the mini bulldozer anywhere near the kitchen garden.

"The quality of the soil over there is perfect and I don't want to lose an inch of it," she declared, ardent in her determination. "I'll clear the entire section by hand."

"Are you serious?" Greg frowned at her. "We don't have time to mess about with this kind of thing," he exhaled noisily. "We need to clear the basement if we're going to have the damp treatment at the weekend."

"If I want to be able to do anything at all with the garden next year, then I need to dig it over now, before the ground becomes too wet and boggy. It's important."

"That's mad." Greg scanned the expanse of dense wilderness, encompassing the whole area with the wave of an exasperated hand. "I'll take you bloody ages to get through that lot, whereas I can get shot of it all inside ten minutes. I'll even take care not to do more than kiss the surface with the blade, I promise."

"There may be other plants and things in there I've not found yet," Freddy stood her ground and shook her head, folding her arms. "I'll not risk it for the sake of a quick fix. I'll dig it all myself, thank you."

"You're nuts," Greg looked at her, bristling up at him like an angry blackbird. "It'll take you weeks."

"Then it will take me weeks," Freddy's accent sharpened into cut crystal as she swivelled on her heel and stamped off.

Well, shit, Greg. That could have gone a bit better, couldn't it? Huffing out a great breath, he pulled out his phone, opening one of the weather apps he used at crime scenes as he scanned the increasingly gloomy sky above him. Rain was due for the next couple of days, scheduled to clear by weekend. Well, okay then. He strode off after a fractious Freddy, a plan of compromise in his mind. He caught up with her as she was starting to make a safe pile of some terracotta pots salvaged from the old greenhouses.

"I'm sorry I suggested you were mad," he said, cautiously, offering to take the pot she was holding. "I wouldn't want to be the one to have to dig my way through a jungle like this, though clearly it's important to you, but have you actually looked at the sky in the last twenty minutes?"

Pausing, a stray strand of hair dangling in front of her face, Freddy narrowed her eyes crossly before humouring him and glancing upwards. There was a dark blanket of cloud barrelling right towards them.

"That's a bit of a sod," she stood, placing the heavy clay urn on the dead grass. "I planned on shifting all the old salvaged pots and flagstones today."

"The forecast says it's going to rain for the next two days but then come out fine," Greg offered
quickly. "How about we spend the wet days inside, clearing stuff up and then, when it's sunny, I can come and help you clear up this bit of the garden?"

"You said I was mad to want to do it by hand," Freddy arched a severe eyebrow. "You called me a nutter."

"Yeah well," Greg rubbed his nose. "I reckon all gardeners have to be a little mad," he said. "A bit like artists," he smiled at Freddy's dubious expression. "Gotta have the creative spirit, eh?"

"I'm still not having any excavators in this part of the garden."

"Yeah, alright then," Greg shrugged. "But what about one of them hand rotovator thingies?" he asked. "I once watched a Greensman at Chelsea demonstrate how one of those things could turn over a half-acre of rough ground inside a couple of hours," he added. "Would one of those be acceptable?"

"A hand-rotovator?" she paused. "I don't use them," Freddy paused again, awkwardly and Greg wondered why.

"Well, even if you don't use them, what about if I used it but you told me where to, you know, where it needs digging up like? Is there a proper gardening reason you don't use them?"

"I don't use them, because ..." Freddy pursed her lips and looked down at her spread fingers. "Because my hands are too small to handle one comfortably, if you must know," she sounded stormy again and Greg hastened to pour oil on ruffled waters. He most definitely did not smile. Not on the outside.

"We can't all be brilliant at everything," he said, quietly. "Unless you're me, of course," he threw her a dreadful wink and grabbed her hand, dragging her bodily back towards the house as the first heavy drops of rain began to fall.

"Let's see if we can dig up something interesting in the basement instead."

###

Greg had called in a favour from his forensic colleagues and 'borrowed' a couple of old crime scene arc lights and their tripods. Freddy'd had a sparky set up a stable temporary electrical junction and meter box in the main hallway connected to the mains out in the street and they had plenty of exterior-grade electrical extension cable, the bright orange-and-yellow snake twisting as it unravelled from its neat coil. One of the lights stood at the top of the basement steps pointing downwards, illuminating the steps and the front half of the long space. The second light had been positioned all the way down at the farthest end, across from the big stone sinks. Between the two, the level of light was bright and helpful, showing every little chunk of debris and fallen plaster. The place, by anyone's definition, was a shambles.

During the garden clearance, Freddy had removed all obstructions from the high basement windows before Greg carefully detached the plywood from one window to reveal the still-intact glass, green with mildew. It was the same with all the rest except the one right at the corner which was missing several panes. They decided to leave the boards off the intact windows to encourage light back into the cellar, though on a day like today, it didn't make a lot of difference.

Freddy kept a skip on-site permanently now, so there was a place to put all the rubbish and junk when they were clearing it up; the idea of simply moving stuff from one place to another affronted her naturally logical soul. They'd also laid in a supply of robust plastic buckets, heavy-duty plastic
bags, shovels and brooms. Greg had donated his old tool kit, one of the things he'd kept from the divorce.

"Where do you want to start?" Freddy walked the length of the room making rough measurements as she went. The basement ceiling was twelve feet or so high, maybe a little more when you considered the space needed for the windows. Evenly-spaced brick columns braced the slightly vaulted roof. From the front of the basement beneath the windows, right the way back to the farthest wall at the rear, took her fifteen of her steps each about two feet, making the width of the basement about thirty feet. Counting again from beside the sinks, Freddy strode carefully all the way across the floor to the bottom of the steps where Greg stood, arms folded, wearing an amused expression as he also silently counted her steps. The approximate length of the space was thirty-eight of her strides, or over seventy-five feet. Whichever way you measured it, the basement was enormous. Entire tribes could be lost down here.

"Or, you know, you could just use your phone," Greg pulled out his device, flicking to an app called Roomscan. "Got this when I was house-hunting," he said, with a studied lack of smugness, turning the screen to face her. "I never trusted the measurements of half those floor plans and this was an easy way to check."

"I trust my own measurements too," she smiled sweetly, returning to look into the dark corners. "How are you with a sledgehammer?"

"Not too shabby," Greg flexed his biceps, "though it's been a while since I've had to use one in anger," he grinned. "I get the uniforms to do the grunt work these days."

"How do you fancy taking out those cracked old sinks while I get one of the wheelbarrows?" Freddy pointed into the far corner.

"As you wish, Milady," Greg whistled softly as he collected the heavy hammer, his boots crunching across the wide, debris-covered floor. "It's you or me lads," pulling on his work gloves, he reached for the clear plastic safety glasses lodged in his top pocket, sliding them into place with the air of one about to commit gratuitous mayhem. "You heard the woman; I gotta take you out," he added, swinging the solid lump of steel up and underneath the first sink which broke in half with a pleasing crack. Another two swings had the first sink completely off the wall, crunching to the floor with a gratifying series of thuds. Turning the hammer head-down, he smacked it onto each of the remaining large pieces of old earthenware until all that remained were shovel-sized chunks.

A feeling of contentment washed over him as he surveyed his work. He could do this. He could do all of this. Greg's grin took on a feral edge as he contemplated the rest of the sinks huddled in the corner. The sound of something bumping down the steps at the other end of the room made him turn as Freddy wrangled a wheelbarrow past the light and over to his side.

"You'll never get a full barrow up those stairs," Greg lifted the safety glasses up to his forehead.

"Which is why, Detective Inspector, I intend to fill these buckets and ferry them up to the second barrow I've left on the landing," sighing, Freddy threw him a pitying look.

The wheelbarrow was indeed filled with empty buckets.

"Good thinking, Batman," he lowered the glasses back into place. "Mind your back."

It took him nearly ten minutes of consistent slog, but by the end of it, all the old sinks lay in crumbled piles of broken earthenware. A trickle of sweat ran down his spine and he wiped his face with a shirtsleeve, leaning back against the wall.
Freddy was already shovelling up the broken stone when a flicker of movement caught her eye and she stopped, abruptly. "What's that?" her tone was sharp.

"What's what?" Greg turned to look in the direction of her pointed finger indicating one a hole in the wall, a result of his recent demolition efforts. It was deep and dark and he saw nothing.

And then something twitched; a small, pointed nose poked itself out into the lit room. The sound of buckets being heaved onto the floor made him realise something was off. Glancing around, Greg saw Freddy standing in the middle of an empty wheelbarrow as she stabbed a finger at the hole in the wall.

"Rats! I hate rats," she hissed, "hate them."

"It's only a single rat," Greg said, tolerantly. "It's probably used to hanging around here. It's very likely frightened."

"I don't give a flying damn if it's frightened, get rid of it!"

Someone clearly didn't like rats.

Sighing, Greg stood by the hole and gently tapped the cracked wall with the end of the sledgehammer. A large chunk of plaster slid to the ground exposing three small rodents who leaped out, running and scrambling for the safety of darkness as if their very lives depended on it.

Freddy squealed and jumped in fear, lurching and tipping the wheelbarrow to one side. Seeing what was about to happen, Greg heaved himself across the space, grabbing her before she hit the floor. Rigid with fear, Freddy clung blindly, accidentally ensuring he landed on the floor and she landed on him. Partially winded, Greg lay back holding her to his chest, his watering eyes tracking the terrified scuttling creatures as they circumnavigated the brightly lit basement, seeking refuge that wasn't there. First one rat, and then the other two discovered the stairs and most probably sensed the fresh air from the open door at the top. In a second, all three had scuttled up the concrete steps and vanished.

"They've gone," Greg lay back and closed his eyes, trying to regulate his breathing.

"I don't believe you," Freddy hadn't budged, her eyes were closed tight and her fingers gripped the folds of his shirt. Heaving himself upright, Greg managed to hold her small frame within the cradle of his arms. "Have they truly gone?"

"They've truly gone," he smiled a little. "I wouldn't lie about something that scares you so much."

Opening one eye, Freddy assessed his expression for honesty. "Where'd they go?"

"They must have felt a draft at the top of the stairs and made a dash for freedom that way. They're probably running around the garden looking for a new home somewhere." More likely, they'd scurried up the big staircase or found their way into the depths of the kitchen cupboards, however Greg felt discretion was the better part of valour in this instance.

"You can let go, in that case," Freddy didn't budge. "If they've gone."

"Yeah, all gone," Greg smiled at her. It was warm and quiet and for a moment, neither of them moved.

"Right then," Freddy scrambled to her feet in an ungainly surge, brushing down the knees of her trousers and finger-combing her hair back into place. "Thank you for catching me. I apologise for my silliness."
"All part of the service," Greg struggled upright a little more slowly, walking over to lean against the nearest roof-supporting pillar while his breathing settled. There was an odd carving in the brick he'd not seen in the dark. It was a smaller version of the shield carving he'd seen in other places in the house. About time he found out what it was.

"What's this?" he asked, pointing out the carving as Freddy approached. "I've seen a couple of other carvings like this one in different places; two men holding a shield between them with a crown and a couple of horses' heads at the top," he lifted his eyes to hers. "I'm no heraldry expert, but I know the real deal when I see it," he paused, watching her face. "What gives?"

Happy for any excuse to leave the basement, raising her eyebrows, Freddy shrugged. "It's a long story."

"Then let's grab a cup of coffee and you can tell me all about it," Greg looked interested. "I love a good story."

###

"My Great-grandfather's great-grandfather was John Ker, spelled with one 'r', third Duke of Roxburghe," sitting on the house's wide entrance steps Freddy poured steaming cups of coffee from her trusty Thermos. "Try one of these," she added, offering Greg a Tupperware box of home-made fruit muffins. Peach. Sweet and moist. He smiled, pleased at her remembering.

"The duke was a decent man by all accounts, but he gave up the woman he loved because her younger sister married George the Third and in those days, it simply wasn't done for an older sister to marry someone of lesser rank than the younger one, and it's not easy to outrank a British king."

Freddy sipped her coffee and shrugged. "Sounds mad, but that's the way it was back then."

"So, if the Duke didn't marry, then how come ..?"

It was Freddy's turn to smile. "I said he didn't marry. I never said he was a monk. My four-times Great-grandfather had three natural children with his mistresses; a son and two daughters, though none of them could inherit the primary title, of course."

Ah. One of those family arrangements. British history was littered with them. Greg nodded. "Go on."

"John Ker eventually died without legitimate issue in eighteen-O-four, and the titles of Earl Ker and Baron Ker died out with him, but the ducal title and most of its subsidiary titles passed to a cousin, the Seventh Lord Bellenden."

Greg's inner detective pricked up its ears. "Most of the titles?"

"Quite right," Freddy poured more coffee for them both. "There were three minor titles kept back or created for the three bastards. The son Robert was made Earl of Apley and his two half-sisters were each made a Countess, one of Erith and the other of Stowe. However, one of the other things the eldest son was permitted to do was to keep the surname of 'Ker' as long as a second 'r' was added, thus continuing the family name in all but spelling."

"Which is where your family comes in," Greg raised his eyebrows understandingly. "Your mob are descended from the Earl of Apley, son of the third Duke of Roxburghe," he blinked slowly. "Well that's ... wow," he laughed. "You really are posh."

"And hence the reason you'll see the Roxburghe crest around the place," Freddy waved her fingers airily. "There were a number of family properties in London at one time, mostly built and owned by the first Earl of Apley, and I suspect this house was constructed using some pieces from those older
buildings."

This made sense. The grand staircase was really much too ostentatious for a house like this. Perhaps it had been commissioned for somewhere else but found its way to Sussex Street instead. Just one of those things.

"So, are you ... titled?" Greg looked down into the dregs of his coffee. It would be good to know if he'd been arguing the toss with the upper classes.

"Oh, god, no," Freddy laughed. "The Earldom died out years ago since all the family seemed able to throw were girls," she looked rueful. "I have no brothers or close male relatives and as I can't be the Earl ..." she shrugged again. "It's not a big issue in the family, really. Daddy had some old records somewhere."

"But you're directly descended from a British Duke?" Greg met her bright eyes, proof the rat incident had been all but forgotten.

"I am," Freddy agreed offhandedly. "Though from the wrong side of the blanket, as they say, one of the reasons this place is all tied up in family trusts and death-duties that go back at least two generations," she sighed. "All of the problems and few of the benefits."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Greg leaned back against the stone stair. "It got you this place, and that's not exactly spare change."

"No, you're quite correct," Freddy nodded. "Though sometimes I wonder what life might have been like without the constant crushing worry of how we were going to pay the next lot of death-duties and manage the upkeep of the old houses everyone seemed to be living in. One of my personal fantasies was to move into a small cottage and go to the local school," she smiled sheepishly. "But here we are."

"But you went to university and studied medicine, didn't you?" Greg was in the mood for talking and so, he hoped, was Freddy.

"I did, but that's a completely different story," she got to her feet and dusted off her hands. "And we have a basement to clear out, I believe."

At least part of the mystery had seen the light of day, though Greg thought he might have more questions now than before Freddy began her explanation. Where were the remains of her family now? Where did they live? What did they do? Were they in London or somewhere else? What were these 'other properties' she'd mentioned? His thoughts fizzed with questions but it wasn't his place to ask; this was private business not a police officer's question time. He'd wait. There were bound to be other opportunities. Picking up his gloves, he followed Freddy back down into the basement.

It took them two hours of solid effort to clear the worst of the broken plaster, cement and general rubbish into central piles and then another good hour to clear those into the skip. Greg had discovered a classic chippie shop not four minutes' walk away in Lupus Street and he strode down to get two portions of gloriously fluffy cod and chips wrapped up in paper and tin foil for the walk back. He'd already secreted a six-pack of lager in a cold bag and, as the rain had held off, they planned to eat their late lunch outside before the man from Nineton Waterproofing arrived to give them the bad news.

The big white van pulled slowly in through the double gates and parked near the main steps. Derek, the same chap who'd come out several days prior to survey the basement and take samples and measurements, smiled at them as he pulled his tool bag out of the van.
"You've got an interesting situation here and no mistake," he grinned, following them into the house. "There's damp from the windows and the front wall but there also seems to be damp coming up from beneath the floor here," he stamped his boot in the middle of the basement.

Greg's stomach sank. He and Cath had to have a new damp course put into the Camden place and it had taken bloody ages and made a hell of a mess, on top of which it had cost them an arm and a leg. To do the same to a place this big ... he blinked, not even wanting to think about it.

"This house is pretty amazing," Derek didn't sound as if he were about to bring financial havoc down upon their heads. Strolling easily down the steps and into the wider space below, Freddy made to say something, then bit her lip.

Greg smiled. If she was worried about further rat incursions, she probably needn't be; any rats were long gone by now. But still. If she was so terrified of them, it was brave of her to come down here at all. He squeezed her arm supportively.

"This wall," Derek patted the exterior wall beneath the windows," is actually a very early example of Victorian cavity build," he said. "Any damp coming in from the old windows themselves," he pointed upwards to the dirty greenish glass panes, "can be completely eradicated by replacing the windows."

"Which we were planning to do in any case," Freddy folded her arms. "But what about the wall itself?"

"Ah," the waterproofing expert grinned, lifting a pleased finger. "There's a two-stage chemical treatment which might be perfect for this situation," he pointed at the wall. "The first chemical is injected into a measured series of holes along the wall and it does several things. First," he counted on his fingers, "it coats the inside of the cavity with a superhydrophobic formula that pushes moisture away from itself. We leave it in there for about a week to make sure it's well and truly saturated both sides of the cavity," Derek was a man who clearly enjoyed his job. "Next, we pump in a second chemical, completely filling the cavity space with a dense, water-retardant foam which not only stops any moisture migrating across from the external to the internal wall, but also creates a secondary waterproof barrier as a back up to the hydrophobic layer. Finally," he said, smoothing the palm of his glove along the inner wall. "The first waterproof barrier actually becomes absorbed into the outer skin of the cavity itself, meaning that the bricks and construction materials in direct contact with the surrounding earth continue to repel moisture for a very long time, even under significant hydrostatic pressure."

"How long's a long time?" Greg didn't want to have to redo any of this for at least a decade.

"The chemical makers in America have been running an ongoing test using this stuff for more than twenty years and so far, there's no sign of any degradation whatsoever."

"And what about the inner wall?" Greg wanted to be absolutely sure they weren't taking on something that might cause more problems in the long term. "How do these chemicals affect the inner surface? Any problems there?"

"And that's the third thing," Derek was positively beaming. "Once the inner wall of the cavity is saturated with the chemical barrier and then dries, it forms a perfectly smooth, nearly white surface, which not only seals the whole wall, but lets us know that everything is working as planned," he lifted his hands, a broad smile across his face. "You can paint on it and everything. It's really cool."

Greg smiled. It was good to see someone who enjoyed their job.
"It sounds just the thing," Freddy nodded slowly. "But you said there was also damp coming up from under the floor?"

"Yes, and that's more of a worry, though from the thermographic images I took last time I was here, the damp does seem to be located in a fairly restricted area," Derek walked over to the corner where the sinks had been and Greg wondered if it might be a cracked water pipe under the stone.

Selecting a special hand-held scanning device from his bag, Derek tracked around the floor, waving it backwards and forwards until the thermal image on the screen seemed to focus in on one particular spot about ten feet from where the sinks used to be.

"Here," he tapped the toe of his boot on the stone flagged floor. "But there's something very odd," he added as both Freddy and Greg came to look. It appeared as if the thermal image was ... moving.

"It's not rats, is it?" Freddy stiffened, about to head for the stairs.

"Eh? Oh no, not animals of any kind," Derek shook his head. "This is water, alright. But where is it?"

"Hang on, I've got a yard broom here," Greg was back in seconds, brushing the designated spot vigorously. In a matter of seconds, the broom revealed a narrow circle cut into the stone floor, no more than eighteen inches across. With a little more brisk brushing, a smaller circle became clear, embedded into the larger one. Derek dropped to his knees, scraping at the packed down dirt with a stiff wire brush he'd pulled from his bag.

The shape of a large letter 'W' appeared in the centre of the larger circle and Derek stopped brushing, sitting back on his knees.

"Well, I'll be damned," he laughed, getting to his feet and turning to meet two pairs of very curious eyes. "This house would have been built in the mid-eighteen-fifties or thereabouts?" he smiled at Freddy's nod. "Then I can explain the damp spot very easily," Derek grinned.

"It's the River Westbourne," Derek pointed down at the 'W'. "It was sent underground in the middle of Victoria's reign so they could develop Belgravia and Paddington," he laughed again. "What you have here, my friends ..." he dropped down on one knee, digging up the old loop of iron that was the smaller circle and bracing it with a crowbar. With a bit of effort and the sound of old metal and stone grating together, the large circle lifted up to reveal a manhole. Derek shone a torch down into the hole where there was suddenly the smell and sound of swiftly running water. "Is your own private river."

###

"But there's nothing on the plans or in the land maps of the time," Freddy sat on the steps beside Greg after Derek and his van had departed. "I had no idea."

"At least the problem is relatively simple to fix," Greg felt much better now knowing the worst. Even though they'd have to wait for a formal quote, Derek had given them a good idea of costs. Given the size of the space down here, it wasn't going to be cheap, but it was necessary and would, apparently, do the job for a long time.

"I'm famished," he stretched and groaned. "But we've done some good work today and I think I can stretch the budget and buy you dinner tonight," he turned to look at his partner in crime. "Fancy meeting up later, somewhere nice, after we've cleaned up?"
Kicking the mud off her boots, Freddy looked apologetic. "Sorry," she started clearing up the things they’d brought over for the day, "but I've already made plans for this evening."

"Oh well, not to worry," Greg felt strangely let down, though nothing at all had been agreed or even spoken of. "Maybe some other night."

"That would be super," Freddy agreed, stacking the empty buckets upside down in a big pile. "Alex asked me for drinks and dinner with some friends whom I've not seen for ages and I thought it would be fun to catch up."

The sound of a car pulling into the still-open gate drew Greg's attention and he watched as a shiny black Mercedes came to a silent halt. Freddy's legal advisor emerged and stood by the open door. "Ready when you are, Freddy."

"I'll leave the Landrover here tonight if you wouldn't mind dropping me around in the morning."
Freddy brushed off her clothes as she walked towards the car, turning to smile and wave goodnight to Greg.

"Delighted to oblige, my dear," the family solicitor was being solicitous in the extreme. As his guest got into the Mercedes, Alex Harper threw Greg a look filled with triumph.
Chapter 6

Pimlico is a major conservation area within the City of Westminster and almost anything that could be done to retain the classic architectural identity of the borough was swiftly approved. Westminster Council were only too happy to grant privileged access to the Sussex Street property, permitting the reservation of several additional parking spaces by the big gates for large vehicles and, when Greg arrived just after dawn, parking was a breeze. Aware that they had to clear every scrap of old plaster from the basement wall beneath the windows before the damp-proofing treatment could be implemented, and further aware that once this week was over, he'd only be free at nights and weekends, Greg set his alarm for shit o'clock.

Unlocking and throwing the wall-gates wide, he rubbed his eyes, promising himself a taste of nice hot coffee before he began demolishing the cellar. The house was silent, with not even the faint scamper of rats to mar the peace. He smiled, remembering Freddy's upset, not because it was funny but because it was so human. Flicking the heavy-duty lamps on in the freezing void, he shivered, surveying the work that needed to be done. With luck, he'd have at least half of it finished before Freddy arrived, especially if she'd had a late night with her friends and Alex Harper.

Alex Harper. Greg had no clear idea why he had taken such a dislike to the man, but there was no denying the fact that every time the solicitor walked into view, all Greg's carefully-honed police instincts leaped to attention. He was almost positive the man was up to no good, though he'd seen no concrete proof of anything. Not yet. It might also explain why he felt out of sorts at the idea of Freddy spending time with the guy; she didn't need the inevitable hassles of associating with someone like that. Greg would put money on the fact that Harper was going to come to a bad end and Freddy was simply too upright and above-board to even notice. He shook his head. Maybe it was worth having a little look at Harper's background; see if there was any previous irregularities that might explain Greg's uneasiness.

Derek the damp man had made it clear the inside of the wall beneath the windows needed to be entirely free of old cement and plaster before the treatment could begin and, as a provisional date had been arranged for the coming weekend, there was nothing for it but to get it done. Sure, they could afford to hire in some temporary labour, but while the work was within his capacity to do, Greg felt he needed to do it. Finishing his coffee, he hung his jacket on the handle of the big yard broom and pulled on his work gloves, stiff with old cement. Setting up a tall stepladder, he grabbed a heavy steel trowel and began at the top, directly under the ancient window frames. The first slab of cement coating slid to the ground with a satisfactory clunk. He was a good half-an-hour into the job when he heard light footsteps on the stairs.

"You're here early," Freddy was already pulling her work gloves on. "Couldn't sleep?"

"I could ask you the same question," Greg didn't look round, his attention claimed by a particularly obstinate piece of plaster. "No need to come in early if you had a late night."

"Not that late," Freddy began shovelling the pile of old plaster into buckets. "And you know I'm always up early."

"Good night?" Greg asked carefully.

"It's pleasant to catch up with friends one's not seen for years, though it's surprisingly easy to run out of topics to discuss," Freddy kept shovelling. "However, Alex is always good at keeping a flagging conversation going."
I just bet he is. Greg scraped another chunk of plaster away. "You know your family's legal advisor well?"

"Alex?" Freddy stopped loading the buckets, a mildly perplexed expression on her face. "I've known Alex since university. He's always been very attentive," she paused, lifting her eyes to watch Greg up on the ladder. "Why on earth would you ask that?"

"No reason," Greg shrugged, scraping away. "It's just that in my line of work, most solicitors tend to keep themselves apart from their clients to retain a sense of impartiality, is all," he looked down to where Freddy stood, frowning. "Are you and he ..?"

"Are we what?"

"You know," it was Greg's turn to pause as he met her gaze. "Are you and he together?" Lestrade felt suddenly awkward. "In a romantic sense."

"Alex?" Freddy sounded baffled. "Alex and I?"

"Well, if the man is someone you've known for a long time and he takes you out to dinner, then it's not too big a stretch of the imagination to think that you and he might be a couple," Greg returned to his plaster, digging the point of the trowel forcefully into a recalcitrant lump of cement.

Freddy smiled and shook her head. "Alex is my mother's choice, not mine," she said. "We met at King's College where I was studying medicine before moving onto Bart's, and he was studying his Law Masters. Both of us were interested in history and we attended a seminar on the hidden past of London's major buildings. Alex is a bit of a snob but is unfailingly polite and seemed to know all about a problem my mother was having with some Capital Gains tax. He offered to help." Freddy frowned again. "He's been working with the family ever since, but there's absolutely no other relationship between us; he's simply not my type."

Tempted to ask the obvious question, Greg restrained himself, climbing off the ladder to brush the cleared wall with the stiff bristles of the heavy broom.

The cleaned pink-grey bricks looked washed out in the bright light of the arc lamps, but they seemed sound enough and the mortar looked smooth and solid. Greg rubbed a glove across the surface. "Once they've injected the waterproofing chemicals into this, the place should dry up nicely," he turned and smiled. "You said you wanted to have a lab down here? You'll have buckets of room."

"Yes, I will, won't I?" Freddy grinned massively. "It's far too much, of course and I'll probably end up using a lot of the space for other things; storage and the like," she hesitated. "Are you still keen on the middle floor? The top one is probably going to end up being a great deal larger if we convert the attic as planned."

"This middle floor will be plenty big enough for me," Greg dusted his gloves together. "I'm going to have more room than I know what to do with as it is and there's no real point in me taking on a bigger apartment," he shook his head. "I'm perfectly happy with the arrangements as they stand."

"In that case, how about we go and grab some breakfast before either of us becomes too grubby for polite company? There's a little café in Charlwood Street that opens early and does a magnificent bacon sandwich."

Greg laughed. Now he knew there was nothing between Freddy and the slimy solicitor, he felt unaccountably relieved. An invitation to breakfast sounded perfect. "Okay, but then we need to clear this entire wall when we get back," he said sternly, waving a finger. "No more lollygagging."
Laughing again as Freddy stood wide-eyed with indignation; Greg dropped his gloves and headed back up the steps.

###

The bacon sandwiches lived up to their reputation and Greg felt far more lively the second time he entered the house. "So tell me about your family," he suggested casually as they trooped down to the basement, hoping to keep the easy café conversation going.

"There's not a great deal to tell, really," Freddy grabbed the nearest shovel and started filling the buckets with piles of broken plaster. "My mother lives in a run-down house in Harrow, not far from the school. I've asked her several times to come and live with me but she refuses to give up her independence," Freddy pulled a filled bucket clear. "Father died just over fifteen years ago, which was about the time I met Alex at university and he offered to help Mummy with Daddy's tax mess," she paused; standing and straightening her back, watching Greg attack the wall.

"My two younger sisters were still at school, though they couldn't wait to get out of the place. Margot, the youngest, is currently an Au Pair in Switzerland and Louise recently married a delightful French vintner from the Médoc; they have a little girl called Cosette," Freddy pulled two more empty buckets close and grabbed the shovel.

"You never married?" Greg paid close attention to the nearest patch of plaster.

"Never really had the time," Freddy looked around. "First it was university and then the hospital and then ... we need more buckets," she said, heading for the stairs.

"Damn. Just when things were making sense.

"And what about you?" Freddy returned, hands full of empty containers. "Divorced, right?"

"Does it show that much?" Greg looked down from the top of the ladder and smiled ruefully. Did he really look like an old married man? Or had Mike Stamford said something?

"Only in the little things," Freddy lugged two filled containers to the bottom of the steps. "The way you try and keep the peace, your tolerance of small things," she smiled. "The clothes you wear. You know, you're far more civilised than I am. I suspect you were married a long time."

Greg didn't feel terribly civilised. He didn't want to be judged by the way he wore his clothes or for his tolerance of small things. This was his big new start and ... The look he threw her wasn't entirely kind.

Freddy raised her eyebrows and nodded. "Right then," she smiled brightly. "Let's talk about staircases."

###

Needing a break after scraping off seventy feet of damp plaster and cement, Greg willingly followed Freddy into the kitchen on the ground floor. At the very rear of the kitchen, there was a set of glassed double-doors that opened out into the garden at the side. The wood of course, was just about gone, with the old lead paint flaking and peeling away from shrunken door-jambs and frames. But it had been a handsome door in its day. Entering the doorway from outside, one was faced with two openings; the left led into the kitchen proper while the right went directly up a wide flight of stairs to the next floor. His floor.

"You have to have your own private entrance," Freddy looked at him. "And I think it should be this
one. It makes perfect sense. The kitchen staircase goes all the way to the second floor. We simply close it both here and at top floor so that there's no impairment of privacy for anyone," she paused. "We also need think about improving access at the rear of the house for your apartment and the one above."

"The building plans allow for the rear staircase to be dedicated to the top floor with emergency access from both my and your floor," Greg raised his eyebrows and looked thoughtful. "What else did you have in mind?"

"I was thinking of large pieces of furniture, actually," Freddy stood at the bottom of the staircase and looked up to where Greg's flat would be. "While this is more than sufficient for all normal purposes, I can't imagine anyone would be too happy attempting to get a large settee up these," she said, "let alone a grand piano."

Greg couldn't help the laugh that bubbled up. "Do I strike you as the kind of person who has a piano of any description?"

"But whoever purchases the top apartment might be," Freddy poked his arm. "Especially if, as you say, we're going to be asking a sizeable price for it."

*That was true.* Greg made a mental note to install good acoustic insulation in the floors of the two upper storeys.

"For everything above the ground floor, we're going to need a furniture hoist in any case," Freddy folded her arms. "And I have an idea about that."

"I'm all for ideas," Greg nodded. "If they're good ones."

Narrowing her eyes menacingly at his implication, Freddy re-entered the kitchen. "Follow me."

They ended up at the far side of the house, facing a heavy external door similar to the one he'd first seen on the top floor. Freddy had clearly worked on the locks and bolts of this one, as the heavy key in her hand opened it easily and with relatively little noise. Outside the door was a small stone landing with a few steps curving down to the left towards a heavy iron gate in the high external wall leading to the public pavement beyond. To the right were ascending steps, also inside the high curving wall.

"The brick enclosure goes all the way to the door by the attics you saw the first time you looked around," Freddy stepped onto the landing, walking down the few steps towards the old gate. "In addition to the new garage gates on this side for the top flat, I want to knock a smaller internal entrance to the garden from here," she said, pointing to a space in the inner wall opposite the iron gate. "Which will allow the owners private access to their own part of the garden."

"And your idea about moving furniture?" Greg

"Through here," Freddy dug into her jacket pocket for another key, wiggling it into the large open keyhole on the ancient gate. It took a little doing but the thing eventually yielded, creaking slowly inwards.

Out on the pavement, Greg took his first really good look up at the rear staircase to the house. This close up, he'd never seen anything like it. The high outer wall not only continued around the house and garden but at this point, also curved up to enclose the external staircase all the way to the second floor. There were even a series of small windows in the enclosure. It was the oddest hidden staircase he'd ever seen in London. The back of the house facing into Westmoreland Place had fewer
windows and more drain pipes than other aspects of the building, though there was a largish central window on both the first and second floors and it was at these windows that Freddy now pointed.

"Those two windows, the one on your floor and the one on the floor above, are at the end of the passage, right beside the doors that let into the staircase," Freddy sketched her idea into the air. "If we widened those windows in such a way as to open them completely to receive furniture, moving into and out of the house above the ground floor would be a piece of cake," she turned to assess Greg's expression. "The windows are already there and as we have to replace all of them in any case, I don't see a problem making them fit for a dual purpose," she paused. "What do you think?"

"As long as the window people say it can be done, then it makes good sense," Greg nodded. He had watched furniture hoists in action before, never thinking he'd use one himself. He could see exactly what Freddy was talking about. They'd simply extend the existing windows into a wider, reinforced design, purpose built for furniture delivery, maybe adding a small safety balcony. As they'd need to replace all the windows before they fitted out the upper floors, the concept could be used for the delivery of materials and fittings; it would be well-tested by the time the renovations were complete. "It's brilliant," he grinned.

Looking pleased, Freddy ushered him back inside the iron gate. "Have you thought how you'd like your apartment arranged?"

"Arranged?" Greg wasn't sure what he was being asked.

"How you want the rooms laid out? Where you want the bathrooms, that sort of thing."

"Do I get a lot of choice?"

"We're virtually rebuilding the house from the inside out," Freddy locked the side door behind them. "You can have what you want. Do you want to get a designer or an architect?"

"I'm pretty happy with the way the first floor is laid out right now, actually," Greg looked up at the ceiling. "A big bedroom and maybe an ensuite at the front of the house, then a living room and kitchen and dining area, an office, another bedroom and bathroom; a laundry would be good," he shrugged. "I told you I'd have more space than I knew how to use."

"If your bedroom's at the front, you'll overlook the garden," Freddy sounded hesitant.

"I'm counting on it," Greg smiled. "Actually, I can't wait to see what you've got planned for the front."

"You know there's a secret passage on your floor, don't you?" Freddy paused as they reached the base of the big staircase.

"Really?" Greg was tickled. "A secret passage?"

"No, not really," Freddy laughed, "let me show you."

Up the stairs to Greg's floor, Freddy came to a halt in front of a large, waist-level panel situated between two doors. "Here," she said, patting the painted wood. "See if you can work it out."

Greg had been in all sorts of buildings and houses in his life; grand ones with hand-gilded architraves and humble council flats tagged and graffitied to death. Anything odd behind a panel in a house of this age was put there with a definite purpose in mind. It was probably a void left after removing some antiquated heating system or ... he tapped and then pressed one end of a row of carved rosettes directly beneath the panel. With a dull *click*, the entire panel swung inwards, revealing ...
"It's a dumb waiter," Greg leaned into the dark and looked down. The dimensions of the service channel were generous; it would have carried coal up to the bedrooms and dirty laundry down to the washing room. "It must start in the kitchen or basement somewhere and end up ..." he lifted his eyes up into the dark. "Up there. It's neat," he stepped back. "Are we going to keep it?"

"It's the perfect space for a utilities shaft," Freddy pressed the other end of the carving and the door swung shut. "Especially as we're going to have to have three of everything in from the mains."

About to say that three was his lucky number, Greg's phone rang. "Hang on a tick," he answered and listened, his eyes swivelling towards Freddy. "Hold on a moment, I'll check if that's okay," he dropped the phone down by his side.

"Thompsons the roofing contractors have had a cancellation and can come out today instead of Friday," he said. "Does that suit you?"

"Today?" Freddy raised her eyebrows, nodding. "Now?"

"How soon can you get here?" Greg grinned at her as he listened to the response. "In an hour would be great, yes, we'll be here. See you then." Ending the call, Greg looked pleased. "Looks like things are starting to move."

###

"Oh yes, a fine place to be sure," Gerard Thompson was a tall, well-fed man with greying hair, an expensive gold watch and a heavy cashmere jacket that had Savile Row written all over it. His company had come recommended, Freddy said, from someone she knew whose garden she occasionally tended in Richmond. Walking around the building, Thompson occasionally referred to the council drawings showing lengths and dimensions.

"You'll be needing a complete re-roof," he muttered, frowning and sucking his teeth. "All the way from the ridges to the soffits. You want dormers?"

"The council gave us the option of adding two large dormers at the front as it wouldn't be overlooking anything but the garden and the street beyond," Freddy pointed at the spot on the roof and on the plan. "Though we need to know if it's feasible and how much it will add to the price, of course."

"You got Welsh slate on oak up there," Thompson ignored Freddy completely and spoke to Greg. "You want to keep that or go to tiles?" he asked. "I can do you a sweet deal on some lovely new clay tiles. Look grand up there, they would."

"I'd rather stay with the slate, thank you," Freddy stood directly in front of the man, a polite smile on her face. Gerard Thompson looked down at her and smirked.

"Yeah, gotta keep the little woman happy, dint we?" he grinned toothily.

"The only little thing here is your chance of getting this job if you upset the lady," Greg spoke stiffly. "I'm just the grunt. Dr Kerr makes all the important decisions."

"Oh, a doctor is it?" A new gleam entered Thompson's eyes. Greg could almost see the numbers totting themselves up. "Any chance I could see the council report on the roof?" he asked in a more civil tone.

"Of course," Freddy nodded. "I'll fetch it." Waiting until she was out of range, a grinning Thompson turned to Greg with a look on his face that suggested this was to be a man-to-man discussion.
"I can do you a really nice deal on the slates," he said casually. "Cash sale, no questions asked, if y'know what I mean. I can also get the boys around and knock up a double dormer for you toot sweet," he grinned again. "Some of the lads work on the low down, so a bit of cash in hand there means I can bring the overall cost down a bit more," he added. "Between you and me, like."

Shoving his hands in his jacket pockets, Greg did his best not to grin.

"I may be the grunt, but I'm police grunt," giving up any pretence of maintaining a straight face Greg smiled tragically, pulling out his Metropolitan Police identification with a flourish. The words 'Detective Inspector' were printed in large capitals beside his photograph. "And you, Gerard Thompson, are nicked."

###

"Where did Mr Thompson go?" Freddy returned, report in hand.

"Let's just say he had a change of heart about the job," Greg sounded philosophic. "I think he realised this wasn't the right place for his particular set of skills."

"Is he coming back?" Freddy stared at the open gate as if the roofing contractor's van might magically reappear.

"I very much doubt it," Greg smiled quietly to himself. "So what's next on the menu?" he asked.

"It's a bit late to be starting anything major now," she scanned the sky. "It'll be dark in less than an hour."

"Yeah, plus I'm knackered from scraping that wall this morning," Greg eased his shoulders until his spine cracked

"In which case, would you like to come with me to see an apothecary?" Freddy was already putting things away and locking up. "It's only ten minutes down the road and I need to go and pick up some supplies."

"An apothecary?" Greg scraped his boots. "Do they still exist?"

Freddy laughed. "Come with me and see."

Only too happy to knock off a little early now that the work was done, Greg locked up and slid into the Landrover's passenger seat. "This can't be cheap to run around town," he looked at the fuel gauge. "Got to cost a mint to keep it on the road."

"Alex showed me how to claim Capital allowance as my company vehicle, which it is, as well as fuel used for work purposes. And since we're going to a work-related trip, that's all well and good," Freddy waited until Greg was buckled in. "I had to install a CO2 exhaust filter to get the highest rate of claim, but it's worth it. Have you noticed how quiet she is?"

Greg had but hadn't really thought about it. Nor did he choose to consider the fact after hearing Harper's name. He wished there was some way to lessen Freddy's reliance on the solicitor but without a solid reason, there was little he could say or do. He contented himself with frowning through the side window as the Landrover headed along Chelsea Embankment. Within a handful of minutes, Freddy pulled into a parking space outside the Chelsea Physic Garden. There was a peculiar looking heraldic crest of a golden man astride a small dragon standing beneath a rhinoceros. How it had anything to do with people who made cough medicine, Greg had no clue.
"Come and meet Roy," Freddy walked over to a tall archway in the nearest red-bricked building with an intriguing sign at the top of the arch. The Worshipful Society of Apothecaries. Greg knew there were a pile of worshipful societies in London; most of the trades and professions had them, all involved in raising money for good causes. There were also suggested links with Freemasonry, another odd bunch of people if ever there was. And who was Roy?

After walking through several doors and along numerous corridors with big windows framing, Freddy knocked on a half-glassed door with two quite different security key pads though as she knew the codes to both, the door opened without fuss. They stepped into a laboratory that seemed to be more garden than science. At one end, the large room was filled wall-to-wall with beautiful tall purple flowers in pots, their vibrant colour and intense fragrance almost overwhelming. At the other end, standing at a white stone lab bench, an elderly man peered down through a modern microscope, making notes in a small book.

"Hello Roy," Freddy bounced across the room, giving the old man a hug and a kissed cheek. "How are you today? How's the back?"

"Doing acceptably well, my dear," Roy set a pair of gold framed spectacles on his nose, looking from Freddy to Greg who stood just inside the door. "And who have you brought to see me today, hmm?"

"This is Greg Lestrade; he's a detective with the Met," Freddy smiled as she turned to make the introductions. "Greg, this is my old friend and mentor, Professor Roy Armstrong who keeps me from the worst of myself. Greg's helping me renovate the Pimlico house, Roy," she said. "He's going to be taking one of the flats and we plan to sell the top floor apartment. It should solve a lot of problems one way or another."

"Going to be living in the same house, eh?" Armstrong gave Greg a very calculated look.

"Once we've done the place up and made it habitable, that's certainly the intention," Greg stepped closer. "Though each of the flats will be entirely self-contained and separate," he smiled. "There should be plenty of privacy for everyone."

"Mmh," the professor didn't sound overly impressed at the idea. He turned to face Freddy. "The Hemp you ordered is in the restricted lab, in the refrigerator by the door," he said, smiling as she turned and left the room.

Hemp?

"Freddy's using Hemp?" Greg's thirty years in the Force couldn't avoid the question.

"Of course," Armstrong lowered his eyebrows frowningly. "Her work on distilling the cannabinoids in hemp oil for the treatment of auto-immune diseases has been well published," the professor sniffed. "When she gave up her surgical appointment at Guy's and after her work at Bart's, Frederica finally saw sense and turned her fine intellect to the curative arts. I was proud to act as her sponsor when she gained her licentiate of the society several years ago."

"The society?" the explosion of questions in Greg's head made him slightly giddy.

"The Worshipful Society of Apothecaries of London," Armstrong paused and looked askance. "Have you been drinking?"

"I'm sorry, Professor," Greg lifted a hand in the air. "It's just that all of this is new information and I'm a little lost for words to be honest. Freddy's said nothing of this to me at all. We're ... we're not in
a relationship, if that's what you were thinking. We're business partners and that's all we are."

"Oh really?" the old man sounded surprised himself. He paused, removing his glasses to polish them. "It was simply that Frederica has never before introduced me to any of her male acquaintances, and I rather assumed ... I may have spoken somewhat out of turn, in that case."

"I'll say you did, you foolish old man," Freddy re-entered the lab with a stack of small, hermetically sealed containers, walking over to give the professor a one-armed hug. "I'll show Greg my lab since we're here and you've probably frightened him half to death with your solemn pontifications," she pinned the old man with a stern look. "Remember to go home early tonight and try that solution on your back and get some rest," she said, her concern visible and genuine. "Let me know if it gives you any relief."

"I will my dear, I promise," Armstrong smiled warmly, patting the back of her hand. "Off you go now with your young man and I'll get back to my typhoid."

Smiling over her shoulder, Freddy beckoned Greg to follow

"His typhoid?" Greg felt his head spin.

"He may look like an old dodderer, but Roy Armstrong has spent years identifying and refining a specific medication for Typhoid," Freddy headed down an old stone corridor. "And since most of the materials he uses are lethal to humans, people tend to leave him well alone."

Stopping at another half-glassed door, Freddy typed a six-digit code into the security lock.

"How come your door only has one keypad and the professor's has two?"

"Because of the flowers, of course," Freddy stood with her fingers on the door handle, seeing the lack of understanding his eyes and she smiled. "They're Monkshood," she said, as if that explained everything. "Arguably the most deadly plant in the world."
Poisonous flowers, *Hemp*, Guy's Hospital ... Freddy was a surgeon ... *apothecaries* ... Greg's thoughts fell over themselves to find some sort of order. If Freddy had suddenly pulled a white rabbit out of her jacket, he would not have been remotely surprised.

Opening the office door into an overcrowded little space barely larger than the professor's workbench, Freddy waved him to the single seat in front of an old wooden desk piled with papers. The room felt smaller than it was because of the hundreds of books and notebooks packed tightly together on shelves covering one wall, just as the shelves full of glass displays of leafy plants covered another. A narrow filing cabinet crammed itself into a corner. In the other corner was a half-cabinet, on top of which perched a tiny padlocked fridge.

"My home from home," Freddy packed the plastic boxes into the fridge, snapping the padlock shut. "When I'm not trying to earn a crust from wealthy garden owners, my membership of the Society allows me to use their facilities in the general lab. I invent potions," she said, daring Greg to laugh as she met his intensely curious gaze. "Okay," she sighed, sitting in the chair on the other side of the desk and folding her arms. "I can see you've got a mass of questions. You may as well ask whatever it is that's got you squinting like a myopic Fagin," she raised her eyebrows and looked resigned.

"How long?" Greg's eyes wandered around the bookshelves to see if there were any books he recognised. Most of the titles contained words like *carboxylic acid*, *isomerizing* and *hydrophilicity*. He decided not to ask about any of them.

"Since I started working here?" Freddy linked her fingers on the desk and looked as if she was consulting an inner calendar. "Nearly five years, after I left Bart's."

"Where you studied with Mike Stamford?"

"Where I studied with Mike Stamford for all of two hours; the time it took him to familiarise me with the new laser microscope that was his special toy at the time," Freddy laughed. "Mike's very kind though I think he exaggerated a little there. I spent several years at Bart's as an analytical chemist working in Toxicology and drug formulation. That ended up bringing me here."

"And you really worked as a surgeon at Guy's Hospital? What kind of a surgeon?"

Puffing out her cheeks in a slow exhale, Freddy met his fixed gaze with one of her own. "I don't usually talk about it," she said quietly.

Greg got the message. "Okay," he said softly. "Then there's no need."

"But I find myself thinking perhaps I should," Freddy frowned and looked down at her hands. "It was a long time ago."

"When?" Greg’s voice transitioned effortlessly into the gently questioning tone he used with victims of serious crime.

"Nine years, nearly ten," Freddy watched her own finger draw a slow line along the wood of the desk. "I was twenty-eight and had been on Guy's surgical staff for about eight months," she paused, blinking slowly. Remembering.

"What happened?" his words were so soft as to be almost inaudible.
"I was on emergency shift, one of several surgeons on call and there was a train accident. All the senior staff were in theatre when another emergency came in ..." Freddy swallowed. "It was a little girl," her voice faltered. "I did everything I could to pull her through, but the car crash had caused too much damage ... there was just too much ..." she closed her eyes, the image of the dying child still too sharp. "I did everything I could ... I tried everything ..." she looked up, her dark hazel eyes wide and bleak. "And I wasn't enough for her. And afterwards, I couldn't go back into the operating theatre," Freddy stared down at the desktop and furrowed her brow. "I was too terrified to risk another disaster. I freaked out and ran away; ran right away and never went back. I'm a poor surgeon and a dreadful coward."

Sometimes satisfying your curiosity was not always the best idea. Greg called himself a fool as he saw the hunted, heartrending expression in her eyes.

"Would anyone have been enough?" he leaned forward, resting his forearms on the edge of the old desk. "You must have been very good for Guy's to employ you in the first place," he added. "You don't have a magic wand, Freddy," he paused, searching for the right words. "And you're probably one of the bravest people I know, doing all the things you do alone and unaided. Is it time to be kinder to yourself, maybe? Can you?"

Closing her eyes briefly, Freddy sat motionless in her chair, her face taut and uncomfortable.

"Perhaps," she looked at him. "The work I do here will benefit thousands, potentially hundreds of thousands once I've identified and refined the correct formula," she blinked. "Perhaps I might be able to come to terms with it one day," she sounded yearning.

"Would you like to come to dinner with me tonight?" Greg spoke abruptly as he held her eyes, speaking in a decisive tone. "If you don't want to, just say and I won't ask you again, but it just feels to me like you need to have ..."

"I'd love to have dinner with you."

There was a pause as the idea sank in.

"Then that's great," Greg sat back in his chair, his stomach muscles relaxing from their unrealised tension. "I'll pick you up from the Dolphin and then take you to a nice restaurant and treat you to a very decent bottle of Vouvray and the best Coquilles Saint-Jacques you have ever tasted."

"This would be a French restaurant, I'm assuming?" Freddy sounded suddenly lighter, as if the previous few minutes had drifted away.

"Blanchette in Soho," Greg nodded. "Not the fanciest of places, but a very reasonable eatery without a lot of the fuss so many French restaurants have these days. I will even have a shave and put on a clean shirt, so be warned," he arched his eyebrows with great seriousness.

"It's been ages since I went out for dinner with anyone," Freddy sat back in her chair, smiling. "Let me show you the main lab and then I'll drop you back at your car."

"Aren't those the same toiletries they use at that spa place you took me the other day?" Greg noticed a box in the corner filled with empty plastic containers labelled Body. He leaned over and picked one up. It was identical. "You playing fast and loose with the freebies, Doctor Kerr?" he grinned at her teasingly. Looking immediately embarrassed, Freddy seemed distinctly uncomfortable and Greg wished he hadn't attempted the humour.

"Not to worry, we all do it," he smiled again to downplay the question, wondering why she would
be even remotely troubled by such a thing. Sighing internally, Greg realised there was a great deal he still didn't know about Freddy or her situation so perhaps he'd better stick to safe topics for the time being.

"So where do you make all these magical potions then?" He opened the door and waited for her to pass.

###

He had indeed had a shave and not just with the electric razor either. Greg hadn't been out to dinner with a nice woman for a long time, not that this was anything like a romantic assignation, but the principle was there. He slid a new blade into the old safety razor that used to be his father's. It was plain steel with a solid heft and a good grip and Greg saw no reason to change it. As the smooth new blade swept through the foam on his jaw, he realised he was smiling, though what for, he couldn't say. He was even a little bit excited; he was doing stuff these days he'd never imagined in his wildest dreams and it felt great. It was good to break new ground, try new things. He whistled softly.

And tidy trousers and a jacket just didn't seem to have the right feel for tonight. Greg looked in the single wardrobe in his pokey little bedsit. He had five suits. Three everyday ones he wore to the office, a best charcoal one for funerals and serious appointments and a mid-grey with the finest dark check. He regarded it as too nice to wear for work but had had few places to give it an airing since the divorce. It would do nicely for tonight. Deciding to go the whole hog, he pulled out a snowy-white shirt, eventually opting to do without his one and only Armani silk tie, going with a more casual open shirt neck. A dab of the Gucci cologne he'd won in a Secret Santa at work two Christmases back. A heavy old silver watch, some good black leather shoes and he felt as cheerful as he had in ages. A smile curved his mouth when he realised the waistband of the trousers was loose enough to actually need a belt. He could feel the muscles over his stomach had become firmer and slightly more defined in the week he'd been working at the house. He grinned. He might come out of all this with a better bod as well as a new home.

Grabbing his wallet and phone, his whistle grew louder as he headed out to the car. It would take him nearly fifteen minutes to reach Dolphin Square and then, depending on the traffic, another ten or fifteen to get to the restaurant by about seven-thirty in perfect time for the reservation he'd made earlier. Most people wouldn't get a look in at such short notice, but Greg had helped out one of the chefs after a nasty robbery and had been assured of preferential treatment ever since. Not that he normally abused his police position, but one night wouldn't hurt. He was looking forward to a decent dinner for once and some pleasant companionship to go along with it.

Driving through the same tall archway that Freddy had taken with the Landrover the first time she'd brought him here, he pulled into a parking space and rang her number.

"On my way," she called breathlessly down the phone. "Give me a second."

Wondering what might have caused her to be rushed, Greg got out of the car, waiting by the open door. He hoped she wasn't going to be too late or traffic would start to get really heavy and ...

"Made it," Freddy paused at the top of the steps leading into the side of the building. "I changed into this at the last minute."

For the first time since he'd known her, Freddy had discarded the baggy dark clothing and stood there in a longish floaty green dress and a short burgundy jacket that fitted her small frame like a glove. Her freshly washed hair swayed thick and shiny around her head and she clutched a small handbag. Instead of the ever-present work boots was a dainty pair of heeled shoes. Greg grinned. She looked almost elven.
"Your carriage awaits, my lady," he laughed, opening the passenger door of the BMW with a bow.

"You are such an arse," she smiled, getting in.

Traffic was unexpectedly light for the end of the working week, though Greg was far from complaining. Freddy was wearing some kind of floral perfume and he found himself sniffing surreptitiously, trying to identify the delicate fragrance. *Rose?* Some kind of lavender? It was an old scent and it bothered him that he couldn't quite put his finger on ...

"It's Jonquil and Bergamot," Freddy kept her eyes forward. "A favourite of the late Victorian era for its clean yet subtle perfume," she added. "That's if it was my perfume you were trying to identify and not anything else in the car."

"Daffodil," Greg smiled and nodded. "I was wondering where I'd met it before but I just couldn't place it. "It's nice," he added. "Suits you."

"If I were going to make a cologne for you, I'd use Lavender, Damask rose and Tobacco," she said. "Possibly a touch of Vetiver."

"That's my personality, is it?" Greg kept his eyes on the traffic ahead, looking for a parking spot. "Lavender and Rose?"

"They're in more men's colognes than you'd imagine," Freddy spotted a vacant space. "Will that one do?"

"Perfect." Greg pulled smoothly into the empty spot, stopping the car and releasing his seatbelt. He turned to look at her. "You ready for a really nice dinner?"

"As I'll jolly well ever be," Freddy grinned, collecting her bag and opening the door.

Greg made it around the car with enough time to lend her his hand. "If I'm to be considered a gentleman this evening, then you'd better hold my arm," he looked down at her. "For appearance's sake."

"For appearance's sake it is then," Freddy tried hard to keep a straight face as she curved her small hand up and into the crook of his arm.

"Ah, Bonsoir Monsieur et Madame Lestrade," the Head waiter at the door recognised the name. "Chef Phillipe told me you would be joining us this evening. I 'ave a special table for you both. This way, please."

"You told him you were bringing your wife?" Freddy hissed.

"No, just that a lady would be with me," Greg whispered back. "He's making an assumption."

"For you and your lady, Monsieur Lestrade," the waiter smiled charmingly as he pointed out a very private table for two off to the side of the room. There was a bottle of champagne already chilling in a silver cooler on a stand. "Compliments of Chef Phillipe." The waiter popped the fizzy in an admirably efficient manner, pouring out two flutes of the chilled wine.

"Please pass my ... *our* thanks to the Chef," Greg grinned playfully at Freddy as she was seated and he took his own chair. A crisp white linen napkin was swiftly laid across each of their laps.

"While you consult the menu, I will bring you the Raffinés Chef Phillipe made specifically for you this evening."
"God, what did you do for the man?" Freddy leaned forward across the table with a theatrical whisper. "Marry his sister?"

"Stopped his previous restaurant being done over by the local mob," Greg leaned forward too. "There was a spike of organised crime in certain parts of London that targeted the French communities," he shrugged. "We got the men responsible and made the bad people go away."

Freddy nodded understandingly "Hence the Raffinés."

"Yeah," Greg nodded too. "And a Raffiné is ..?"

"Usually they're pre-dinner nibbles ..." she stopped as the waiter returned with a long narrow plate holding a number of savoury petits fours. They looked delicious and Greg's stomach reminded him it had been a long time since the sausage rolls at lunch.

"So how many of you work in that big general lab at any one time?" After they'd ordered, Greg tried a round-shaped pastry with salmon and capers and a swallow of the bubbling champagne. It was indeed, delicious.

The main communal workspace at the Apothecaries Chelsea Gardens centre had been laid out very much like a standard school laboratory, though with large Perspex dividers sectioning off stretches of bench top and different pieces of equipment. Freddy had guided Greg down to a corner section where not only were there all manner of files and glassware set up in a distillation arrangement, but also several small glass containers holding tiny twists of paper, similar to the one she'd given him as a hangover preventer several weeks earlier.

"You make these for a living?" Greg pointed to the glass boxes.

"No, not at all," Freddy seemed peculiarly flustered at the question. "These are by-products of some of the previous clinical trials I've run. It's not something I ... it's not important," she said, walking across to the complex though currently inactive distillation arrangement.

Now that was odd. Greg was pretty adept at spotting a deliberate lie, and he knew he'd just heard one. Why on earth would Freddy feel the need to lie to him about her herbal remedies?

"My current experiment focuses on the extraction of a certain essence from the cannabinoids in Hemp-oil," she indicated the key points of extraction in the glass assembly. "I'm chasing a very specific indicator," she added, frowning.

"Are you going to find it?" Greg glanced around the big lab. Though currently empty, there seemed to be experiments set up all around the place.

"Sooner or later, yes," Freddy had nodded confidently before heading for the doorway and out to the parked Landrover.

The menu at Blanchette was neither extravagant nor extensive but, as Greg had promised, the dishes were delicious French classics. The waiter persuaded them to order a good Burgundy with their main courses and Greg had pre-ordered a bottle of his favourite Vouvray, a demi-sec, bottled nearly forty years before. It wasn't cheap but it wasn't as if he did this sort of thing every day. Besides, Freddy loved the semi-dry white wine that accompanied the almond tarte, which in his mind, made the indulgence very much worth it.

"Tomorrow is my last full day off," Greg thought about going outside for a smoke, but he'd been off them for so long now, it was more of an habitual impulse than a real desire for a cigarette. "Once I'm back at work, I might be able to drop by to keep an eye on the contractors every so often, but until I
can organise some more time off, then I'm restricted to the odd evening and the weekends, I'm afraid."

"I've got a few small jobs coming up in the next few days, but they're in town and I should be able to get them all finished well before the weekend," Freddy sipped the Vouvray lingeringly. "We've got another roofing contractor coming early tomorrow and then the damp-proofing chaps are coming around nine to do the first lot of chemical injections," she mused thoughtfully. We have to get the basement sealed, the roof on and then all the doors and windows replaced before we can even begin to consider the house watertight." "But once it is," Greg grinned over his wineglass, "we should be able to crack on with the major internal work."

"It's rather exciting, really," Freddy smiled.

"Yeah, it is," Greg nodded his agreement. "I never thought for one minute I'd ever want to take on another house renovation, but this one's not what you might call run-of-the-mill."

"Nothing about this has been run-of-the-mill," Freddy gazed at her wine before glancing at Greg's watch. "If we're to get a decent day's effort in tomorrow," she said. "Perhaps we shouldn't be too late this evening?"

Greg could quite happily have stayed drinking and talking for the rest of the night, but she was right. There was still so much to do, even before the main contractors could come in, that having a lazy day this early in the piece didn't make a lot of sense.

"Yeah, come on then," he raised a hand to the waiter, mimicking signing, the universal code requesting the bill. In moments, a black leather folder was placed discreetly on the edge of the table. After Greg dropped his VISA on top, the folder was deftly whisked away.

"This was a marvellous dinner and a truly wonderful idea," Freddy finished the last of her wine. "It would be nice to return here at some point," she looked thoughtfully around the fashionably neo-rustic décor. "It reminds me of school summer holidays."

"Then it's a date," Greg held her chair as she stood.

###

Other than initially suggested costs when the house roof was first damaged, Freddy had sought no recent quotes for its repair, yet it was a critical activity. Nothing could be done internally until the roof and the windows were sealed.

Mr Lewis, of Lewis, Sons and Co. was a short Welshman, barely taller than Freddy. In his early seventies, the neatly dressed man was accompanied by a tall skinny boy who carried a laptop and a pair of binoculars.

"One of my grandsons," Mr Lewis nodded towards the boy. "Daffyd. Deciding if he wants to learn the trade or not." The Welshman's musical vowel-sounds clearly marked him as a native of coal-country. "This your roof, is it?" he stared up at the front of the house that was still almost intact, before walking around to see the side and the back where it was mostly missing.

"It was the slate that brought me 'ere to London, you see," he offered, conversationally. "Nobody knows Welsh slate anymore, so the comp'ny asked my father and me to come down to London to help them out for a while, see?" He wandered back across the front of the house with Daffyd following and Freddy and Greg listening to the absent-minded commentary.
"And in the end, more people were comin' to Da and me than were going to the comp'ny," he turned and smiled cheerfully. "And I ended up buyin' them out, see?" He took the binoculars from the boy and stared at some detail on the roof.

"And it turned into a family business?" Freddy looked where Mr Lewis was looking, trying to see what he saw.

"It did at that," the old man nodded thoughtfully, his eyes lost in the serried rows of unbroken slate shingles. "And if the boy here takes to it, the family will have been in slate for a hundred years," he nodded with satisfaction as he reached a decision.

"It's a big job," he said, turned to look at both Freddy and Greg, "and you have a number of choices on how to go about it."

Greg liked choices. This sounded good.

"I can do you all new slate for the whole roof, which is fairly costly given the size of the thing, but it would carry a thirty year guarantee," Mr Lewis returned to gaze at the front of the house. "The slate you already have is antique now, see? Which means if you try and repair the broken aspects with new slate then it will show up as awkward lookin' for at least ten to fifteen years, depending on the weather."

"Even if the slate comes from the same part of the country?" Greg frowned. It would be a shame for the finished roof to look half-baked.

"T'is not the area, tis the age that makes the difference here," Mr Lewis nodded distantly, his thoughts clearly up on the roof. "'Course, I can prob'ly manage Spanish slate for you, if you're looking for a cheaper options," he sniffed. "But it would be a shame to do a house like this a disservice when it was built with proper Welsh slate at the outset, like."

"Is it possible to find reclaimed slate of a similar age and wear?" Freddy folded her arms, staring up at the rows of thin grey stone, her expression becoming almost as distant as the Welshman's.

"Yes, it is, of course," Mr Lewis nodded. "But t'is dreadful expensive," he frowned and looked at her and then at Greg. "I can do you Spanish slate for just over a pound the piece, but proper aged slate comes in at ..." he pursed his mouth and shook his head wonderingly. "Even if I can locate enough of the same slate to reclad the damaged area ..." he raised his eyebrows. "You've got Duchess-size slates up there now," he narrowed his eyes in thought. "Even at just above cost, it's still going to be about two-pound fifty a piece," he wrinkled his nose at the very notion of the extra cost. "Mind you, it would be a proper job and would definitely look the part."

"What kind of figure are we looking at overall if we go with the aged slate?" Greg added his own gaze to the unmoving roof.

"How much Duchess stock do we have in reclaimed Welsh, lad?" Mr Lewis kept his eyes on the tiles.

Swiftly consulting the small laptop, Daffyd pointed out a figure to his grandfather. "Nearly eleven thousand at last daily check, Grampa," the boy's voice was less Welsh but as soft as the old man's. "We could prob'ly do it."

"And you said you wanted dormers, yes?" Mr Lewis refocused on the central section of the undamaged part of the roof. "If so, we could reuse the slates you already have as well."

"And we found quite a few unbroken ones at the back of the house, so they could be used as well,"
Freddy offered optimistically.

"I would need to sit down and work out a proper figure mind you," Mr Lewis chewed on his lip as he thought. "But if you were going to go with the aged slate, and have two dormers at the front ..." he muttered things at his grandson who tapped a number of keys. *Breathable membrane ... battens ... labour ... valley lead ... nails and fixings ...*

The boy turned the screen so the old man could see. Mr Lewis nodded.

"I'd have to check some details back at the office of course," he said. "But to do you a decent job with the aged slates and all the trimmings, you'd be lookin' forty thousand in the eye," he said. "At least," he added. "Though I very much doubt you'll find anyone who can do it for less. Of course, you should get as many other quotes as you need."

"It's a lot of money," Greg turned to Freddy who was still staring up at the roof.

"Yes, but think how glorious it will look when it's all done," she murmured.

"It'll probably be more than that, it always is," Greg shook his head, returning his eyes to the expensive lines of slate.

"But if we want to sell the top floor flat for the best we can ..."

"There's no thirty-year guarantee on old tiles."

"There's no guarantee at all on the tiles we still have up there."

"We should get other quotes. It might be cheaper."

"I find myself trusting Mr Lewis and his hundred years."

"It would be more cost efficient to go with new Spanish slate all over."

"I know," she sighed. "But ..."

There was a drawn-out pause.

"Then we're agreed?"

"Yes," Freddy met his eyes. She was smiling. "I believe we are."

"Seems you have a deal, Mr Lewis," Greg nodded at the old man. "We'd like a formal quote, of course, as well as an idea of scheduling and a potential finish-date, but it looks like the old girl is going to be properly sorted," his voice was light.

"Proper job," Mr Lewis nodded, a gentle curve to the corners of his mouth. "It will be a pleasure to put her right, so it will."

###

Mr Lewis and grandson had barely departed the garden when Derek and his big white van hove into view. He was not alone.

"This is Andy," he jerked a thumb at his assistant. "When we're not using him, he acts as ballast for the cross-Channel ferries."
Andy was huge. Tall, blondish, built like a lumberjack and, Greg noticed quite objectively, unreasonably good looking. The man grinned a gleaming white smile. "I just do what I'm told," he waggled his eyebrows. "Derek frightens me."

"Yeah, yeah. C'mon golden boy, let's get this stuff downstairs."

Various groups of muscles bunching in his arms, Andy picked up several of the heavy containers of chemicals in each hand and followed his boss into the house.

"Wow," Freddy breathed, watching him go.

"It'll all be flab before he's forty," Greg observed dryly.

"Who cares about that?" Freddy headed inside. "I just want to watch. Him... it, at work. Them at work... and Derek, of course," she smiled manically as Greg threw her a pitying look.

"You won't be able to stay down here once we begin the injection process," Derek was already setting up a mobile platform that could be rolled the length of the basement. "Though they're not toxic, the fumes can be overpowering and we only brought the two masks."

"I can hold my breath if the lady wants to watch us in action," Andy treated Freddy to a salacious wink as she stood at the top of the stairs. "I do some of my best work for the ladies."

Greg managed not to groan, but it was a close thing.

"I'm sure you do," Freddy agreed, abstractedly watching the basement Adonis laying out powerful masonry drills and heavy pneumatic equipment.

"How long do you think this will take?" Greg looked at the long wall with different eyes after spending almost an entire day scraping it clear of plaster.

"Once we get into the swing of things, not that long," Derek sounded reasonable. "The drilling will take a couple of hours at least and then the chemical injections about another hour or so. We should be out of here around lunchtime."

"Which means we can go and do some work on your kitchen garden in the meantime, doesn't it" Greg bent at the waist until he caught Freddy's eye.

"That would be nice," she nodded slowly, still watching the activities below. "Some things just make you want to take up painting, don't they?" There was a disgusted sound as Greg disappeared back up into the house.

Freddy was still smiling when she arrived around the far side of the house where a gloved Greg was already starting to pull out unbroken pots from the piles of detritus near the wall. He threw her a withering look.

"I wonder if Andy would like to buy the top flat?" she asked innocently, squeaking with laughter as a clod of grass and earth landed directly on her boot.
Greg sat at his new desk in his new office in the new Yard building looking directly across the Thames towards the old City dungeon, which felt apt from an historical perspective. He hadn't expected to be given an office with such a spectacular view. He'd barely expected to have an office with a window, though maybe a small one, around the back of the Curtis Green building would have been nice. There were a series of individual, private offices for senior investigative officers on the fourth floor of the Yard's new headquarters, but only one with a window that faced onto the Thames with a view real estate agents around the world would commit multiple bloody murders to possess. Since the new building was significantly smaller than the previous headquarters, numbers of admin staff and active officers had already been dispersed to different localities around the city, a nexus of investigative personnel remained at the new HQ, of which Greg's team represented the Serious Crimes Division. By the sheerest of chances, he had been offered the office with the window facing the river. As the choice of occupant had been settled by the time honoured method of pulling a name on a paper slip from an old shoebox, no mutterings of favouritism could be seriously levied, not that this was ever likely to stop a bunch of coppers from gossiping.

"Mark my words," said Duncan Brimacombe, a DI in the Flying Squad. "They're going to be after you for DCI now, Greggy boy," he arched his eyebrows, nodding sagely. "Nobody gets one of the best seats in the house without something going on upstairs," he added, meeting the eyes of his other colleagues who nodded back equally knowingly. "You'll be booted up to the Lord Mayor's entourage before you know it."

Smiling cheerfully and presenting Brimacombe with a silent but specific gesture that offered a clear opinion of his prediction, Greg retreated into his still gleaming office. The view out the big window beside his desk knocked his socks off every time it caught his eye. Even though it was the beginning of November, traditionally a month of stormy grey weather, a weak sun still shone down on a calm River Thames and the vista was stunning. Turning back to his desk, the small tsunami of papers, large sealed envelopes and thin printed reports sitting in the middle was not such an appealing view. When he logged onto his computer, a flurry of appointment reminders queued up to make themselves known. No chance of an early night tonight, in that case. His thoughts flicked back to the Pimlico house.

Derek and the godlike Andy had indeed finished not long after one o'clock the day before. Waiting an hour as Derek had recommended before venturing down the stairs to have a look, Greg and Freddy had been faced with the unmistakable signs of progress.

The entire wall running the width of the house was criss-crossed with a meticulously measured and regimented series of small drilled holes, into which had been injected a virulent purple liquid. The smell in the basement hovered unpleasantly somewhere between vinegar and bananas. Derek had assured them the odour would not linger beyond a couple of days and to get as much air circulating in the basement as possible. Greg had taken the simple step of entirely removing several of the rotted windows on top of the wall, covering the gaps with well-placed and thoroughly sealed squares of plastic-wrapped wood when they left the house that evening. Even if it poured in the interim, no water would enter the basement.

"It's already leaching through the brick, look," Freddy squatted, her gaze at floor-level. There was indeed evidence that something was permeating the actual bricks, as tiny dark speckles were beginning to show on the inside of the wall.

"Derek said the chemical would saturate both sides of the cavity and expel any moisture," Greg
crouched down and peered at the spot where Freddy pointed. "He said it would take a week or so to do the job completely and start to dry, ready for the second phase of the process," he stood, his knees cracking. "Looks like progress to me."

"I still find it hard to believe this is really all going to happen," Freddy stood too, shaking her head as she looked along the length of the wall. "Everything seemed to be such a hugely overwhelming job only a few months ago, but now ..." she looked up and met Greg's eyes. "Things are really moving."

Freddy's gaze was jubilant and Greg thought it would worth a bit of effort to keep it that way.

###

"So, anything of interest happen while I was off exercising my inner property developer?" Greg shunted the pile of work on his desk to one side while he concentrated on clearing his computer screen of nagging appointments and reminders. Technology was grand in its place but this kind of deluge he could well do without.

"Nothing really exciting," Sally Donovan sat in a chair the other side of his desk as he clicked his mouse and muttered balefully under his breath. "The usual gang problems; a spate of organised phone thefts on the Tube," she wrinkled her nose in thought. "A bunch of near drug-busts and a couple of medium-sized robberies in Hatton Garden," she shrugged. "While you've been off on gardening leave, we've been clearing up back cases mostly."

"It's good to be quiet at times," Greg's eyes remained focused on the screen of his computer. "You know it's going to go mental on the run up to Christmas." He paused, looking up. "Near drug busts?"

"Yeah," Sally leaned back in her chair and contemplated Greg's fine vista. "Three operations went down but no contraband was found," she scowled. "Though the info was good, I'd have sworn to it," she shook her head and went back to staring out the window. "We made a lot of noise though, so maybe we'll have made everyone lie low for a while."

"With only eight weeks to the festive season?" Greg raised his eyebrows and sounded sceptical. "Good luck with that."

"So what's all this about you getting booted upstairs?" Sally was interested. "Is this just a rumour or is there more to it?" she leaned forward on the desk, scanned his expression and spoke in a whisper. "You can tell me."

"It's a load of bollocks, is what it is," Greg returned his eyes to the screen in front of him, sighing at the never-ending list of meetings ahead. "Envy," he murmured, scanning down the lines of emails. "They're all a bunch of sad, envious old busybodies."

"Come on then," his sergeant leaned back, folding her arms. "Tell me about this amazing place you've been working on down in Pimlico," she said. "And that woman you've been working with ... Franny ... Freda ..."

"Freddy. Her name is Freddy, short for Frederica," Greg continued to speak absently as he clicked and deleted a dozen different requests for information that would have been fielded elsewhere by now. "She's really nice. We get on well."

"Do you now?" Sally sounded arch. It was the tone of her voice that intruded into Greg's thoughts. "Freddy is a very hard-working professional person," he defended his statement. "She's honest and dedicated and reliable," he said, realising even as he said the words, that he really did trust her.
"Is she clever, rich, pretty?" Sally was leaning on his desk again, her dark eyes searching his face for the truth of the matter.

Freddy's features and direct dark gaze were too clear-cut to be pretty, but she was beautiful, no doubt about it. She also had to be some sort of genius to do what she did, not to mention being too modest for her own good. And what was all that rubbish about her not being a good surgeon? Too much of a perfectionist; no wonder she could only see the negatives about herself and had lost sight of all the seriously important skills lesser people would be scrambling to publicise. Greg shrugged. "Not really thought about it," he kept his eyes on the screen.

"But you really like her?" Sally persisted. "Is she nice?"

Freddy was too nice for her own good, though nice didn't really cut it. She was a caring, thoughtful and funny woman. It was good to work with her.

"She's okay," Greg nodded decisively as he sent the last dead email into oblivion. "Tell me about these fizzled drug busts."

Sighing at the realisation she would get nothing more out of him this way, Donovan sat back.

"Intel from two of our best informants said that the same gang would be shifting some major product from a central location out to several distribution centres in the London area. We were looking for several different types of drugs including marijuana worth over two hundred thousand; cocaine; ecstasy; LSD and cannabis resin," Sally recited the details as if reading from a charge sheet. "We were given the time and the places and we were all there as a normal operation, but when we got inside ..." she lifted both hands in the air. "The birds had done a bunk," Sally scowled again. "This happened three times with almost an identical set-up, until we realised that that's exactly what it was, a set up." The scowl changed to a heavy glower. "There had definitely been some stuff on the premises because the sniffer dogs were all over the place, but it was squeaky clean by the time we got there."

"Have there been any more tip-offs?" Greg narrowed his eyes and looked absorbed. "It might be a case of crying wolf until there really is a wolf."

"Yeah," Donovan nodded, "but three times without a result was as much as the brass would stand for in one week," she sighed wearily. "And it was proper intel too. None of us can understand it. Something funny's going on."

A stash of weed and resin was one thing, but the cocaine and LSD took the situation into a different league. Cannabis seemed to be the *soup de jour* at the moment. Greg smiled inwardly as he thought of Freddy's tiny padlocked fridge. You could get a few keys of coke into all sorts of small places if you had to.

"Who were the informants?"

"Regulars known to the Central Task Force," Sally shrugged. "You know they won't give up any names without it being a closed courtroom."

"And where were the supposed holding sites?"

"That's another funny thing," Donovan folded her arms and went back to her scowl. "All three locations were upmarket massage places ... *day spas* they're called these days."

A wondering thought meandered through Greg's brain. "Nothing at the Dolphin?" he asked casually.
"The posh place in Pimlico?" Sally shook her head. "Nah. Two were in South London and the last one was out by Limehouse," she said, flicking her gaze to his face. "Why?"

"No reason, really," Greg sighed and sat back in his own chair. "Any of these places got form?"

"Nope. Every one's shiny and sparkling. Apart from the fact that all three of the places was a day spa catering to a specific market, you'd never imagine they'd be drop-off places for a drug mob."

Greg thought a bit more about the kind of drugs Sally had mentioned. They were the kinds of drugs normally clumped together as *recreational*; there hadn't been any great shipment of heroin or methadone that the heaviest gangs moved. Though the cocaine and the LSD were both Class A narcotics, worrying if there was a lot of it.

"How much LSD and cocaine did the informants say would be there?"

"Not that much, actually," Donovan consulted her memory. "The cocaine and the LSD seemed to be afterthoughts almost. The main stuff was the weed and the resin. It would have been bulky in the amounts we were told to look for. There was supposed to have been a major haul."

Strange thoughts were tickling the inside of Greg's head; ideas that weren't properly formulated slid in and out of the shadows.

"Any of these places still under lockdown?"

"Yeah, the last one in Limehouse. *Salmon Lane Saunas*," Sally looked sharply at her boss. There was an odd inflection to his voice. It usually meant he knew something. "Want to give it a quick shufti before we let the owners reopen for business?"

"May as well," Greg stood, the appointments in his diary and the files on his desk relegated to later in the day. He wanted to have a look at the potential drug drop before it could be cleaned up and sanitised by anyone. "My car's downstairs," he checked his watch. "Embankment's probably the quickest way."

###

The smell reminded him of the spa at the Dolphin, though this place was more redolent of conifer trees with a clearly chemical undertone that lacked the rich spicy fragrance of the massage experience Freddy had dragged him to. Greg looked around though there wasn't that much to be seen. Salmon Lane Saunas wasn't a big place, with clean whites and pale greens and pots full of live bamboo everywhere. The front office and waiting area were carpeted in a Jute matting and everything seemed low-key and innocuous. Heading through to the treatment rooms, there was a similar arrangement of showers heading into a pine-panelled series of rooms where the almost metallic smell of spruce and wintergreen was stronger. Open shelves filled with clean folded white towels, smaller rooms holding a single massage bed and little else. It all seemed harmless.

"Storeroom's through here," Sally beckoned Greg to follow her as she rounded a tight corner and walked into a squarish, cement-floored room at the back of the establishment. There were a couple of small barred windows and a triple-locked back door which was also security-locked with a heavy emergency safety bar. Nobody was going to come in that way.

Looking around at the shambles left behind after the failed drug raid, Greg saw numerous brown cardboard boxes had been tipped over into the middle of the hard floor, revealing all sorts of bottles of massage oils and skin treatments. The scent of pine was particularly potent out here. Someone had spilled some of the treatment lotions and the smell of fir trees was almost overpowering.
Bending down, he rummaged in a large plastic bag filled with small tubes, pulling out a handful of the same plastic containers he’d seen in the showers at the Dolphin spa. Opening the tiny screw cap, Greg sniffed the contents, half expecting to be reminded of that strange night with Freddy in the enormous tiled pool. But the smell was entirely different: a hard, sterile smell with a whiff of coal tar. Pine trees and salt; the faintly brassy fragrance irritated his nose. Nothing at all like the sensuous spicy aroma of the Dolphin's products. Not like it at all. Holding the small tube in his hand, Greg saw it had the same lettering on one side. *Body. Now* that was interesting.

"Find out what products each of the other two spas use," he held out the plastic container to his sergeant. "See if it's the same as this, and find out who manufactures the stuff," he added. "I've used something like this myself, though not here," he looked around at the uninspiring storage room. "It might be nothing."

"And it might be something," Sally nodded, sliding the plastic tube into her coat pocket. "What if they all use the same products?"

"Then it gives us a connection we don't have at the moment," Greg looked around the small, shambled storeroom. "The dogs found nothing at all?"

"Only that something had probably been here," Donovan waved at the boxes in the middle of the floor. "But nothing more specific. No confirmation as to what it was."

"Hmm." Greg took a final look around. "Let me know if forensics come up with anything, though I doubt they will if the dogs found nothing." He headed for the door. "There's something that feels off about this," he admitted, closing the main entrance behind him. "Like we're missing something."

"Welcome back, Guv," Donovan smiled and got in the car.

On the return to his office, his phone buzzed in his pocket just as he walked through the doorway.

"I'm so dreadfully sorry to bother you," Freddy sounded anxious. "I'm out at a manor house in Brentwood this morning and it would take me ages to get to all the way across town to Harrow at this time of day. Mummy's rung me three times to say that the next door burglar alarm at Heathfield House has been ringing for over an hour and nobody's appeared to turn it off." There was no panic in her voice, though she was clearly worried. "I've told her not to go over there and to ring the local police, but she says she's called them and the alarm's still ringing. It's unusual for the house next door to be entirely deserted, you see, especially during the week when the staff are there."

"Phone the Harrow police and see if they've had a call about an alarm at one of their posh places called Heathfield House," Greg shouted out through his open office door to whoever was nearest. "Burglar alarm's been ringing unattended for an hour," he added, turning back to Freddy on the phone.

"Is your mum alright?" he asked. "She's not going over to next door, is she?"

"I've got a horrible feeling she was planning to do exactly that," Freddy's voice was tense with concern. "She doesn't have a mobile and she didn't answer the house phone when I rang her back a couple of minutes ago ... she's such an impulsive old thing, especially if she thinks something is wrong, and she'll probably take the shotgun she uses to frighten off the foxes ... what do I do, Greg?"

*Shotgun?*

"You can stop worrying, is what you can do," Greg checked his watch. From central London to Harrow straight up the M4 ... forty minutes in the usual traffic, less than half that if he used the siren,
especially if he booted it and got the lights going as well.

"Harrow police report no alarms from any of the major residences in the immediate area, though they said they'll swing by as soon as they can to check it's not a defective alarm," one of the detective constables stuck his face through Greg's open door.

"Not good enough," Greg shook his head, lifting the phone back to his ear. "Harrow police are on the way, though they can't say how long they'll be, so I'll take a quick jaunt up there myself, just in case. Okay?"

"I'm so very sorry, Greg," Freddy sounded mortified. "I'm getting in the Landy right now and am heading there myself, but it'll take a couple of hours."

"Don't rush," Greg was already heading back down to the carpark, ignoring the strange looks heading his way. "The last thing we need is an accident on the M25 with you speeding in that old rattler," he wrestled with his key to beep the BMW open. "Don't panic, I'll call you when I'm there. If you speak to your mum in the meantime, tell her I'm on my way and to stay put until I get there."

"Yes, yes, of course," the relief in Freddy's voice was plain. "It's probably nothing, but you know how old women can be so stubborn."

And now I know where you get it from, Greg smiled to himself as he pulled out of the carpark, activating the flashing blue lights and the rapid rising wails of the siren. He was past Tavistock Square and into Marylebone Street before the engine had even got warmed up. Westway turned into the A40 at White City and he'd made the Greenford roundabout inside ten minutes. Less than fifteen minutes after leaving his office, Greg was already on the outskirts of Harrow on the Hill. His satnav had told him long ago where Heathfield House was, so he simply looked for the building closest to it. He passed a number of expensive cars parked here and there, but there was no sound of a burglar alarm.

The nearest dwelling was an ancient pile; an old brick courtyard kept meticulously free of weeds and mud couldn't disguise the overall run-down nature of the place. It must have been a nice house once but now it needed a new roof and new windows and god only knew what it needed inside.

"Mrs Kerr?" Greg knocked loudly on the porch door, peering through the half-glassed entrance way. The door moved inwards under his touch, not an event that filled him with confidence. "Mrs Kerr?" he called again as he stepped inside. The place was clean but in desperate need of a complete repaint. "This is DI Lestrade from the Met. Freddy said you were worried about next door's alarm." There was no answering call, no sound of footsteps.

"Bollocks," Greg looked through his phone's police app, swiftly locating and dialling the Harrow police station.

"I'm at the place next to Heathfield House and there's no sound of an alarm, but also no sign of the old lady that lives here," he said after identifying himself. "Have you had a look around yet?" There was a brief explanation of why they were only just on their way now. Should be there within ten minutes, they said. Fat lot of good that was.

"I'm going to head over to the big place next door and check that Mrs Kerr hasn't got herself into a sticky situation," Greg advised them. "I'm unarmed, but the old lady might be carrying a shotgun." Given the lack of outraged response, Greg took it that this kind of behaviour was considered normal out here in the wilds. Making a mental note never to get on Freddy's really bad side, he took a short cut through the high line of shrubs and trees marking the boundary line between the two properties.
Heathfield House was what an old country hall should look like if you had enough money not to worry about things. The wide swathe of carefully mowed and striped lawn led up to the front of a well-kept half-thatched country pile where, Greg knew without a moment's doubt, there would be old stables out the back, a tennis court and a small, Italianate garden. He'd read enough house-for-sale notices in the last year to give him a lifetime of nightmares. Hugging the line of trees separating the two properties, Greg headed for the side of the house, silently crossing open space until he eased through the wide side gate leading into the rear of the property. The place was enormous and it took him a while to find the back door. It too swung open at his touch. He should wait for backup, Greg knew that, but what if something bad had happened and Freddy's mum was inside, maybe in trouble … stepping noiselessly into the tiled hallway beyond the door, he held his breath, searching the air for any kind of sound, anything that might indicate he wasn't alone.

"Stop right where you are!" He froze. Not just because of the command in the woman's voice but the cocking sound of both barrels of the entirely serious shotgun pointed squarely at his head, had him instantly motionless. "Who the hell are you and what are you doing in this house?"

Not daring to move and barely daring to breathe, Greg kept absolutely still. "My name's Greg Lestrade. I'm a DI with the London Metropolitan police and I'm here because Freddy Kerr asked me to come and check up on her mum," he said, not changing the direction of his gaze.

"Freddy?" the woman sounded fractionally uncertain, though the gun didn't so much as waver. "You know Freddy?"

"If I could reach into my jacket pocket, I can show you my police identification if that helps," Greg risked moving his head slowly until he met the woman's eyes.

In her seventies, she was petite but seemed quite in charge of the situation. She handled the shotgun like a pro. "Very well," she said stepping back. "Put it on the table there," she flicked her eyes down towards a narrow table next to the wall but kept both barrels pointed where they could do the most damage.

Very slowly, Greg eased the slim leather wallet from his breast pocket, laying it open on the small table top, standing back to allow the old woman to read the details. She immediately scanned his features and Greg made an effort to look like his photo.

"Thank god someone decided to turn up," she uncocked the gun, dropping the nozzle towards the floor. "I've been chasing the local police all morning and in the end decided to come over here myself."

"Mrs Kerr?"

"Call me Gwendoline," she smiled briefly, for a moment looking so much like Freddy that Greg relaxed. "What do you suggest we do, Inspector? The owners of Highfield, the Washbournes, would never leave the house completely empty. And today's Monday. Mrs Jellicoe the Housekeeper and her son are here three days a week looking after the house and environs," she added. "But there's no-one around and that damned alarm has only just now ceased its frightful clamour."

"You are going to stay here and watch the back door for me, Gwendoline," Greg returned his ID to an inner pocket. "I'm going to have a look around the rest of the house. Stay here so I know any noise I hear is not going to be you."

"Do you think they might all be dead?" Freddy's mother asked the question quite matter-of-factly.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, shall we?" Greg nodded at the shotgun. "And keep that beast
"Very well, Inspector," Greg swore he heard a little sigh of disappointment. "I shall remain here as you say."

Walking through the ground floor of the large house, he took note of the good quality furnishings and the general tidiness of the place. Shelves were sparkling and carpets were spotless. Whoever took care of the place did a good job, a thorough job. Not the kind of place a conscientious housekeeper would suddenly vanish from if she was supposed to be here, doing said job. He paused as the faintest of sounds caught his ear. A couple of soft thumps sounded off to one side of the main hall. Cautiously, he headed towards the noise. There was a door in a side hallway on the way into the kitchen with a heavy wooden chair wedged underneath the handle. The soft thumping came again; three thumps from behind the door. In a second, Greg had his handkerchief out and was pulling the chair aside, opening the door in the same action. He looked down into a semi-lit cellar.

"Who's down there?" he called, only to be greeted by a cacophony of new thumps. Descending the stairs, he found himself in something of a wine cellar and general storage area. There were also three very upset people, gagged and bound to chairs.

"I'm with the Met," Greg lifted out his ID card for the second time in five minutes. "The local Harrow police are on their way, so please stay calm. This will all be taken care of very shortly." Loosening the cloth gag of the nearest victim, a stout man in his sixties, Greg went on to assist the others.

"Are they gone?" the man exclaimed. "Did they damage anything?"

"Not sure yet, sir," Greg was busy with the knots holding a middle-aged woman's hands together behind her back. "You'll be asked for a statement later."

There was the sound of more steps coming from the passageway above and Greg paused, looking up as two uniformed police appeared. "About bloody time," he muttered.

Once everyone was untied, he suggested they all go upstairs while he went and found Mrs Kerr, still waiting at the back door.

"The Harrow police will want a word with you and a statement," he said. "Are you up for that or do you need a sit down first?"

"I have a casserole in the oven I'd like to turn off first," Gwendoline Kerr broke the gun open over her arm, extracting the cartridges. "Then I'll come directly back."

"I'll go with you, just in case," Greg took the large gun into safekeeping for the moment. "Freddy was worried."

"Freddy worries about too much, the poor dear," Mrs Kerr shook her head as she took a more direct shortcut to her own backdoor. "My daughter takes too much on her shoulders at times."

"I'm helping her with the renovation of the Pimlico property," he offered by way of conversation as the old woman led him into the back of her house. "It's going to be special once it's been done up properly." Smiling, Gwendoline turned into the kitchen and headed for the oven. "I'll go and get my car and park it next door," Greg paused by the kitchen doorway, watching the old woman potter around in a very tired-looking kitchen. "I'll be back in a jiffy."

Walking through the house towards the front door, Greg marvelled at how some of these old biddies managed to cope with things that would send most people screaming for government help. It wasn't
until he was actually out in the immaculate front courtyard that he stopped abruptly. What had been a clean and unmarred brick surface now displayed two very clear sets of wet and muddy footprints. One set into the house and the same set leaving.

And they weren't his.
Chapter 9

It was plain where the muddy prints had come on the way in, but how were they muddy on the way back? There was no puddle in the courtyard … Greg turned and looked more closely at the prints as they left the house, seeing a long, slightly uneven flagstone directly outside the porch, dark with moisture. With the tip of his shoe, he pressed down on one end. Sure enough, a small gush of muddy water surged up. Anyone stepping on this as they left the house would have a soaked foot. Gut instinct told him the wet footsteps might be important and snapped off a photo with his phone before everything dried away.

"Oh, it didn't get you, did it?" Gwendoline arrived at the door, wiping her hands on an old kitchen towel. "I'm afraid it's often a trap for the unwary. It needs to be repaired but I simply don't …"

Raising his fingers in thought, Greg lifted his head to meet the old lady's eyes. "I need you to have a look around inside your house and tell me if anything is missing or out of place," he said quietly. "I'm right beside you, so don't worry, but I need you to do this now, before anyone else arrives. Can you do this for me?"

"In here?" Mrs Kerr was clearly taken aback. "In my house? But I thought it was next door that …"

Shushing gently, Greg ushered her back inside, his eyes flicking towards every doorway as he followed Freddy's mother into the house. There had been nothing wrong in the kitchen or she would have said something by now. He wondered if there was any jewellery of note, or perhaps some valuable antiques not yet sold to keep the ancient house liveable. All the way down the passage on the ground floor there seemed to be no disturbance and Greg wondered if the problem might be upstairs in the main bedroom; it was, after all, the place where most women kept their jewellery.

"Oh, goodness …" Gwendoline stopped abruptly as she looked into a room that clearly acted as an office. An antique roll top desk, an ancient telephone from the dark ages, a couple of worn armchairs. There was an equally antiquated filing cabinet beside the bureau. Old framed photographs of long dead dogs hung on the walls.

The desk was a shambles. The roll top had been wrenched up with force and one end was jammed tight. Papers were strewn everywhere, sliding into untidy heaps on the floor. A couple of heavy archive files had been tipped out, their contents ransacked. A number of small drawers had literally been yanked out, the splintered wood testament to their previously locked state. All the filing cabinet drawers had been rifled and it slanted forward as the extended drawers pulled it off-balance. A quick look around the rest of the room showed nothing out of place. Whoever had been in here had been looking for paperwork of some description. It would hardly have been money. Deeds? Bonds?

"We'd better take a look upstairs while we're at it," Greg rested a hand beneath the old woman's elbow as she tried to absorb what had happened, shocked to the core but doing her best not to show it. "Come on, Gwendoline, show me the upstairs."

Holding her hand, Greg led the shaken woman up the creaking staircase. It was freezing up here and Greg wondered if there was any heating at all up on this level. There were several half-open doors leading off from a central passageway. Pushing each one fully open as they passed, it was soon obvious that the intruders had not bothered to come up here. In what was patently the main bedroom, Gwendoline opened a small drawer set into the centre of an old fashioned dressing table and which contained a number of worn jewellery boxes, untouched and undisturbed. The intruders hadn't been here. Evidently, they wanted something that would be at home in an office rather than a bedroom. Not jewellery or expensive knick-knacks, in that case, but papers of some kind.
Mrs Kerr was shaking. Greg took off his heavy outer coat and draped it around her shoulders. "Come down to the kitchen and I'll make us a nice cuppa, shall I?" his voice was soft and inoffensive, not knowing yet if he might need to call in a woman officer to stay for a while. Then he remembered. "Freddy will be here soon. I expect she'd love a hot cup of tea, won't she?"

"Freddy? Oh, yes, of course. Tea's the thing," Gwendoline seemed to shake herself back into action. "Best to go downstairs then," she murmured, clutching Greg's coat around her. He was already back on the phone to the Harrow police, asking them to send an officer to the house next to Heathfield as there appeared to have been a break in at the same time, possibly by the same people.

"But what were they after?" Mrs Kerr paused with her hand resting on the kettle as she filled it from the old brass tap in the kitchen. "I don't have anything of value and lord knows I don't have any money in the house," she frowned. "How very unpleasant this all is."

A familiar growling engine arrived outside the house, followed by a slammed car door and heavy boots running towards the kitchen.

"Mummy," Freddy sounded breathless as she rushed in. "What are all the police cars doing outside in the lane? Hi Greg," she rolled her eyes and threw him a profoundly grateful look before turning back to her mother, reaching for her hands. "Are you alright? Is everything okay?"

"We're just having a nice cup of tea to calm things down," Greg's deliberate tone instantly alerting Freddy that all was not well. "Seems the people who had a go at the big place next door came over here when your mum was out and had a look around," he said placidly, meeting her eyes carefully. "She's had a bit of a shock."

"Oh, Mummy," Freddy slid her arms around the older woman, leading her slowly towards a wooden chair. "I'll make the tea, you sit here and get your bearings," she said, turning back to the range and the big old brass kettle.

"I'll pop outside and have a quick word with the local lads in the meantime," Greg paused by the door, glancing at the older woman. "I'm afraid it will mean somebody will be in shortly to take some photographs, though they'll be very discreet, I promise." He knew they'd be discreet, or they'd answer to him. Thanking him silently with her eyes, Freddy got the tea things ready as the kettle boiled.

Meeting up with the two uniformed police officers just now making their way across the open courtyard, Greg briefed them on what had happened both at Heathfield House and right here next door. On the surface of things, it looked like the work of opportunists; people who targeted Heathfield first then had a go at the place next door on the principle that people who lived in the same street as wealthy neighbours must also be wealthy.

But somehow, this didn't sit comfortably in Greg's thoughts. If it really were opportunist burglars, then they'd have started upstairs with Mrs Kerr's jewellery. All women had a box somewhere on or in their dressing table for bits and pieces. Yet the disorder in the small office looked far too comprehensive to be a thief looking for money or valuables on the off-chance, if they hadn't first done the same upstairs. This looked more like a specific search had taken place, though for what? What kind of papers would someone like Freddy's mother possibly keep on the premises?

Very shortly thereafter, the Harrow police arrived in the form of a photographer and a young detective sergeant. After introductions, Greg pointed the photographer to the right door, closing off the kitchen so as not to alarm Freddy's mum any further. It took only minutes. The local detective, medium height, fresh-faced and with almost unprofessionally long hair, asked to have a word with Mrs Kerr before he left and Greg pointed him towards the kitchen in which there was something of a
"How bloody well dare they!" Gwendoline smacked an empty whisky tumbler down onto the table beside an empty tea cup as she stood, openly fuming, confronting the hapless Harrovian detective who opened the kitchen door at precisely the wrong moment. "In my house! I'll have their guts for bloody garters!"

Meeting Freddy's eyes, Greg lifted his eyebrows.

"Mummy's a bit cross, Inspector," she murmured politely. "She's not best pleased about the break-in."

"Bloody robbing bastards!" Mrs Kerr looked between the startled local detective and Greg; her expression of unfettered fury increasing now that her initial shock had worn off. "What are the police going to do about it, hmm? I shall phone Reggie and have him look into this himself, mark my words."

"Reggie?" Greg's eyebrows lifted a little higher.

"Sir Reginald Jarsdel," Freddy offered softly.

The name sounded vaguely familiar … Greg couldn't quite work out where he'd heard it recently.

"Hertfordshire Chief Constable," Freddy nodded, getting up to make some more tea, though Gwendoline eyed the opened bottle of whisky sitting in the middle of the kitchen table. "Reggie and Mummy were in the same team together."

"Team?" Greg wondered if he'd missed something important.

"The 1984 Olympics," Gwendoline glared at both the men standing in her kitchen. "Los Angeles. For those of us who can remember that far back."

"You were in the British Olympic team?" the young Harrow detective - Greg guessed he couldn't be more than early twenties at best; he must only recently have got his sergeant's stripes - pulled out a seat at the table. "That's amazing. I never knew we had any Olympians in the locality," he paused. "The name's Ames, by the way, Charlie Ames," he offered his hand to Mrs Kerr and Freddy, nodding collegially at Greg. "What was your event?"

"Shooting," Gwendoline sniffed, still angry. "Fifty meters rifle which was jolly good fun. Then there was the twenty-five meter pistol shooting, of course and what the American chose to call skeet shooting," the older woman inhaled slowly as her fury gradually abated. "I took the silver in the fifty meters. It would have been the gold but the Chinese competitor was just that little bit better than I on the day," she sighed and smiled faintly. "Reggie took the bronze in the air rifle," Gwendoline looked wistfully back in time. "It was a wonderful experience. He was such a magnificent dancer."

That explained the shotgun, Greg glanced at Freddy, busy pouring out more tea for everyone. Though it would be better all-around if external brass were not involved in a Met inquiry; certain people in their shiny new offices on the Embankment would be very unhappy if that were to happen.

"Best we leave Sir Reginald in peace for the time being, I think," Greg aimed for a diplomatic solution. "Until the local police have time to do their job properly, at least," he added, raising his eyebrows in a meaningful way at young Ames.

"Inspector Lestrade is quite right, Mrs Kerr," Charlie adopted a serious expression which, on his young face, looked strangely out of place. "Don't show me up before I've had time to sort this out for
you," he grinned suddenly, disarmingly. "Save the big guns for when you really need them, eh?"

Both Freddy and her mother regarded the young man with something less than total confidence before relaxing. It was hard to gain people's complete trust when you still had acne. Greg kept the smile off his face; the young lad was charming both women without them even realising.

"Very well, young man," Gwendoline accepted a fresh cup of tea. "What do you require of me?"

"Just a few words, Mrs Kerr, if you don't mind," Charlie sounded almost shy. "The Inspector here has kindly given me the general picture, but I'd much rather have the details from you, if you don't mind."

Yep; a complete charmer. Greg kept his mouth straight, but only just. "I'll just have a word with your daughter while you're showing DS Ames the office," Greg stood, catching Freddy's eye over her mother's head. Nodding, Freddy stood, heading for the front door.

"Did you know about the loose flagstone outside?" he asked as soon as they were out of the kitchen and walking down the passageway. He stepped carefully over the offending paving.

"Well, everyone who comes here regularly knows about it," Freddy answered carefully realising it was clearly an important question. "Though the postman is always forgetting. Mind you, he usually wears wellies these days so it doesn't really matter."

"Postman, eh?" Greg narrowed his eyes in thought. Postmen knew everything about everyone in these country roads. It wouldn't be difficult to set off an alarm, wait until Gwendoline left to investigate the noise and then slip into the house.

"The local postman here is called Harry." Freddy smiled and folded her arms. "He's at least seventy and the worst thing he does is spy on people's gardens to see the size of their dahlias."

Greg looked at her oddly.

"He's won every dahlia growing competition in this area for more than twenty years," Freddy shook her head. "His entire family live here. There's no reason he'd break into Mummy's house. Everyone around knows she doesn't have any money."

Greg remained silent on what the intruders might have been after, though he was fairly certain it hadn't been cash.

"DS Ames said that nothing seemed to have been disturbed in Heathfield House," he said calmly. "Two men in balaclavas broke in, shoved everyone into the wine cellar and tied them up. Only when they were all safely out of the way did they set the alarm off, after cutting the automatic link to the police station. It's obvious they knew exactly what they were doing and with a clear plan to get your mother away from her house long enough for them to get into the office and ransack the place," Greg nibbled his bottom lip. "None of this was accidental," he said broodingly. "Someone wanted your mother out of the way long enough to have a good look around." He didn't add that this probably meant the intruders knew Gwendoline and she very likely knew them.

"Might they return?" Freddy frowned at the thought of her mother all alone.

It was a definite possibility. If the intruders hadn't found what they were after this time, such desperate searching suggested whoever was responsible wanted something very badly. They might come back to get Freddy's mother to tell them where it was. They really might.

"Is there anywhere your mum can stay with someone for a while?" he asked, watching as Ames
paused just inside the front door. "Another relative in the area?"

"My sisters are both overseas and I'm the closest, so I'll just have to persuade her to come and stay with me at the Dolphin for the time being, I suppose," Freddy frowned again. "I've got the run of a small staff flat in the building. It's only one bedroom, but I'm sure mother and I can muddle along for a while."

"Right then. I'll talk with young Ames here and you go and convince your mother to pack a few things; enough for at least a week."

Looking as if the job wasn't going to be an easy one, Freddy nodded briefly and headed back inside.

"Looks like someone knew exactly what they were doing, sir," the youthful detective watched Freddy re-enter the old house before turning his gaze upon the surrounding countryside. He finger-combed the hair out of his eyes. "Seems they were being very particular in their search, all things considered," he murmured, half to himself. "Wonder what it was they were after?"

"Well, we both know it wasn't money," Greg also surveyed the surrounding hedges and hills; the tall trees and the plentiful conifers offering all-year coverage. A burglar's best friend was a big conifer hedge. "And they didn't even bother going upstairs, so if they were ordinary burglars, they weren't very good ones."

Ames nodded. "Mrs Kerr told me you'd been upstairs and nothing was touched, which would be strange if they were ordinary thieves."

"Means there's something different about this lot, in that case," Greg ran his gaze along the front boundary of Heathfield House and wondered who would know the place had a wine cellar as well as a connection to the local police station. Who would know that Gwendoline Kerr would automatically go and see why the alarm went off? It seemed to be a lot of knowing for strangers.

"You think it might be someone in the house?" Charlie Ames might be young, spotty and in desperate need of a haircut, but he would make a good detective. Greg nodded. He'd had the same thought. "Somebody who knows their way around both Heathfield House and Mrs Kerr's house," Greg inhaled hard through his nose. "That's got to narrow things down a bit."

"Shall I start Mrs Kerr on making a list of people who know the inside of her house, then?" Ames sounded as if that was what he intended doing in any case.

"Yeah, and the Washbournes as well," Greg nodded thoughtfully. "Everyone in the last six months. See who comes up on both."

###

It was all a question of style, apparently. It seemed there were some things one could simply not do if one was to retain the inherent charm, grace and grandeur of a period dwelling. Managing not to roll his eyes at all the estate agent type crappery, something he might never now be able to erase from his brain, Greg sighed inwardly, folded his arms and waited for the pain to be over.

Derek and Andy had returned to the Pimlico house at the weekend to complete the second stage of the damp-proofing treatment in the enormous cellar. The first stage was curing well and a thin whitish sheen now covered the entirety of the inside wall underneath the front of the house. It was quite firm and inflexible and most importantly of all, dry. The second chemical treatment took much less time to apply and the two men were in and out in only a couple of hours.

"You definitely need to get those basement windows fixed now," Outside in the empty garden,
Derek nodded to base of the house. "Looks like you're getting the roof done, I see."

And they were. Mr Lewis and various members of his extended family were already in the process of setting up a rooftop safety gallery around the entire house, while down at ground level, great pallets of aged Welsh slates were carefully and neatly stacked, alongside lorry-loads of long wooden battens and rolls of breathable roofing membrane. Once things got started, they were planning on finishing the entire job in a couple of weeks. Greg thought they had their work cut out for them. He'd been permitted up onto the roof with a safety harness and the extent of the damage looked really bad this close up. But old man Lewis and the family of younger Lewis's seemed to take the whole thing in their stride.

The basement damp-proofing was mostly done now and with the roof and new dormers in safe hands, this only left the windows and doors to be replaced in order to render the house pretty much watertight for the first time in well over a year. Which is why Greg was currently standing beside Freddy in the posh, overlarge workshop of a Bethnal Green window and door restoration firm.

The salesman was waffling on and on about casements and sash cords and draft proofing while Freddy, amazingly, kept a perfectly polite face, though the tapping of her foot suggested she might be feeling otherwise. Gwendoline, however, was a different kettle of fish.

"Young man," she interrupted the window specialist in mid flow. "I'm not getting any younger standing here, and I'd very much like to know if you are able to fabricate and supply the specified fittings within the timeframe my daughter has so clearly defined for you?"

Greg bit the inside of his cheek. When Freddy rolled her eyes at him behind her mother's back, he bit it again.

It hadn't actually taken a lot to convince Freddy's mum to leave Harrow after all. Perhaps the shock of the break-in had affected her more than she let on, or possibly, she just fancied a stay in town, but either way, when Freddy returned to London late Monday afternoon, Gwendoline came too. While the small apartment at Dolphin Square was indeed tiny, it turned out that Mrs Kerr actually had her own friends who were tenants in the building. It was, after all, a large apartment complex and Gwendoline seemed to know a lot of people. This was great news for all involved, though she insisted on being allowed to see the Pimlico house and, once she heard about the meetings with window companies, was adamant that she be permitted to come along.

"I haven't had this much fun in ages," she confided to Greg as they all walked into the first window showroom. "Perhaps I should sell the old place in Harrow after all and see if I can get a little pied-à-terre closer to town."

"You'd probably make a decent deal; that's a really nice area you live in out there," Greg helped the older woman into his car. "Why not see if you can get an apartment in the Dolphin?" he asked. "It's central and you already know people there. It's not like Freddy would be far away, either, not after the house is done and we all move in." Tempted to make a helpful comment about there being some very nice retirement homes all over the place, Greg thought twice about it and said nothing.

"Hmm," Gwendoline shot him a meaningful sideways glance.

And now Greg felt as if his ears were about to abandon ship unless they could get out of this deathly dull salesroom and find somewhere with real people who knew how to talk to other people.

"There's this one other place I saw that had some really good reviews," outside, Freddy sounded weary. "Though it's all the way down towards Penge."
Greg checked his watch. "It would take less than an hour from here at this time of day," he grinned. "Come on, where's your spirit of adventure?"

"I believe I left it behind at the last but one showroom," Freddy sighed hard, puffing out her cheeks as she did. "This is harder work than getting government funding for my drugs research."

"Then let's try this one last place for the day and whatever happens, maybe we can all go out for an early dinner afterwards," Greg leaned closer. "Your mum seems to be enjoying herself," he whispered.

"Mummy's in her element," Freddy whispered back. "She was brought up post-war, when efficiency and common-sense ruled. She could do all this in her sleep."

"Maybe we should introduce her to Mr Lewis," Greg grinned madly at the thought.

Freddy's eyes widened hugely until she squeezed them shut in an effort not to laugh.

"When you two have quite finished whispering so rudely out there, perhaps we can be on our way?" the querulous suggestion issued out from inside the BMW.

"Yes, Ma'am," Greg held the passenger door for Freddy before climbing into the driver's seat. "And we weren't being rude," he said, over his shoulder. "We were discussing getting you a boyfriend."

"A boyfriend!" Mrs Kerr paused, momentarily bereft of words. "Gregory Lestrade, you are a serious mischief-maker."

Greg laughed to himself as he started the car and headed for Tower Bridge Road.

###

The minute they walked into the long workshop behind the street front office, the scent of fresh cut wood and epoxy resin filled the air and Greg felt at home. There were several craftsmen at work on various tasks, including a girl operating a strange sort of vertical loom, with long bobbins of heavy bronze filament rotating around a thin wire core like a maypole. Leaving Freddy and her mum take the workshop tour, Greg wandered over to stare at the ancient spinning machine. "This rig is pretty old," he said to the girl. "What are you making?"

"This is premium grade sash cord," the girl flicked her glance to his face and then back to the dancing bobbins. "We get through hundreds of meters of the stuff every month and it's an apprentice job to keep the stocks up."

"So you're an apprentice here?" Greg looked around at the different projects and nodded. "Good place, is it?"

"None of us are ever allowed to take short cuts and everything we do is quality tested before it goes out on a job," the girl stopped the machine in order to replace an empty bobbin, her movements deft and efficient. In under a minute, the old iron machine started up again, the newly-made window cord looping itself into a wide tray to one side.

It sounded good to Greg. He headed back to join the women who were watching, fascinated, as a man carved a laminated piece of wood into a fine curving arch with only his hands and eyes to guide the process.

"Everything here is beautifully made," Freddy turned, smiling. "Anything that needs special work is done in here like this," she nodded down at the wooden curve being fitted into the top arch of a new
window frame. "And they say they can usually repair a lot of what's left, even if the window itself is almost completely rotten, they can often save the rails and stiles."

"But can they handle a big job like ours?" Greg watched the man sand a rough edge into shape. "There's more than fifty-odd big windows and external doors that need seeing to, and we know for a fact that at least half of those are so far gone that they'll need complete replacement," he drew breath, nibbling the inside of his bottom lip. "And how long is it going to take? Craftsmanship is great but neither of us can be around all the time and if there's problems, then how ..."

"Gregory, calm yourself," Gwendoline patted his arm. "I have discussed this matter with my daughter and we have agreed that I shall be staying in town until after the New Year. This means I will have sufficient time during the day to act as your pro tem site manager, if that would help and if you would allow me the pleasure of assisting you both."

Freddy's mum project managing the house renovation? She could certainly make things happen and she had a way of getting people to do what she wanted. Yeah, but she was an old lady; bit of a cheek to expect her to be able to handle this kind of work at her age, really. Yeah, but Gwendoline Kerr was as fit as a flea and tough as old boots. She said she wanted to do it.

Squinting, Greg looked at Freddy, then Freddy's mother, and back to Freddy. "If you don't want your mum involved, I can always sling her in gaol for a few weeks, you realise," Greg drew himself up to his full height and looked down his nose at the older woman. "There's still the matter of that shotgun you were waving around the other day."

"For which I have a full and proper licence, dear boy," Gwendoline patted his arm again. "Thank you," she smiled and Freddy smiled and Greg had little choice but to raise his eyebrows and sigh, outmanoeuvred.

Looks like they had a temporary project manager.

"In which case," he said to Freddy, tipping his head towards the man finishing off the hand-made window frame. "Do you like this place enough to talk inspection visits and prices and installation schedules and all the other stuff we're going to need to know?"

"I do," Freddy nodded. "But what about you? You know this is going to be one of the more expensive parts of the renovation?"

"Yeah," Greg nodded, his eyes briefly finding the girl at the maypole loom. "But they make perfect sash cord and even the apprentices know what they're doing," he smiled down at her wickedly. "I think we should let your mother handle the negotiations."

###

Greg watched as the waiter brought over their soups. The afternoon had turned cold and it was dark when they got back to town, so an early dinner suited everyone. Everyone had voted for Italian.

"How's the list coming?" the richness of the Minestrone was perfect and filled a big empty hole.

"I'm onto a second page," Gwendoline stopped eating and looked at him. "I had no idea I'd had so many visitors since Midsummer."

"Anyone interesting?" Greg sipped his soup.

"You mean any ex-convicts or people wearing masks and carrying a sack labelled 'swag'?" Mrs Kerr shook her head. "I'm afraid it's a very ordinary group. Delivery and service people, the neighbours
and friends, some people from around the town raising money ... and family, of course."

"That would be your own personal family, I take it?" Greg met her eyes. "What about the friends?"

"You think one of my friends might have been responsible for such an appalling intrusion?"
Gwendoline seemed about to get cross all over again until she felt Freddy's touch on her wrist.

"Greg's just doing his job, Mummy. There's no point getting upset."

About to make a soothing response, Greg's phone rang. It was young Ames from Harrow police.
"Sorry to disturb at the weekend. Can you talk?

"I'm in the middle of dinner," Greg shrugged a silent apology at the women and stood, walking a few feet away before speaking quietly. "Is it urgent?"

"One of the men on the Washbourne's list did time for assault and burglary two years ago," Charlie Ames didn't waste time. "Is the old lady safe?"

"Mrs Kerr and I are having dinner together at this very moment," Greg turned on his heels, waggling his eyebrows at Gwendoline who had looked up at the sound of her name. "The lady in question is perfectly fine and working on a list of her own. Who is this bloke?"

"Emanuel Garcia, did time in Coldingly for attacking a man who caught him breaking and entering. Gave the chap a couple of nasty wallops by the sounds of things and is considered potentially dangerous."

"Anything else?" Greg's stomach growled. "Urgent, that is?"

"Not yet, but I just wanted to be sure the old dear wasn't home alone."

"Consider the information received and understood," Greg nodded. "It was good thinking to let me know so quickly. Sound procedure, that man."

There was no disguising the satisfaction in the young sergeant's voice. "Send me Mrs Kerr's list when she's done and I'll email you the one from Heathfield, maybe there's more common denominators."

"Yeah. I'll be in touch. 'Night," with a touch to the screen, Greg ended the call, returning to his seat at the table where two very focused stares came to rest on his face. He concentrated on finishing the soup until he could almost feel his skin being lasered off.

"God," he looked up, straight-faced. "They could have done with you two in the Spanish Inquisition."

"Then do share the news, Gregory," Gwendoline's smile was pure saccharine.

Taking a breath, Greg exhaled briefly. He'd hoped to leave this for a while. There was little point upsetting either Freddy or her mum, but this information might do just that.

"Do you know or have you met a man called Emanuel Garcia?" he asked. "Ever?"

Dabbing a napkin to her lips, Mrs Kerr nodded. "Yes. In fact I know Mr Garcia quite well."

"Manny Garcia?" Freddy looked at her mother for confirmation. "That the chap?"

"I believe so, dear,"

Greg kept his expression neutral. It was unlikely there would be two individuals with the same name in a small place like Harrow, which meant...

"Did you know Mr Garcia had been in prison for burglary and assault?" he asked as casually as he could.
"Yes, of course," Gwendoline nodded matter-of-factly. "I knew that before he ever set foot in my house. Emanuel is a perfect gentleman and a lovely pianist."

"He plays the piano at your house?" Greg felt his brain swim.

"He was tuning it at the time," Mrs Kerr finished her soup. "It's what he does, you see."

"Tunes pianos?"

"In Mummy's house and Heathfield House and a good many others, certainly," Freddy carried on eating as if the conversation was without the slightest seriousness. "Though he's actually a music teacher by profession."

Scrunching his eyes up tight before facing both Kerrs at once, Greg felt momentarily adrift. "Emanuel Garcia is a music teacher who came to your house to tune a piano?"

"Several times," Gwendoline nodded. "He's a very nice man and extremely competent."

"Even though you knew he'd served time in gaol for burglary and attacking the man who tried to stop him?"

Mrs Kerr sighed, leaning her hands on the table. "Manny Garcia was and is an accomplished musician and teacher," she said. "His wife allowed herself to be seduced by another man, who took not only her away, but also one of Manny's favourite guitars. Emanuel went to the man's house to reclaim the instrument."

"What about the wife?" Greg held his breath.

"He decided his wife was no better than she ought to be and by that time was really only concerned about the guitar. It was a mint 1936 Hermann Hauser and extremely important, not to mention its sentimental value," Gwendoline sounded a shade reproachful.

"And the man he attacked?"

"Was the individual who stole both the wife and his best guitar," Freddy sounded perfectly comfortable with the notion of physical violence. "Manny punched him on the nose and when he fell over, he ah, administered a coup de grâce with his foot."

"He kicked him in the ..?" Greg raised his eyebrows.

"With unerring accuracy, apparently," Gwendoline nibbled a breadstick. "He was, I believe the term is, sent down, for almost three months at an establishment in Surrey," she turned to look at her daughter. "It was Surrey, wasn't it, dear?"

Looking around to see if the waiter was about to appear with their main courses, Freddy nodded absentely. "He's an old con now," she agreed. "You'd like him. Manny taught several of the inmates to play different instruments while he was serving his sentence," she added. "He's got an ongoing music teaching contract with the prison, I think."

"Three months?" Greg shook his head. From the sounds of it, Mr Garcia was probably not one of the duo who bundled the Heathfield House residents into their own wine cellar. He made a mental note to advise young Ames before the night was over.

Their main courses arrived and the heady aroma of basil and garlic and tomato changed the direction of the conversation.
"I'm back out to Brentwood again next week; they want me to re-landscape the entire north side of the property to block out a small housing development that's just been signed off by the local council. It's a big job but I've worked with the family before and they have no problem paying for what they want," she crunched through a bite of prosciutto and mozzarella pizza. "It'll likely take me several weeks on and off, to have the whole thing organised."

Gwendoline said nothing but it was obvious there were words in her mouth. Greg surveyed a dish full of mussels and white wine, fresh chillies and linguine, and kept quiet. He could make an educated guess at what Freddy's mum might want to say, what she might, in fact, have said many times before. It must have been difficult to have an up-and-coming young surgeon for a daughter one minute, and a gardener the next, but it wasn't his place to say anything, especially since both sides had justification. It was one of those family things that you just got on with.

"Inspector," Mrs Kerr left her chicken and mozzarella arrabiata, turning to him in a bid to redirect her thoughts. "Have you any other information on the Heathfield House break in? It's been several days."

"Call me Greg," he smiled, sipping from a tall glass of iced water. "And yes and no," he added. "Though DS Ames will need your list to start really eliminating names," he said.

"I shall have it to you in the morning, I promise," Mrs Kerr tried her wine, a deep rich Malbec from Argentina. "Though I simply cannot believe any of the names on my list could possibly have done anything so dreadful. I've known some of them for more than fifty years ..."

"It's almost certainly not going to be any of your friends," Greg was swift to allay her fears if he could. "This is just the standard police procedure when we're trying to identify who might have the necessary knowledge of your home that was needed, especially as nothing was touched next door."

"So it was definitely Mummy's house they were interested in?" Freddy stopped eating and looked troubled. "Then she can't possibly return to Harrow until they've been caught," she said with some finality. "I won't have it."

"We can't always have what we want though, can we Freddy?" Gwendoline lifted her eyebrows in gentle rebuke. "Besides, I'm sure the police will do a sterling job and have the miscreants bang to rights before Advent." Greg hoped so too, but was less confident. Burglaries, especially ones when nothing was actually stolen, were fairly low down on the 'to do' list of most police agencies.

There was also another point he forced himself to consider even though he was reluctant to do so. If the burglars had gone to all the trouble to set off the Heathfield House alarm after bundling the residents down into the cellar, only to get Gwendoline out of her house, then it meant they had very much not wanted to confront her at any time. To go to such lengths suggested not only that they knew her well, but also had some concern for her. Everything that had happened on Monday morning had been about getting Mrs Kerr out of the way. It was the kind of concern that family members usually had; husbands … daughters. There was no real proof that Freddy had been where she said she was when she'd phoned him on Monday morning; she could have been anywhere and then waited until the right time to drive up. What if she had been one of the masked bandits that set off the Heathfield alarm? Would Freddy have needed to get hold of some documents so badly that she staged a robbery in her own mother's house? The whole idea was mad, and yet ... 

"Any thoughts yet on what they might have been after?" he asked, twisting up a forkful of linguine. "It was clearly a document they were after, the kind of thing you'd keep in a home office. Got any deeds of ownership? Any old share certificates you might have forgotten about? Premium bonds? Lottery tickets?"
Gwendoline shook her head. "This is what makes the whole thing so mysterious," she said, picking up her wine. "Of course I have a number of deeds and so forth, but they've always been kept perfectly safe at my solicitor's office. In fact anything of the slightest value that hasn't already been sold, is kept at Alex Harper's office. Alex has all my tax details, photographs of my jewellery, such as it is ... everything that might be considered too important to risk in a house-fire has been with Alex for the last few years."

"And nothing has changed in the last few months?" Greg speared a mussel. "There's nothing new come into the house? Nothing has been renewed or has suddenly been found in an old shoebox? You've had no weird phone calls? Nobody asking around for old documents or legal papers of any kind?"

Mrs Kerr paused as Greg's last comment jogged a thought free.

"Well ..." she frowned suddenly. "Alex has asked me a couple of time recently if I had any more of Daddy's old papers to do with the family trust, though I assumed he was simply endeavouring to make sure Freddy's work with the Pimlico house went off without a hitch," she said slowly.

"When did Mr Harper ask for these papers?" Greg felt a different edge of concern. Both he and Freddy had relied upon Alex Harper's work to ensure everything was above board with the property. Even though he'd had Jean Robington go over the contract, if there was the slightest chance that Harper had mucked something up in his interpretation of the Kerr family trust rules and how they pertained to the house in the walled garden, there'd be hell to pay.

"Oh, weeks ago, when you and Freddy were just talking about taking on the renovations. I think Alex was doing a great deal of checking the records so that nothing untoward might appear later," Gwendoline waved his question away. "He's really a very thorough and dependable advisor; he's looked after all the family dealings for a very long time."

"So he'd probably know if you had any papers at home that would be better off in his office?"

"Oh yes," Mrs Kerr nodded emphatically. "And if there was anything important, he would have advised me to let him keep it with the rest of the things in his office," she added.

"And there'd be no need for him to come and ransack your house looking for something?" Greg felt he had to ask; it was procedure, after all.

"None at all," Freddy's mum drank some more wine. "All he'd ever need to do was request to see something, at which point he'd tell me if it would be safer kept with him."

Greg looked sideways at Freddy who'd kept silent throughout the discussion. "Anything you'd like to add about Mr Harper while we're on the subject?"

Freddy raised her eyebrows and blinked downwards. "There's not a lot I can add," she said. "Alex has been a little persistent with me of recent, asking me out to dinners and things. The only reason I've gone with him a couple of times is because it felt nice to get out of my work gear occasionally," she shrugged. "I feel nothing more than polite friendship towards him."

Greg concentrated on his food. Whoever had raided Heathfield had done it for the express purpose of getting the old lady out of her house long enough to ransack the office looking for ... looking for ... what? It was obviously someone who knew Mrs Kerr and who didn't want her in the way or in any danger, otherwise they'd have just done the same with her as they did with the people next door. So, someone who knew Gwendoline, who didn't want her hurt but who didn't necessarily believe her when she said she had nothing of value in her house. Specifically in the office. The search had
been all about documents, not jewellery or any other kind of valuables … and who would be interested in documents?

"Is there anyone in Harper's office who might have done some work for you in the past, Gwendoline?" he asked, sipping his water. "Anyone you can think of who might imagine you've got some papers that you don't?"

"Not a clue, my dear," the old woman looked a little gloomy. "There's simply nothing there."

"Not to worry," Greg felt the conversation was too dismal to end such a good day. The Penge window company had agreed to send a couple of their people up to the house by the following Friday, a day when Greg was fairly sure he could take a couple of hours off to meet them. "We have something much more critical to discuss first," he added, putting down his fork, linking his fingers on the table and adopting a serious expression. "Exactly what colour are we going to have the windows on the outside?"

###

As promised, Mrs Kerr had her list ready by the following morning, exactly a week after the Harrow break in. Greg emailed the thing to Charlie Ames as soon as he'd had a look at it himself, young Ames having already sent him the list of visitors in the last six months from Heathfield. There were several duplicated names, including that of the unfortunate Manny Garcia. Mostly, the people on both were the usual suspects; service and delivery people, collectors for charities and the occasional political candidate on a meet-and-greet with his or her electorate. Nobody sinister at all. Nobody with form and certainly nobody, other than the aforementioned Emanuel Garcia, with a prison record. It was a bit of a dead end. All the local Harrow police could do now was to see if anything else happened in the area; burglaries often occurred in a series. If this had been a burglary, a fact which Greg considered less and less likely, then there might be another one. In the meantime, everyone had to get on with their lives as best they could.

And now it was getting closer to Christmas, all the usual little niggles started to appear in the daily bulletin at the Yard. Petty theft began to rise, just as the numbers of scam-artists and Wide Boys began to take to the London streets flogging their knocked-off and otherwise ill-gotten gains to whoever might be gullible enough to buy it. There was a spate of small commercial burglaries as companies began to take on their extra supplies of Christmas stock. The couple of robberies in Hatton Garden, the jewellery district of London, turned into four and then seven. The *modus operandi* was almost identical in each case: two men wearing very realistic human masks and carrying sawn-offs would walk in just as the shop was about to close for the night, followed by a third man who locked the door and put the 'closed' sign up. Nobody passing by thought anything of it as the shop would normally have closed then anyway.

They knew exactly where the police alarm was and went directly to the spot, warning all staff members to stay clear if they wanted to get home that night in one piece. They then proceeded to rob the place of all the small and unimportant pieces of jewellery and stocks of small precious stones and gold, all things easy to fence. So far, the small gang had made off with nearly two million quid's worth of stock. Sensibly, they left behind all the really big and flashy pieces, knowing the insurance people would already have photographs of anything over a certain value. These men were smart and not greedy. In seven brief incidents, they'd done very well for themselves indeed.

And now all seven jobs were placed formally into Greg's tender loving care.

After the standard team briefing, the ideas that had come out of the subsequent brainstorming session made a lot of sense. The robbers knew exactly what they were doing, knew precisely what to take and leave and also went directly to the location of the alarm immediately upon entering the premises.
To Greg’s team, this meant only one thing. A series of inside jobs, or, at least, a series of jobs done by men who were very familiar with the establishments they’d knocked over.

Donovan was already onto a list of people who’d been sacked in the last year, as well as any family members of the jewellery shop owners. Criminal acts done by grown up children wanting a share of the family business sooner than they should, was more common than people thought. Unwillingly, Greg's thoughts went back to Freddy and her mother. Surely not, he thought, shaking his head at the very idea. He'd sent out two of his team to pay a visit to some of the lesser-known jewel fences in London.

His phone rang.

"Guv, we're down in Drummond Road in Bermondsey," Gary Lester, a senior team member spoke quietly. "At the corner of Drummond and Jamaica. We've just had a swift word with old Billy Swithins who keeps the post office."

"The same Billy Swithins who did a five-stretch in the Scrubs for aiding and abetting in that Richmond armed robbery?" Greg had a good memory for old cases. Especially if they were his.

"The very same," Lester agreed. "Looks like Billy's gone legit, but a little birdy told me he sometimes had a bit more than stamps behind the counter, if you get my drift."

"Did he actually say he knew anything about the Hatton Garden jobs?" Greg held his breath. If someone like Billy Swithins, a hardened old lag if ever there was, could be persuaded to talk, or even just to mention a name, then they might actually have a second lead to follow. This was usually immensely helpful, as the point where two leads crossed was often the place to ask some fairly serious questions.

"He wouldn't tell me anything, Guv, but I told him you were on the case and he said he'd be happier talking to you about it."

Checking his watch, Greg was already reaching for his coat. "I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Make sure Mr Swithins doesn't go anywhere in the meantime."

Traffic was relatively light and Greg was on schedule. Pulling the silver-blue BMW around the corner into Drummond Street, he walked up to Gary Lester who was leaning nonchalantly against the wall, having a quiet smoke.

"Those things'll kill you, you know," he said, holding his hand out for one. Lighting the cigarette, Greg managed not to inhale, but only just. Once a smoker, always a smoker. "Where's Billy?"

"Inside the Post Office," Lester nodded briefly towards the small combined newsagents and Post Office on the opposite corner. "It's a half-day today; he'll be closing up in a bit."

"Not before I have a word, you know," he said, holding his hand out for one. Lighting the cigarette, Greg managed not to inhale, but only just. Once a smoker, always a smoker. "Where's Billy?"

"Inside the Post Office," Lester nodded briefly towards the small combined newsagents and Post Office on the opposite corner. "It's a half-day today; he'll be closing up in a bit."

"Not before I have a word, you won't." Grindng out the cigarette under his shoe, he picked up the stub and deposited it in a nearby bin. "Keeping Britain beautiful," he grinned back as he started across the road towards the shop.

Inside, there was an old Indian lady collecting her pension and a couple of kids gazing at a glass cabinet full of special edition stamps. Billy was the only one behind the counter, looking up as Greg walked in. As soon as he'd sorted out the old woman, he ushered the boys out and closed and locked the front door, reversing the 'Open' sign.

"Long time no see, Billy," Greg stood waiting, his hands relaxed in his overcoat pockets. "I hear you've gone legit these days."
"Indeed I have, Mr Lestrade," the old man was still neat in his habits, Greg saw. Still wore a tie with his white shirt. "Got me this little business going on here. It's more than enough for an old man like me."

"I bet you still hear things though, don't you Billy? You still get asked to look at a few things here and there? Pair of diamond earrings or the odd ring or two?" Greg started looking around the small shop. Everything was neatly stacked and the glass panels were freshly polished. No sticky fingerprints anywhere or rubbish on the floor. "Even though you obviously don't get involved in those sort of things anymore, I bet you still get to know about them, don't you?"

"Sometimes," Swithins shrugged. "In the pub or down the betting shop," he shrugged again. "I might catch the odd whisper here and there."

"Well that's all very helpful," Greg nodded, walking around, examining the racks of birthday cards and little gifts people might buy in a last minute rush when nothing else was open. "Heard anything lately?"

"I may have, Mr Lestrade," the old man started stacking things into neat piles on the counter. "There might have been a bit of chitchat about a few things in the pub in the last couple of weeks."

"I'm listening, Billy." More small things were stacked together on the counter. A handful of used black biros were scraped into a tidy pile.

"There's word out that it's a couple of brothers running the jewellery jobs," the old man murmured. "Din't hear no names, at least not yet, just that they was brothers and that they knew what they wanted to take before they took it."

Pursing his lips, Greg realised this meant one of two things. Either the brothers, assuming Billy's whisper was correct and if two of the robbers were actually related, knew the places they'd knocked over very well indeed, or at least one of them had been in each of the jeweller's shops prior to the robberies. In which case there had to be security video footage available somewhere, which meant it should logically be possible to trace all the recent customers. And if two of the thieves really were brothers, then it shouldn't take too long to track potential suspects down, assuming they were in some database or another. Letting his gaze unfocus as he moved around the little shop, thinking, Greg paused in front of the tall glass counter. Something caught his eye and he paused as his musings were interrupted. He looked around, trying to pinpoint what it was that had derailed his thinking.

Billy shuffled his feet uncomfortably, a faint whiff of anxiety hung in the air.

One might even imagine the old man was hiding something on the premises he didn't want anyone to find. Greg wondered what it was. Like smoking, some habits were harder to kick than others. Letting his gaze wander aimlessly around the confines of the tiny Post Office, Greg tried to recapture whatever it was he'd seen without realising he'd seen it.

There it was.

On the wide shelf at the back of the shop behind the counter itself, there was a small twist of paper that looked unnervingly familiar. Same size, same colour, same paper. It was one of Freddy's little remedies. Now what was something from Freddy's lab doing at the back of a Post Office in Bermondsey?

"You have a hangover recently, Billy?" Greg asked, allowing his gaze to slide away from the suggestive scrap of paper. "Or a cold, maybe? Something that might need a little medicine you don't get in a chemists?"
Frowning slightly, Swithins tilted his head in thought. "Now where did you get that idea from?" he asked, surprised. "As it happens, I did have a nasty head-cold last week but it seems to have cleared right up," he nodded, a faint, uncertain smile on his lips.

"Looks like you've been getting your medication from an unusual source," Greg stood squarely in front of the long glass counter, folding his arms. "Want to tell me about it?"

Now looking openly confused, the older man turned around to see what Greg might possibly have noticed to make the conversation change direction so dramatically. The small scrap of pale paper caught his eye and he stopped moving abruptly, his entire body rigid as his brain worked out what had tipped the policeman off.

"I, er, I get these from a herbalist at the Saturday market sometimes," he mumbled, the lie so obvious that Greg remained silent, needing only the lift of an eyebrow to express his opinion. Billy picked up the fragment of paper and waved it around. "Bloody good stuff, these herbals cures," he nodded enthusiastically. "Swear by ‘em, I do."

Taking a brief inhale, Greg fixed the man with his stare. "And now the truth, Billy," he said. "I know where those bits of paper come from and I know you don't, so how about you start again and tell me what you're doing with one of those," he pointed to the paper still clutched in Billy's fingers, "and where you got it."

Long seconds of silence passed as Swithins did his best to come up with a different story, a better story. Clearly the truth was not something he imagined the police would want to hear.

"It's only a little bit of stuff, Mr Lestrade," Billy looked and sounded mournful as he spread his hands wide. "Nothing heavy at all, nothing serious, like," he paused, almost trembling. "It's only the recreational stuff."

Expecting to hear a story about petty theft from the apothecary's lab in Chelsea, Greg felt the air leave his lungs at a confession that clearly hinted at a great deal more.

"What recreational stuff?" he demanded, wondering just what he'd stumbled into.

"It's not like you can't get harder stuff on almost any corner in Soho after dark," Billy Swithins was muttering again. "This is stuff is so harmless, it's almost legal."

Almost legal?

"Give it me all, Billy," Greg kept his voice level though by Christ he wasn't feeling that way at all. "All of it."

"It's only a little something to help supplement the money this place brings in, see?" Swithins voice approached a whine. "There's no real harm in it, not really."

"Harm in what, Billy?" Greg's mouth felt like sand.

"Doin' a bit of sellin' on the side, like," the old man spread his hands again. "But only stuff for parties and Friday nights, like," his words trailed off.

"Like what specifically?"

Sighing heavily, Swithins turned around and slid a partition aside in the counted at the back of the shop, bringing out a small square tissue box which he placed on the counter between them. Upending the box, he lifted a cardboard flap away at the bottom and tipped out more than a dozen or
more similar twists of paper in slightly different colours.

"The green is pot," he said, pointing out several of pale green paper twists. "The blue is Coke and the yellow is LSD," he spoke quietly. "But there's nothing more than that in any of it," he protested, belatedly. "And none of it goes to kids, on that I will swear," his words were firmer. "It's just a bit of party fun is all it is, honest."

Pulling a clean white handkerchief from his jacket pocket, Greg picked up a blue twist and opened it very slowly. The pinch of white crystalline powder inside could have been almost anything, but he doubted someone like Billy Swithins would make up a story like that if he had another one to tell in its place.

"So you're dealing drugs and selling stamps, eh Billy?" Greg twisted the bit of paper closed and reached in a pocket for his phone. "Bit of a change from aiding and abetting?"

Realising his situation was only going to get worse, Swithins leaned back against the wall behind him and stared at his feet. In seconds, Greg had alerted Lester outside to call for a car and a couple of uniforms. He pointed to the opened twist of paper that had initially caught his eye. "I'll have that one too," he said. "Drop it on the counter for me please."

Swithins dropped the scrap onto the scarred and worn glass countertop, where Greg picked it up with another corner of his hanky. Bringing it up to sniff, he could make out the faintest aroma of mint and wintergreen, something that smelled very like the hangover cure handed to him at the pub in Thurloe Place. In addition to handing out home-made cold cures, was Freddy Kerr also pedalling drugs?
It was late and his back was killing him. He really shouldn't have spent so long at his desk, he really shouldn't. The tall purple flowers at the far end of his lab seemed to sway as Professor Roy Armstrong stood up from his chair and gingerly stretched out his burning back muscles. The flower spikes sometimes swayed like that, though nobody knew why ... possibly there was a draft from somewhere, or perhaps it was something to do with the plants' diurnal sense, that somewhere beyond the walls of their current dwelling, there was a sunset and a dawn. Perhaps they leaned toward the idea of a distant sun. Armstrong smiled at his own fancies, though working alone in his private and secure lab at the Apothecary centre sometimes did lead to the thinking of strange thoughts.

Stretching his muscles a little more, he thought he'd try another one of Freddy Kerr's plant-based anti-inflamatories. They really were wonderful things; mild enough to take without fear of digestive upset, yet sufficiently efficacious to enable him to carry on working just a little longer. He'd have to remind her to add it to her growing catalogue of patents.

There was an empty glass on his desk, next to a nearly-empty tea mug, and he realised he'd need water to dissolve Freddy's nostrum, but he usually made himself a cup of tea about this time anyway. The staff room was only down the main passageway and a few minutes break wouldn't hurt. He'd make himself some tea, take the herbal powder in a fresh glass of water and then finish writing up the last series of enzyme observations. With a little bit of effort, he'd be back in his small Shoreditch house before ten and get a good night's sleep.

Walking carefully and with some effort, Roy Armstrong exited his lab, wedging, as he usually did, a small stool in the door to stop it closing completely. At this time of night, he was the only one around and he could relax his security for a few minutes. Not even the cleaners appeared until early morning and he'd be long gone by then.

The entire building was in silence and mostly dark. Armstrong had been working in this network of labs for over twenty years and the place was more familiar to him than his own living room. He knew all the creaks and all the odd little noises about the place and could practically walk around in the pitch dark if needed.

On the way to the staff room, an unexpected flicker of something caught his eye in the corridor across the wide square herbal garden that lay at the centre of the quadrangle of offices and labs of the Apothecary centre. The garden was more of a place for staff to relax during the summer months than a serious source of raw materials, but its presence allowed a clear view across to the opposite side of the campus buildings. Was that a flash of light he'd just seen, or had it been a streak of lightning off in the distance? The weather forecast had said there might be storms coming, so lightning was entirely possible. Roy Armstrong stood and stared for several long moments across the dark garden, the lit passage in which he stood making his own presence quite obvious. There were no more glimmers of light, so either he'd imagined the whole thing or the storm was going in the opposite direction.

He made an unhurried pot of tea in the kitchen, refilling his flask of water at the same time. Carrying a mug of hot tea in one hand and a tall carafe of cold water in the other, he carefully hooked his right foot into the gap between the wedged stool and the doorway and tugged the door open; his back hurt too much to bend and put either the mug or the carafe down and this technique worked out to be the least uncomfortable. The lab door opened wide and he shuffled in, pushing the stool out of the way to allow the door to close and finally shut with a firm click.

Moving shadows on the far wall showed where the tall spears of purple Monkshood were once again
swaying as if moved by an internal breeze. Placing his mug of tea and the water container onto the benchtop, Armstrong stopped and looked at his flowers for a few seconds. They seemed particularly restless tonight and he wondered why. Shaking his head at the vagaries of the plant kingdom, he turned back to his tea and his notebook, only to feel a blinding pain as something hard and heavy struck him violently on the side of his head.

###

"She's waiting for you in interview room three, Guv," Sally Donovan shot Greg a sideways look as his expression closed down, his face schooling itself into a blank neutrality all coppers learned to master early on in their careers. It was clear that bringing Freddy Kerr in for formal questioning was not something he wanted to do or felt comfortable about doing, but if nothing else, her boss was a professional. No matter what the man might feel about his house-renovating partner, he would do his job first and foremost and he would do it properly. It was just the way he was.

"Right," Greg nodded briefly, taking a deep breath before collecting the bulky folder sitting on his desk and heading down the corridor, Donovan at his shoulder. The interview suites were on the floor below and Greg made his way slowly down the stairs, his mind going over and over every little detail inside the folder. Most of his brain wanted to swear that Freddy had nothing whatsoever to do with any of this drug trafficking, but there was a small part, a teeny-tiny part, that kept asking difficult questions. If she wasn't involved, then why was her name coming up over and over again? If Freddy's name didn't belong in all this, then whose did?

Sitting alone in the bland, unwindowed room, a vaguely bored shaped Freddy's mouth, which curved into a smile as soon as she saw who was walking through the opened door, though she looked curiously at Sally Donovan's presence.

"Greg," she sighed with relief. "I was wondering why I got the call asking me to come in and answer some questions, though nobody mentioned your name. Is this about the break-in at Mummy's?"

Already disliking himself for arranging this meeting, Greg ignored the sour feeling in his gut, keeping his expression indeterminate as he sat, pushing one of the two mugs of tea he carried across the table. Donovan took a seat beside him. Waiting until Freddy had picked up her tea and sipped the steaming milky liquid, he cleared his throat.

"Not as such, actually, no," he laid his palms flat on the table, either side of the folder which now lay between them. "Something else has cropped up and there's a few things I'm hoping you might be able to sort out for me."

"Something else?" Freddy's posture was perfectly relaxed, her untroubled gaze curious but willingly co-operative. There was even a faint smile on her lips. Wincing internally, Greg wondered how much longer she'd be looking at him like that.

"We've been following the trail of a large narcotics distribution gang who are moving major shipments of drugs from an unknown central location to various distribution locations around London," he spoke carefully, keeping all tone out of his voice.

"At one of the distribution locations, we found a number of these," he said, bringing out a couple of the small plastic tubes that had been rolling around on the floor at the sauna place in Salmon Lane. "These are matches to the tubes of product used by the spa you took me to at the Dolphin," he added, opening the folder and extracting a filled tube of product one of his people had collected from the Dolphin spa that very morning, laying it next to the empty tube on the table. Both tubes were identical, each imprinted with the word *Body.*
He also lifted up a small crumpled piece of paper that had once held a twist of herbal medicine. "Yesterday lunchtime, I met with a small-time fence who happens to run a sub-post office. Behind the counter he was also keeping a handful of twists of paper almost identical to this one, except whereas this," he lifted a small plastic bag containing a crumpled slip of paper, "contained nothing more serious than some," he consulted a page of typed notes, "Salicylic acid, Wintergreen, oil of Peppermint and Allicin, whatever that is, the other ones he had contained LSD, Marijuana and Cocaine." Taking a deep breath, Greg lifted his eyes to meet Freddy's increasingly horrified gaze. "Further, when I asked you how you could get the spa treatment at the Dolphin for nothing, you said, and I quote, "I do some things for the owners and they let me use the facilities for free," he added.

"But I can explain ..." Freddy tried to speak up, but Greg wasn't quite finished and he lifted a hand, effectively cutting her off.

"Further, when you showed me around the Apothecary centre in Chelsea, I noticed there was a small box of these empty tubes in the corner of your office and several small bowls of different coloured paper twists at your research bench in the general lab, for which I'll arrange a formal search warrant if necessary," Greg paused, letting all his points sink in. Freddy seemed to be in shock.

"Finally," he continued, his voice hardening slightly. "There is the matter of the well-planned break-in at your mother's residence in Harrow. Great care was taken so that she would be absent from the property while the incident took place, and where, it now seems apparent, the search was for papers or documents of some kind, or perhaps for a container, perhaps a large envelope, containing more of these narcotic-filled twists of paper."

Freddy's complexion had blanched at Greg's last words, her eyes widening with some indefinable emotion.

"I have to ask you formally, Dr Kerr, if you can explain your connection to these events" Feeling distinctly nauseous at the hunted expression now on Freddy's face, Greg thought about taking a mouthful of tea but changed his mind as his stomach roiled at the idea.

"I thought you trusted me," Freddy's voice was so faint as to be almost inaudible.

"This is not a matter of trust, but of following standard police procedures and, almost more importantly in this case, being seen to follow them to the letter," Greg heaved a heavy sigh, leaning back in his seat and rubbing his face roughly with both hands. "I asked my sergeant here to sit in so that everyone involved can see this entire thing is completely kosher."

"Why?" Freddy stared down at her clenched hands resting on the table. "If you think me capable of all that you've insinuated, why even bother?"

"Because I want to be able to show everyone that these insinuations are a load of absolute bollocks," he leaned forward, suddenly angry, his hands now resting flat on the table again, mere inches from her own. "But it has to be done properly and out in the open, in the full light of day," he added softly. "Our personal relationship ... the fact that we already know each other can't be permitted to influence this, not any of it," he finished, his voice carrying a final note that might have been optimism. "Talk to me, Freddy," he leaned further forward, meeting her eyes as she raised them from the table top. "Tell me how this is all wrong and then we can work out how your apparent involvement is simply that, apparent." Greg felt his heartbeat thumping in his ears, though wasn't sure if it was anger or something else behind it.

Shaking her head in bewilderment, it was Freddy's turn to lean back in her chair with tightly folded arms, her skin pale but with a crest of pink at the cheekbones. Whether that was a result of guilt or
resentment or some other reason, Greg realised he didn't want to speculate. He wasn't sure of anything quite at the moment. Up until yesterday, he'd have laid all the money in his deposit account that this woman was as straight as they came ... but now ... Well, they'd have to see, wouldn't they?

After several long seconds of silence, Freddy inhaled heavily, clearly making up her mind about something.

"The friends who allow me to live in a small apartment at the Dolphin and also make free with the facilities there, do so because I make and manufacture a range of illicit toiletries which they use both in the spa itself and sell to the spa's patrons through a website," Freddy held Greg's eyes with her own, never blinking as she spoke. "The toiletries are perfectly safe, I use them myself, but the sale of them is illicit as I am not officially registered under EU or UK legislation as a commercial producer under the 2004 Cosmetic Products regulations," she looked down again. "This means that even though it gives me both income and an in-kind benefit, I pay no tax or VAT on the arrangement and neither do my friends," she swallowed, looking up again, the pink on her cheeks darkening into a hot blush. "I am fully aware this is illegal, and I have no excuse for my actions except to say that I needed a place to stay and money to help pay Mummy's bills, and this seemed a simple and harmless way of resolving both problems."

"So you're knocking out black market goods?" Greg watched the blush on Freddy's cheeks climb higher as she nodded briefly.

"Not that it matters, but I would have declared the money as income once I'd sold the top flat at the house and had the cash to pay the tax," she said, lifting her chin and meeting his stare head on. "Though I don't expect you'll believe me."

"And what about the empty tubes that were in the box in your office at the lab?" Donovan pressed on with the questions. It was the reason she was there, after all.

"The reason you found a box of empty tubes in a box in my office at the Apothecary centre is because that's where I manufacture the various products and where I use the centre's equipment to fill the tubes," she added. "It's a safe, clinical environment and I'm able to used sterilised facilities in private," she added, quietly. "I make up bulk amounts of the soaps and lotions several times each month and drop the boxes of filled tubes off at the Dolphin spa. What they do with the products after that, I have no clue," she hesitated. "Other than the obvious illegality, there's nothing wrong with what I'm doing, I promise."

"And why do you think we found more of these empty tubes at one of the drug distribution sites?" Sally leaned forward this time. "Exactly what kind of things do you make down at that centre? DI Lestrade here said he saw you with plastic containers of hemp; he said you put them in a fridge in your office."

"I use the Hemp in my current series of experiments," Freddy lifted her chin. "Every single gram is accounted for in my records because that's what records are for," she replied with some heat. "Go and search for whatever you want, there's nothing in my office or my lab that would verify any of your dreadful suspicions."

"And what about these bits of drug-filled paper?" Donovan tapped the crumpled fragment on the table with a fingertip. "The fence we spoke with yesterday had a handful of them filled with Class A drugs and several bowls of the things were seen at your research bench at the Apothecary centre."

"As with every form of research, things are discovered along the way, things that weren't expected to be found, but which, in themselves, have their own usefulness," Freddy inhaled hard through her nose. "In my previous investigations using different medicinal herbs and other organic materials,
while seeking one thing I discovered others; efficacious little remedies for minor ailments," she added, her gaze moving steadily from Greg to Donovan and back. "Whether you choose to believe me or not, I can show you the dated records of my experiments which resulted in these discoveries. Rather than keep the remedies to myself, I was able to produce small amounts of several different preparations for family and friends," she paused, looking rather pointedly at Greg. "You yourself were a recipient of one of them, if you recall," she raised an eyebrow at him, her voice growing cooler with every word.

Greg remembered a distant conversation in a pub. *What's in it? Don't take it now, it's an old remedy for headaches ...*

"And what about the other drugs?" Sally persisted. "How did one of your herbal things get mixed up with the heavy stuff?"

"I have absolutely no idea!" it was Freddy's turn to lean forward on the table, her eyes bright and growing fierce. "I give my little remedies out all the time to family and friends. The only things I put in my papers are organic, herb-based preparations an infant could ingest without the slightest injury," she said. "I do not produce or refine hard drugs or narcotics in any form and I have no clue where those other paper measures came from," she paused, a hard pulse beating at the base of her throat. "Twisting up strips of paper with small amounts of processed matter inside is not a new concept, you realise?" Freddy's voice began to take on a hard edge. "It's how herbal remedies used to be dispensed for hundreds of years before glass and plastic came along, and, if you think about it, every single cigarette in the world is just a refined version of the same principle. I don't have anything to do with hard drugs of any kind. Even the hemp I use in my research is measured out gram by gram; amounts for which I have to account in meticulous detail, I might add."

"And where were you on the morning of the break in at your mother's house?" Sally knew she was probably flogging a dead horse by this time, but she wanted to be able to say that no stone had been left unturned. For Greg's sake more than her own. From the expression on his face, he was feeling pretty shitty about the whole conversation.

"I was working in the gardens of Brentwood manor," Freddy's chin lifted another inch, her eyes narrowing in resentment as her embarrassment faded. "And if you even *attempt* to suggest that I was involved in ransacking my own mother's home, then ..." she shut her mouth and looked away, heat flooding back in her face.

On his side of the table, Greg felt the knots in his stomach release fractionally. He had been pretty confident Freddy wouldn't really be involved in anything heavy, but gut feel wasn't always enough in his job. By confessing openly to the lesser misdeed, her innocence of the greater crime seemed all the more obvious. Diddling the tax office was a common law offence rather than serious crime, though prosecution and gaol-time was certainly possible. Oddly, Greg hadn't the slightest doubt that Freddy would do exactly what she said she'd do and tell the tax office about her undeclared income once she had sufficient cash to pay her debts and the inevitable fines. It was her style.

The problem now was would she want to have anything further to do with him? He'd instigated this conversation because there were too many coincidences for comfort and it was what he was paid to do; to investigate and sort these twisted links into a clear order. Once the concurrences had started to pile up, he'd had no choice, no real option but to make it formal and bring Freddy in ... but would she see that? Would this unpleasant intrusion spell the end of their renovating arrangement? *Would she even be willing to speak to him again?* There was really only one way to find out.

"I think we've covered all the salient ground here, Sergeant," he closed the folder, sliding it across the table towards Sally. "If there's nothing else you'd like to raise at this point ..?"
Taking the hint, Donovan picked up the paperwork and stood, looking from Freddy to Greg and back. "Thank you for coming in to clear these details up. You will be asked to sign a formal statement before you leave today," she said. "This is still an ongoing investigation and we require you not to discuss any of this with anyone not connected to our inquiry," the formal words a routine speech. "If you become aware of any information that may assist us with this investigation, then contact either DI Lestrade or myself immediately." With a final nod to Greg, Sally walked out of the interview room, closing the door behind her.

The utter silence she left behind was palpable, with neither of the people sitting at the table knowing how to break it. There were several long moments of strained stillness.

"I'm sorry," Greg spoke gruffly, laying his fingers flat on the table again, as if keeping them there gave him an anchor. "I'm sorry I had to put you through this."

"I thought you trusted me," Freddy's words floated in the air like dust.

"I do," Greg closed his eyes and inhaled slowly through his nose. "I always have."

"But not enough to share your suspicions with me privately."

"It's my job," he blinked sluggishly, his eyes half-focused on the table's wood grain. "It always makes things suspicious first and normal second," he blinked again. "There were too many coincidences."

"And you were right, in any case," Freddy sighed again. "I was doing something wrong, so you had reason to bring me here."

"Yeah, maybe, but not for the speculated reason," Greg's stomach was beginning to feel like a lead weight again, as if something had just gone terribly, dreadfully wrong. It felt like a kind of grief.

Her eyes focused unmovingly on his hands, Freddy sighed long and slow, as if the weight of the world was on her shoulders. "It's your job," she murmured, stretching out her own fingers until they too lay flat on the table. "I'm sure you felt you didn't have any choice."

"I didn't," he agreed gloomily. "Not really. And if I hadn't done it, someone else would have and there'd have been nothing I could have done to help," he added, his gaze settling on the gap between their hands, the three inches of no-man's-land might as well have been miles.

"I expect you'll want to terminate our contract," Freddy's voice was arid. "I understand if so."

*Terminate their contract?*

"I can see how it might be uncomfortable for you," Greg spoke slowly, "working with me now, after this."

"It wouldn't look good for you, associating with ..." Freddy swallowed and looked down. "With someone who's done what I've been doing. It wouldn't be the done thing."

Greg frowned. The done thing? Whoever said that these days? Who gave a flying fuck about the *done thing*?

"Well, that's a load of rubbish," he stated, matter-of-factly. "Some of my best mates are crooks," he added in all seriousness. "Some of them are even coppers."

"But I've broken the law," Freddy lifted her uncertain gaze to his. "Knowingly. On multiple
occasions," she held his eyes with her own. "I'm the last person you should be associated with."

A faint smile curving one side of his mouth, Greg slid his fingertips a few millimetres forward. "Some people might argue that you are the one who shouldn't be seen with me," he shrugged inside his jacket. "I've not always been flavour of the month around here."

"You are one of the most decent and straightforward people I've ever met," Freddy frowned. "You're not one of nature's bad people, Greg."

"And neither are you," he looked up, finally meeting her eyes. "Hardly anyone else would have thought twice at dodging a bit of tax, and if that's the full extent of your nefarious reign of evil, I'll be able to get a decent night's kip tonight."

"You haven't been sleeping?"

"Not last night, no. Not really." Greg slid his fingers a half-inch closer to hers. "Truth be told, I wasn't looking forward to this meeting today. I felt quite the traitor, to be honest."

The incredulous, pitying expression on Freddy's face made him laugh suddenly. "Don't look at me like I'm still in shorts," he flashed a faint grin. "I'm pretty senior around this place and I've got my street cred to consider."

"You're an idiot," Freddy pushed her hands towards the middle of the table until there was the merest hint of a gap between their fingertips.

"You're the idiot," his voice was softer, lower. "Was all this the reason you kept changing the subject whenever I asked you about things at the lab and suchlike?"

Pursing her mouth, Freddy nodded. "I didn't want anyone to know," she murmured. "I was embarrassed and a little bit ashamed about doing something so obviously underhand. I'm not usually such a hypocrite."

"You're not a hypocrite," Greg let the tip of one middle finger rest against hers. "I'm just sorry that events conspired to drag you into the middle of other things," he sighed, half smiling. "You make some damn fine shampoo, by the way."

Closing her eyes and letting all the breath gust from her lungs, Freddy made a rueful face. "At least everyone knows now," she said, sounding hugely relieved. "And I don't have to constantly worry that someone is going to find me out."

"True," Greg nodded, but his thoughts were elsewhere. She hadn't moved her fingers away.

"So what happens now?"

Looking across the table and meeting her serious dark gaze, Greg wrinkled his nose, sliding both his hands forward until he was able to close his fingers loosely around her slender, fine-boned wrists. Her skin was warmer than he expected, or perhaps his hands were cold. Freddy's fingers stayed exactly where they were. A strange warmth eased the last of the knots in his stomach and Greg felt suddenly, astonishingly, happy. He turned her hands over until the backs of her fingers rested in his palms. His thumbs brushed against hers. They didn't so much as twitch.

"You make a formal statement confirming what you said here this morning, adding any other details you feel are important. You sign it and then you're free to go."
"I'm not going to be arrested?"

His grin took him by surprise as he looked down at their clasped fingers. "Not at this point, although I dare say for someone who’s led such a major life of crime as you, it's only going to be a matter of time."

"You're teasing me now, aren't you?"

"A bit," he smiled again, brushing the pad of her thumb with his. "You'll have to tell your pals at the Dolphin they need to give you an official receipt for all the stuff you make for them in the future, and they'll only be able to market your goods in-house from now on."

Freddy's forehead creased in confusion. "You're allowing me to continue selling the toiletries? But isn't that what I'm in trouble for?"

"Only if you sell them on the open market," Greg pulled one of her hands closer so he could examine the fine veins that lay just beneath the warm skin. "If there's a private arrangement between you and your friends, as long as you get a written receipt that states what you're getting in exchange for the stuff you make them, then you're in the clear. If your friends decide to knowingly sell unregistered products to the public, then they're the ones who will cop it from a whole bunch of government agencies, not just the Tax office."

Nodding absently, Freddy looked at their clasped fingers. "So we're still working together on the house?"

Brushing the back of her hand with the ball of his thumb, Greg met her eyes again with a faint smile. "What do you think?"

Whatever Freddy might have thought would never be known as there was a brisk knock at the interview room door, a split-second before Sally Donovan rejoined them.

"Sorry to disturb," she said, her eyes immediately registering the fact that her boss now held one of Dr Kerr's hands in his own with no indication he might be stopping anytime soon. "But we've just heard there's been an ... incident at the Apothecary centre in Chelsea. It sounds serious, Guv." The tone of her voice filled in the blanks.

Someone had died?

"Excuse me," he laid Freddy's hand carefully on the table. "I'll be back shortly." Standing, he stepped outside, turning to meet his sergeant's eyes. "Who is it?"

"Chap called Armstrong," she handed over a single sheet of brief notes. "Looks like he was working alone last night and had a nasty fall," she added.

"Then why has it come to us?" Greg scanned the few lines of words, gleaning whatever additional details he could.

"Because one of the uniforms sent to the scene decided to have a go at being Sherlock Holmes and saw that the place where the man was supposed to have banged his head was free of bloodstains, yet he found several drops of blood on the floor under the desk."

Greg looked back at the closed door. Things had just got serious.
Chapter 12

If Armstrong's death wasn't accidental, then it was another thread connecting the Apothecary centre with a drug distribution network. It also linked back to Freddy and, through her, to the break-in at her mother's house. If it was murder and also turned out to be in some way linked to the series of jewellery robberies through Billy Swithins' little extra-curricular retail enterprise, then this whole affair was becoming much broader and more complex than anyone had yet been able to piece together. So far, the only people with links to more than one element of the situation were Billy Swithins and Freddy. But Billy the Fence was too old, too stupid and far too small-time to be able to play a major role in an operation of this size, and since Freddy was almost too straight for her own good, then they needed to look elsewhere. And if it wasn't Billy or Freddy, then it was someone else, someone clever enough, with sufficient organisational capacity and the sheer balls to bring together two very big criminal activities; a London-wide drug distribution network and the disposal and possibly even the organisation of the Hatton Garden jewel jobs. Therefore, it had to be someone who had a connection to Freddy, the drug network, Billy Swithins and the jewel robberies. And now, on top of all this, they had a potential murder on their hands. This was a big fish whichever way you wanted to fry it. The only really inexplicable bit was **why**. What had Armstrong done or known that merited his death in this way?

"Get forensics down there pronto. I want the whole place locked down and a room-by-room search of the entire complex," he directed. "If there's anything there that can possibly be linked to the scuppered drug raids in either the South London sites or the Limehouse one in Salmon Lane, then I want to know about it today."

"Yes Guv," Sally nodded, already on her toes to stride off to the carpark. She paused, looking pointedly at the closed door behind them. "Are you going to say anything to Dr Kerr?"

Shit. Freddy. He couldn't let her leave without telling her Armstrong was dead, not after the events of this morning. It had been clear that she felt very fondly about the old man when she had introduced him at the centre ... he'd have to say something, but perhaps not everything.

"Give me five minutes to see her out of here and I'll meet you in the carpark," he said. "Make sure we've got enough uniforms to go through the whole place in one go; I don't want to have to go back for a second run through tomorrow."

"Right," Donovan nodded briskly, heading off down the corridor. Now all he had to do was break the news to Freddy, who would undoubtedly demand to come down to the centre with him. Taking a deep breath, he opened the door and stepped back into the interview room.

"Is everything alright?" the newly concerned look in her eyes and the hint of uncertainty in her voice evidenced Freddy's remaining apprehension. "You have an odd expression on your face."

Pulling out the chair, Greg sat, still wondering how he was going to be able to break the news without breaking her heart. There was no easy way given the limited time at hand.

"There's been a serious accident at the Apothecary centre," he met her gaze. "I'm afraid Professor Armstrong was involved."

"Roy?" Freddy's eyes widened in alarm. "Is he alright? Is he in hospital?" she made to stand but Greg caught her nearest hand and tugged her back down.

"I'm very sorry, Freddy," he brushed the back of her fingers with a thumb and met her eyes with his.
"But it looks like Roy Armstrong fell and hit his head last night. The cleaners discovered him this morning."

Instantly frozen, Freddy's composure wavered visibly as she struggled with the competing emotions of shock and disbelief. She shook her head slowly. "It can't be," she husked. "He was perfectly fine yesterday."

"I have to get down there now but I promise I'll get to the bottom of everything," Greg held tight to her hand, as if he might transmit his determination through simple touch. "There's nothing anyone can do now except get to the bottom of the situation and I swear I'll let you know as soon as I have something concrete to tell you. I promise."

"Can't I come and make sure...?" her voice. "I'm a doctor, perhaps Roy's not really... no..." she shook her head and looked away. "Of course he's dead," she looked woeful. "Nobody makes that kind of mistake, do they?"

"I'll tell you everything as soon as I know it," Greg gently pulled her hand, lifting Freddy to her feet. "I want you to go home and talk to your mum," he said, laying a light hand on her back, guiding her towards the door. "Want me to have a squad car take you home?"

"I've got the Landy in the carpark," Freddy dashed a tear from her cheek with the side of her hand. "I'll have to tell mummy; she knew Roy too. She'll be upset."

Greg was more concerned about Freddy's immediate state of mind to be honest, but anything that helped her through the next few hours was a good idea.

"I'm very sorry, Freddy," Greg rested a hand on her shoulder. The sudden compulsion to put his arm around her shoulders and hold her close while she wept was startling in its intensity. "I'll do what I can to get it all sorted as quick as possible."

Sniffling, Freddy nodded jerkily, allowing herself to be ushered out into the corridor where a passing uniformed officer was dragooned into escorting her the long way down to the carpark. Greg turned and jogged off the other way, wanting to be already gone before she made it outside. The urge to stay with her until she was more herself had been unexpectedly powerful and he had no time right now to think about why that might be.

###

The buildings and the surrounding gardens were fairly swarming with uniforms as their car pulled into the cordoned-off parking area. Greg had been on the phone with one of his senior scene-of-crime officers the whole way down the Embankment gathering as much background information as was available.

"Show me," he nodded tersely at the waiting SOCO as soon as he stepped out of the passenger seat. Having been shown around the Apothecary centre once before, Greg had a reasonable sense of direction and strode along without needing a guide. The cleaners, centre admin staff and the few scientists who'd arrived at the centre before everyone had been contacted and advised not to come in, were all seated in the largest of the lecture halls. This was convenient central location for things like toilets and there was a hot drinks vending machine just outside the room which was being put through its paces. All up, there were about fifteen people seated variously around the room in small groups, all of them, like Freddy, wearing troubled expressions of shock and disbelief. With a brief nod, Sally went to speak quietly with the senior uniformed sergeant at the door as Greg took a central spot at the front of the room, lifted his ID in the air and called for quiet.
"Good morning and thank you all for being patient. I am Detective Inspector Greg Lestrade and I'll be leading the investigation here today. As you all probably know by now, there appears to have been a fatal accident in one of the labs here involving Professor Roy Armstrong," he stated, looking around at the mostly blank expressions watching him. "However there are a few details that don't quite tie in with that supposition and for this reason, we're treating Professor Armstrong's death as potentially suspicious," he lifted a hand, forestalling the inevitable outcry. "Nobody, least of all the police, wants this situation to be any more complicated than it needs to be, but until we are absolutely sure about the sequence of events that led to the Professor's demise, then I am asking you all to co-operate with both the uniformed police officers as well as my investigative team. We will be as unintrusive as we can, but I ask you to bear with us as we do our jobs," he paused, looking around for anyone who might be in a mood to argue the toss.

"Are we going to be kept here all day?" One of the men in a white coat standing over by a window spoke up. "I've got a meeting with the Department of Health in an hour."

"If anyone has an urgent meeting to get to, please let the uniformed officers know and they'll try and get to you first."

"Was Roy Armstrong murdered, Inspector?"

The speaker was a well-dressed woman of middle years. "I'm Fiona Robb, the Centre administrator," she added. "I would like to know what I'm supposed to tell everyone and if the labs are going to be allowed to stay open; we are running a large number of time-critical drug trials here, you see, and if they have to be stopped midway ..." her voice tailed off on a worried note.

"We can discuss lab closures in a moment, Ms Robb," Greg was thankful that everyone seemed calm and sensible about the situation, but then this was a scientific body; one might hope that they would indeed be sensible people. "We'll answer as many of your questions as we can given the circumstances, though you'll appreciate the sensitivity of the situation."

There would undoubtedly be more questions, though the only people Greg was interested in hearing from right now were the cleaners who found the body and anyone who had worked late last night.

Donovan was already in the process of having people shepherded into different rooms to be interviewed, pointing out the small meeting room across the passage where two middle aged woman in light blue uniforms sat on one side of a table. A uniformed officer stood in the corner of the room, still and silent. Greg was handed a single sheet of paper covered in brief notes. The women were the Centre's cleaners and usually came in around six o'clock to give the place a once-over before any of the technical or scientific staff arrived.

"Good morning, Ladies," Greg took a seat opposite. "Would you like a cup of tea or some water or anything?" Both shook their heads and looked miserable.

"I want you to tell me what happened when you arrived here this morning," he said, looking between them. "I'll need to speak to you individually, so if one of you could go with the officer over there into the next room ... thank you," he smiled and nodded as the younger of the two stood up stiffly and walked through a connecting door into the adjacent room. The woman left sitting at the table took one look at his face and burst into a flood of tears.

Greg sighed. It was going to be a long morning.

###

It was well into the afternoon before everyone had had a preliminary interview; most of the people
had been sent home almost immediately they had been interviewed as they worked on the far side of
the laboratory complex and didn't even use the same entrance as Roy Armstrong. Only the two
cleaners, two scientists who'd been first to arrive in Armstrong's lab after the alarm was raised and
Fiona Robb had much useful information to offer and even that was minimal.

Armstrong's body had been found by the cleaners who saw his lab door was ajar, something,
apparently, that never happened. Upon investigating the occurrence, the professor's body was seen
lying in the middle of the scattered pots of his tall purple flowers. There was very little blood and
only the eagle eyes of a young uniformed constable spotted the few small splashes of the stuff under
the corner of Armstrong's bench. So either death had been nigh on instantaneous, or he'd been killed
elsewhere and dragged in here, or killed in here and then someone had done an almost perfect
cleaning job. He'd wait on his forensics people before deciding which was the most likely alternative,
but he was already leaning towards Armstrong's death being here in the lab at his bench. Whoever
had hit the old man had then dragged or carried him over to the pots of plants to make it look like
he'd slipped and fallen; made it look like an accident.

Which would make it murder.

Initial forensic opinion said that death had been swift given the nature of the critical injury and
Armstrong would most likely have been unable to crawl the length of his lab before heaving himself
up and across the bank of plant pots. Further forensic studies were in train and he'd get the report as
soon as it was ready. The lab people had also taken away a small but heavy desktop microscope
muttering things about wound biomechanics. In the meantime, Greg was advised at a provisional
level that accidental death was appearing less and less likely.

In itself, this was interesting. It meant that whoever killed the professor, assuming it was murder, was
either an amateur or had done the deed in a moment of panic. Nobody who'd been around death or
violence would have imagined a dying man's last act would have been to crawl over to his beloved
plants. If Armstrong had had enough strength to do that, he would have more probably raised the
alarm either from his own phone which still sat on the bench beside the laptop, or by breaking the
glass fire and emergency alarm which perched on the wall mere feet from where his chair was
located. No, something was definitely fishy, and it was now down to Greg to work out how the
professor's death was linked to the other elements of the situation, a link that seemed more and more
obvious, even though there was still no concrete established connections.

Back in his own office, the wondrous view across the Thames was ignored in favour of the list of
people the Heathfield House occupants had put together of all the visitor's they'd had in the last six
months. Printing it off and laying it beside the one he'd got from Gwendoline, it was immediately
obvious that several of the names were duplicated. There were all the usual suspects: the
tradespeople, the salespeople, the friends and families. But now he needed a triangulation with the
Apothecary centre. Was there anyone who had come to this place in the last few months who might,
in any way, have also been on the Heathfield House list, or who had visited Freddy's mum.

All staff at the centre wore magnetic swipe cards on lanyards around their necks. Fiona Robb had
told him that staff needed to use the cards to enter and exit certain critical parts of the centre as well
as a few of the restricted labs. All visitors had to be signed in and were almost always accompanied
by someone who was already on staff. Greg thought back to his own first visit here with Freddy. He
couldn't remember her signing him in, but he did recall seeing a large open book at the front
reception area. At his request, Ms Robb fetched not only the current visitor's book but the one before
it as well. Nodding his thanks, Greg handed both books over to Sally Donovan.

"Here's two lists of names," he said, his eyes flicking to the large books now in her hands. "Have
one of the lads check all the names on both the lists against the visitor names in those babies." He
inhaled hard as he thought of the different kind of people who'd know how old fashioned herbal remedies had been dispensed years ago before there was glass or plastic. Someone who had thought it would be a good way to distribute little individual portions of drugs. Wrap 'em up in harmless twists of pastel paper and make them look like something a kiddy might have in their school lunchbox. He had another thought. *Maybe they'd seen Freddy use the technique first.* One of her friends from the Dolphin? Someone who lived at one of those big houses she worked at?

Lifting his desk phone to his ear, he called down to the interview rooms, asking if Billy Swithins had finished making his statement yet and, if so, had he explained how he received the drug he pedalled at the post office? If there was anyone who might be able to finger the individual behind the drug network, it was going to be Billy the Fence. Mr Swithins, he was advised, had taken it upon himself to be uncommunicative and no such information had yet been forthcoming. Greg felt his mouth curve into a dark smile. Knowing there was nothing more he could productively do back at the Apothecary centre, he might as well go and have another little chat with Mr Swithins.

*Should have talked when it was the nice cop doing the asking, Billy.*

###

Nodding to the uniformed officer standing inside the door, Greg placed a thick file of documents on the table and sat in one of the lightweight chairs. On the other side of the table, Billy Swithins sat calmly, though there was a wary expression in his eyes.

"Afternoon, Billy," Greg crossed his legs, hooked an elbow carelessly over the back of the chair and linked his fingers loosely together. "You know why I've had to come down here, don't you?"

"I can't say nuffink more, Mr Lestrade, on my life I can't," the old man shook his head and swallowed, leaning forward slightly. "Naming names is more than my life's worth, I swear."

"So you *do* have names for us then, Billy, eh?" Greg smiled. Swithins swallowed harder. It wasn't a nice kind of smile.

"Just a expression, Mr Lestrade," Billy backtracked. "I never knew no names; just a voice on the phone is all, honest. No names, no pack drill, like," he grinned nervously. Greg wouldn't like to bet on the last occasion Billy Swithins had been completely honest with the police. Time for the heavy word.

"See, Billy, the problem I have here is that I know you're lying through your teeth and, by now, you've realised I know you're lying and I can see in your beady little eyes that you're trying desperately hard to come up with a plausible story to put me off the track, but I have to tell you, Billy," Greg flipped open the file beside his hand. "It ain't looking good for you and that's the truth."

"It was just a minor trafficking, Mr Lestrade," Swithins sounded a touch anxious. "I never done nuffink with drugs before so it should only be a suspended sentence or maybe a three-monther at most."

"You might think so, Billy," Greg nodded thoughtfully. "Problem is, I have more than enough track record on you here," he tapped the file gently, "to chuck you in the Scrubs for fifteen years without breaking a sweat," he said, closing the file and leaning forward to rest his linked fingers on the table. "But then there's the murder Billy, and you know how much I hate people who do murder on my turf."

"*Murder?*" Swithins' eyes went wide, the white showing all the way around. "I never been involved in no murder!"
"But it looks like your little drug friends might have been," Greg treated Swithins to another little smile, this one even less pleasant than the first. "And you know the new rules about criminals who hang with other criminals, even if they weren't actually involved in the killing."

"I never done nuffink!" Swithins shook his head emphatically, searching the tabletop as if his salvation lay in the grain of the wood. "Sold a few recreational drugs, yes, I'll cop to that, but I never run wiv no hoodlums, Mr Lestrade, and that's God's honest truth."

Given that the entirety of Billy's criminal past rotated through phases of fencing, aiding-and-abetting and now, a little possession and distribution, Greg was inclined to believe the man. However, this belief brought him no closer to knowing who was behind the distribution of Class A drugs wrapped up in little paper twists. Billy Swithins was going down for his part in this; the only question still up for debate was for how long.

"You're what, now, Billy?" Greg frowned slightly as he opened the cover of the fat file again. "Sixty-seven?" he wrinkled his nose and shook his head, making the same soft inward-hissing noise that mechanics made when they looked at the engine of his BMW. "It's a life sentence for murder, Billy. Even if the Court might be persuaded to go lightly because of your age, you're looking at a thirty-stretch, and that's a fact."

Swithins swallowed several times as he stared down at the table. "I can't do thirty years inside, Mr Lestrade," he whispered. "I don't have that long left."

Greg remained silent, one hand resting proprietorially on the closed file. "It's the Crown Court for this one, Billy," Greg sounded sorrowful. "And you know what those bigwig Queen Silks are like."

"What kind of a deal can you do me?" Swithins seemed to shrink inside himself. "If they find out I'm a snitch, I'm as good as dead."

"Who is it, Billy?" Greg leaned swiftly forward. "Who is it that's got you so scared?"

"I don't want to be in no local stir," Billy spoke, almost to himself. "Winchester would do; I quite like Winchester."

"Then give me names," Greg hardened his tone. "Somebody out there is doing things that's affecting friends of mine," he said. "All this stuff is bad enough in itself," Greg leaned in close, lowering his voice to barely above a whisper. "But when nasty things happen to people I care about, I am ready to kick shit uphill. Do you understand me?"

Nodding glumly, Swithins closed his eyes. "Yes, Mr Lestrade."

"Right then," Greg put his phone on the table, pulling up the voice recorder. "Start talking."

###

Well now. That was interesting.

Back in his office, after Billy had been formally charged and was now banged up until the magistrate's court hearing, Greg stared out through the big window, watching the London Eye do its thing on the opposite bank of the Thames. There were a number of tourist sight-seeing longboats moored at the wharf right beneath the circular beast which appeared to be crammed with people wrapped up in heavy coats and scarves. Even at this time of year, there were people willing to pay over the odds for a choppy, wind-blown trip to Tower Bridge and back. But the slow turning of the big wheel and the slow scurrying of the rugged-up tourists passed across his vision without reaching his consciousness. Greg's mind was far too engrossed with the information he'd just extracted from
Billy Swithins and what that information might mean. There were all sorts of connotations he might put on what he'd just heard ... the name itself was only ...

His mobile rang, buzzing itself into his awareness through the breast pocket of his jacket.

"Lestrade," he responded, his eyes still distant and unfocused.

"Guv, it's Lester. I'm still down at the Apothecary centre going through the place with the uniforms as you specified. One of the offices has been properly turned over ... belongs to a ..." there was a pause as the detective flipped open his notebook. "To a Dr F. Kerr," he said. "I've got the forensic people here already dusting for prints but I wasn't sure whether you wanted me to get the guy in to confirm any losses or ..."

"Woman," Greg cleared his throat. "Dr Kerr is a woman, Gary," he added, "and I know exactly where she is right now." Greg sighed and rubbed a hand over his forehead. Today was a day for upsets and surprises and no mistake. "I'll bring her down to the centre myself within a half-hour. See if you can get forensics done with the place before I arrive if you can; the deceased was a close personal friend of hers and I would prefer the lady not be any more upset than strictly necessary."

"No problem, Guv. It's a pokey little office; they're nearly done already. See you when you get down here."

Oh Christ, Freddy. Still standing at his window, Greg closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, holding the air in his chest, releasing it slowly. There was obviously some link between Armstrong's death and the ransacking of her office but he'd hoped not to have to bother her about any of this for at least a while longer. He rubbed his face again before pulling his overcoat back on and feeling in the pocket for his car keys. Advising Donovan he was returning to the centre and to let him know if any of the names matched across all the lists, he headed for the carpark, ringing Freddy's mobile as he went.

"Greg?" She sounded tired. Hardly surprising given the circumstances.

"Yeah, it's me. Look Freddy, there's something I need you to look at down at the centre. I'm on my way to the Dolphin now and should be able to pick you up in about ten minutes. Can you be waiting by the door for me?"

"Is this about Roy?" there was a faint waver in her words. "You don't need me to ... identify him do you?"

"Nothing like that, I promise. I'll explain when we get to the Apothecary centre. See you in a few."

Traffic was fortunately on the light side and Greg's BMW pulled into the Dolphin's side court no more than twelve minutes later. Freddy, wrapped up in a thick wool coat stood in the shelter of the tall stone doorway, running down to the car as it rolled to a halt.

"What do you need me to see at the centre?" Bringing a blast of chilled air into the car with her, Freddy was more interested in scanning Greg's face for clues than anything else.

"I'd rather you see the situation without having any prior knowledge, if you don't mind." Greg assessed her expression, noting the swollen pink eyelids and the fact that she was so pale, even her freckles seemed to have faded. His stomach clenched as he wished there was another way of doing this. The thought that Freddy's upset was not yet finished made him queasy. Realising that she would get nothing more, Freddy faced forwards, fumbling with the seatbelt as the car moved gently off. In little more than five more minutes, he pulled the car to a halt in the same spot he'd parked earlier that
morning.

"With me, please," Greg laid a careful hand on her elbow and nodded to the uniform at the main door as they headed down a remembered corridor to Freddy's little room. As Gary Lester had promised, the forensic people were long gone, though he himself remained, along with a large uniformed constable.

"But this is my office," Freddy sounded increasingly confused. "I thought you said that Roy was found in his lab ..?"

"Just look inside, Freddy and tell me what you see," For the second time that day, Greg felt his world shudder to a halt as the hopeless look on Freddy's face cut through him like acid. *If only there had been another way ...*

Gary Lester watched her face as he held the door open, though it was Greg who saw her stumble slightly as she took in the devastation that had been her private office.

Not a single book remained on its shelf, with journal pages and papers scattered violently around as if the place had been taken apart in a frenzy. The filing cabinet had been jemmied open and the desk was a wreck. Even the small fridge had been smashed open, the plastic boxes of hemp lying where they'd been flung to the floor. A corner of the carpet had been ripped up as if someone imagined there might be something lying hidden beneath it. The office had been thoroughly, ferociously trashed.

Leaning against the doorframe, a low groan choked off into a guttural sob as Freddy clamped a hand over her mouth as if she were about to be sick. It was enough for Greg. Nobody was that good an actor.

"It's all over now," he touched her shoulder awkwardly, tugging a little when her body seemed almost welded to the wooden frame. "I'm so, so sorry, Freddy ..."

"Oh god, Greg," she turned then, her face even paler than before, eyes awash with unshed tears. "Why is all this happening? Why am I involved in all these terrible, dreadful things?" About to try and explain that none of this was really about her, that it was sometimes how these things played out, Greg realised that words just wouldn't do anymore.

"Come here, babe," he murmured, pulling her unresistingly into the shelter of his arms, cradling her shaking shoulders with a strong arm while he fished in a coat pocket for his clean handkerchief. Plastering herself against the front of his chest, Freddy wept as if her heart were breaking and all Greg could do was hold on, curving himself around her shuddering body as if to protect her from the cruel whims of fate.

"It'll be alright sweetheart, I promise," he murmured against her flower-scented hair. "I swear I'll get to the bottom of all this and make it all right again, I will. *I promise I will.*"
Watching his Chief stand there like that with his arms around the lady scientist, it was obvious to Gary Lester, what with being a detective and all, that a bit of discretion might not go amiss. Catching the eye of the tactfully unsmiling uniformed officer, he tipped his head towards the far end of the corridor before strolling there himself to check on the window fastenings. One never knew when the question of ventilation might arise in an investigation such as this. Upon joining him, the uniformed officer seemed equally concerned with the effectiveness of the very same windows, opening and closing a couple of them several times to be on the safe side.

For several long surprising moments, Greg's focus was caught by the woman in his arms, with no awareness of anything beyond their private circle of two. Intending only to offer Freddy a little comfort which she surely needed, his arms were doing a lot more than simply providing support; they were hanging onto her with no intention of letting go. A light floral fragrance rose with the heat of her body and he breathed the scent deep into his chest where it made itself at home and where, in truth, it had been visiting for some time. Holding her with more feeling than he knew he had, Greg felt a tectonic shift as the floor whirled unhurriedly beneath his feet for an aeon or two.

Freddy's sobs quieted though she made no move to unwrap herself from his expansive embrace and she stood still, breathing slowly, leaning her forehead against his damp shirt.

"So," she murmured.

"Yeah. So," Greg agreed though with what he might be agreeing was unclear.

"I'm not the kind of woman who needs a knight in shining armour, I hope you realise," keeping her face pressed against him, Freddy slid her hands down from Greg's chest to the warm skin around his waist. "I'm just having a bit of a bad day."

"I don't want you thinking I put my arms around women all the time," Greg felt a smile creep over his face as he brushed the top of Freddy's head with the end of his nose. "It's not something I do, as a rule."

"Not one of your regular seduction techniques?"

Greg wasn't sure he had any of those any more. "No," he said, pressing his smile into her hair.

Still holding his sides with her hands, Freddy leaned back, tear-glazed eyes looking up. "Because I had wondered, you see," she said, meeting his gaze. "If you might ever consider ... if you might, at some point, consider that you and I could ..."

"You bloody scientists are all alike," Greg's smile deepened. "Always talking too much," he added, wanting nothing more than to lean down and kiss her.

"Oh." Freddy stopped talking, her eyes watchful.

"Though here and now is not the best place for this kind of conversation, is it?" he asked, noticing only then that both Lester and the uniformed officer were, for some reason, examining the windows at the far end of the passage. "People will talk."

"Yes, quite," Freddy agreed, the faintest of curves lifting her mouth. "Some other time, perhaps."

"It's a date," Greg's smile evolved into a grin. "Somewhere a little more private though," he added,
swinging his eyes back to the two men standing at the end of the passage staring very intently at the windows. A flash of movement across the central garden caught his gaze. "What's that over there?"

"Where?" Freddy craned her neck to see where Greg pointed. "That's where Roy's lab is, around from that corner," she sighed sadly. "The staff kitchen is just down from there."

"That's an interesting thing to know, you see," Greg returned his eyes to Freddy's face, his expression suddenly serious. "Because if I can see over there from here, then ..." He felt her hands clamp tighter at his sides as she made the obvious connection.

"Then someone standing there can see what's happening over here," she looked suddenly tragic. "Oh god," Freddy was appalled. "Is that why Roy was killed last night? Because he saw someone over here, doing this ..." she waved at her office door. "Whoever did this thought that Roy might have seen them? That he was a witness?"

Given the potential for more upset if Freddy believed she was in any way responsible for her mentor's demise, Greg acted swiftly. "That's entirely speculative and another conversation we're not going to have now, either," he said, reaching down for her hands, bringing them back to his chest as he met her eyes. "I want you to go home with one of my uniformed officers and know that you have done everything that can possibly be expected of you in a very difficult situation. I'm going to sort things out here, though it may take a while, as I have to review the security camera evidence as well as wait for forensic findings. As soon as I know something positive, I'll contact you, I promise."

"But what should I do about this?" Freddy glanced back at the shambles of her office.

"Nothing right now. Other things need to happen before you can begin to sort the place out, I'm afraid."

"Can I at least put the hemp back in the fridge?" Freddy sounded determined. "It's expensive stuff to waste so much of it needlessly like this."

"Let me." Greg released her hands and stepped inside the tiny room, standing carefully at the perimeter so as not to disturb the mess in the middle of the floor. Using his other handkerchief to avoid leaving fingerprints, he replaced the plastic containers in the small fridge, though the lock was beyond repair. What in hell's name had they been looking for last night? Stepping back outside, he beckoned to the uniformed officer who had clearly seen all there was to see of interest at the end of the passage. Greg looked back to Freddy.

"This officer," he said, flicking his eyes up to the large man who resumed his place at the door of Freddy's office, "is the senior goalie of the Yard's football squad," he said. "I cannot imagine leaving this place in safer hands."

"Thank you," Freddy smiled wanly at them both. "I'd better go before I make another scene," she smiled again as Greg's fingers squeezed her hand gently.

"I'll be in touch," he repeated. "This might be a good time to go and do something productive down at the house," he suggested. "It might be several days before anything comes of all this and you know your mum is simply itching to get her hands dirty."

"Yes, she it. That's actually a good idea," Freddy nodded again as Greg led her away from her office. "It would be good to get clear of all this awfulness for a while and do something solid."

"There we are then," Greg's arms seemed to have a mind of their own as all he could think of doing was bringing Freddy back inside them. "Go home. Have a bath, a cup of tea and let us do what
needs to be done. We're good at the job, you know."

"I know," Freddy's smile wobbled a little and she dashed a hand across her eyes. "Call me when you
know anything."

"I will. Go home."

The ghost of her smile was the last thing Greg noticed and it made him ache. But now was not the
time to dwell on such things. He needed to know who Professor Armstrong had seen last night,
trashing Freddy's office.

###

There is a time in the middle of every big case when there are many things to think about even
though very few of any of them seem to hang together. Greg knew there were links, strange
connections he could feel, even if he hadn't yet quite fathomed out where they were. Billy Swithins
had finally talked about someone very interesting, someone who he said had only even been referred
to as 'His Lordship' but who, Billy said, was in the process of contacting a lot of fences to shift all
sorts of goods, mostly small bits of unimportant jewels and some loose gemstones. It was so
obviously stuff from the Hatton Garden jobs, that Billy had made it clear to the man on the phone
who claimed to be phoning on behalf of 'His Lordship', that he was out of the fencing business for
good. It was only then, so Swithins said, that the man on the phone asked if he might have any
interest in handling a few recreational drugs, just to spread things around, like. While Billy had said
no to the jewellery, the post office had proved to be a prime spot for pedalling narcotics. The
proceeds, said Swithins, had always been collected on a Wednesday night by a big man driving
around in a posh car.

Was it possible that a member of the aristocracy was involved in either the drug ring or the jewel
robberies? It wouldn't be the first time one of the landed gentry had turned to crime because they
needed the money, or because they were stupid, or even because they were bored. Sooner or later
though, someone made a mistake; they always did. But of the mass of information sitting on Greg's
desk and inside his head, little seemed to make sense. He needed to put a few more jigsaw pieces
together.

Freddy was unwittingly involved at several levels. Her mother's house had been rifled, but only in
the office where one might expect to find documents of some kind. The same thing had happened to
Freddy's private office at the Apothecary centre, and the two events simply had to be linked;
coincidence would not stretch that far. Which meant that someone had to have been aware of
Freddy's work at the centre and also where Gwendoline lived, knowing the old woman well enough
not to want her in the way while the small office in the Harrow house was ransacked. And then there
was the matter of the way the drugs Billy Swithins had been selling looked almost identical to the
little cures Freddy parcelled out containing her own cures. Greg would have put money on the idea
that whoever had thought of distributing drugs in the paper twists Billy had dumped on the post
office counter, had also seen the way Freddy presented her remedies. If so, this meant that whoever
he was looking for had knowledge of both the mother and the daughter; close and extensive
knowledge at that. Greg wondered briefly if it might be one of Freddy's younger sisters, though
indications weren't leaning that way at all.

And then there was the connection with the failed drug raids at the spas and the toiletries that Freddy
had been making on the QT for her friends at the Dolphin. It seemed almost an impossible
coincidence that she might be connected in some way to both the drug distribution network and the
jewel robberies, but there was no denying that a link was there, even an indirect one.

So, who was this 'Lordship' guy? Was he really one of the Nobs, or was it simply a convenient nom
de plume? If he was one of the Gentry, then what was his connection to the jewel stores other than maybe being a conventional customer? And if this guy didn't know how Freddy dished out her herbal fixes, then who did he have in his circle who did? Someone surely must know what Freddy did, as Greg couldn't accept the coincidence of the identical twisted papers, each containing a different type of contents; one harmless and the other illegal.

Pulling out a clean notepad, Greg drew a circle in the centre and labelled it 'Freddy'. From there, he drew a line to another circle for 'Gwendoline'. There was another circle for the Apothecary centre, one for the Dolphin and several linked circles for the failed drug raids. Billy Swithins got a circle off to one side, though there were lines from him to both Freddy, the circle marked 'Hatton Garden' and then, right in the middle of it all, one final sphere with the bolded title of 'His Lordship'. There was a link to that one from every other circle except the Dolphin.

Throwing down his pen, Greg sat back in his chair and sighed, folding his arms as he did so. Scowling at the diagram, there was absolutely no way that Freddy didn't know who this person was. The 'Lordship' guy, whoever he might be, was connected to her in so many ways that to imagine she didn't know him was stretching plausibility to extremes. Obviously though, Freddy didn't know she knew him, which was an interesting point in its own right. How could she be unaware of someone doing all this; the drugs, the robberies? Freddy was a very intelligent woman; clever, insightful, personable, friendly. If she knew anyone as well as she must clearly know this person, then she surely must have had some idea, some feeling that all was not right?

All Greg needed was one loose thread and he could unravel this entire case once he could prove the links were as he suspected, but finding that one thread was proving complicated. However, good old-fashioned police work might help out here as Greg picked up his phone and asked for a review of the CCTV footage from outside Billy Swithins' post office and the Apothecary centre. Maybe whoever trashed Freddy's room used the same car to pick up the drug payments from Billy on a Wednesday night? Greg doubted anyone would be that stupid but it wouldn't hurt to check.

He walked to his office door, catching the eye of the young detective whom Donovan had handed the Apothecary centre visitor books. "Got anything for me yet?" he asked, half impatient, half hopeful.

"Not yet, sir," the young man looked a little dazed. "There's a lot of names to go through here."

"Let me know when you find what I'm looking for," Greg nodded and returned to his desk and looked thoughtful. Billy Swithins was the key connection between the drug ring and the jewel robberies. The man took delivery of drugs and handed back the profits every week. Therefore Billy needed to look at some faces to see if anything was jogged loose. Until he had all the forensic stuff back on Armstrong's death and the report on Freddy's office, there wasn't a lot more Greg could do.

###

The following morning was very cold but clear once the early frost had left the air. Even more importantly, it was dry and had been so for the last few days. This meant the heavy vehicle bringing in the final new roof truss could drive right into the garden without damaging the iron-hard ground. Gwendoline, heavily wrapped up in a long coat, a big shawl and woolly hat, waved the roofers inside the garden walls. This was to be the last corner of the main roof to be repaired; all the other repairs, patching and peripheral renewal had already been completed. Once this last truss was in place, the final battens could be fixed, membraned and then, finally, tiled. Once that was done, the Pimlico house would no longer leak from the top down, though there was still a long way to go. The windows, already being pre-assembled in the big Penge workshop, would start to be delivered as soon as the Lewis clan had nailed down their final slate and cleared their stuff away. The minute
there was any space free of vans in the garden itself, the next load of deliveries could begin. It was a race now to see what might be completed before Christmas which was creeping inexorably closer. If everything went to plan and there were absolutely no hiccups anywhere, the house might just be watertight by the third week of December.

Having taken Greg's suggestion to heart, Freddy stood in the open doorway of the old house, her fingers wrapped tightly around a steaming hot mug of tea as she watched her mother and Mr Lewis consult on the last section of work. A pale sunlight shone down on the beautifully smooth lines of newly-laid slates and, even though the garden was bare in the cold of winter, there was a new sense of elegance and clean lines about the place, as the old house was gradually replaced by a newer version of itself. Smiling as she saw her mother accept a drop of spirit in her tea from old man Lewis' hip flask, Freddy went back inside the building, heading into the large ground-floor kitchen where she continued taking the ancient units apart.

Because the overall space of the room was so large, Freddy planned for it to become a kitchen and breakfast area, which meant the entire space needed to be completely emptied until she could see the total dimensions she had to play with. She rather fancied widening the old kitchen door into something three times its present size; one third would become Greg's private entrance to his flat on the first floor, while the remaining two-thirds could be a glass-panelled entrance from the kitchen into the kitchen garden just beyond. There was even the possibility that she could replace the entire wall between the kitchen and the garden with glass; the amount of light coming into the house would be spectacular. Before any of that could happen, however, these old units needed to be removed. It was brainless, physical work, but as it was too cold to work outside for long, then ripping out old wooden kitchen units was the ideal task to take her mind off things.

Some of the units had been screwed into the wall joists and were rusted hard with age and old paint. A few heavy taps beside the screw head with the hammer raised the head just enough to get the power drill in to unscrew each ancient bit of steel one at a time. It was slow work, though she'd already made a surprising amount of mess considering she'd only been at it for a couple of hours. A pile of old cabinet doors and side panels lay in the centre of the room as testament to her efforts, beside a plastic carton of excavated screws and nails. Freddy felt her mind ease away from the edge of anxiety that had been gripping her for days now, as she moved from one screw to the next, a comforting routine where there was no requirement to think about anything more taxing than the avoidance of splinters. Though it was a shame that some of these old wood panels couldn't be repurposed in some way; some of them were in fairly decent condition and, like much of the internal woodwork of the house, was still strong, still had use.

Mummy's house in Harrow had some good old bits of timber in it as well, though the entire building needed an enormous amount of work to bring it up to a modern level of habitability. It was one of the things Freddy intended doing with some of the money from the sale of the top-floor apartment; getting her mother's home up to a decent level of comfort had been on Freddy's mind since forever. The proceeds from the flat were going to fix up an awful lot of problems, on top of which, Freddy would have a dream home all of her own, as well as a walled garden of her fantasies.

Unbidden, an image of Greg strode into her thoughts, wearing the semi-serious expression he had whenever she asked for his opinion, as if he wasn't used to having his ideas valued. That was strange, Freddy smiled musingly as she unscrewed yet another long and rusted metal stick from its ancient home. The way someone like Greg, someone with all that responsibility and professional authority on his shoulders could be so tentative at times, as if reluctant to cause offence, despite being the most likeable man she had met in years.

She stopped tugging a wooden panel away from the wall to focus for a moment on exactly what that awareness meant to her now, after yesterday, at the lab. The way he'd put his arms around her as if it
were the most natural thing in all the world. The way she felt, pressed hard against his solid warmth, his urgent promises that all would be well, that he'd put things back to rights somehow.

Freddy felt an odd peacefulness as she thought of him. Greg was such a genuine sort of man. It was such a relief to have finally met someone like him who she could ... She paused again, reviewing her words thoughtfully. It was probably best to take this a little more slowly. Neither of them had any intention of ... of ... had they? And there was still so much work to do on the house and so many things could go awfully wrong and it probably wasn't the most sensible of ideas, it really wasn't. Not right now. Not with all the terrible things that were happening.

Dropping another panel onto the central pile, Freddy stretched her back. It seemed so perverse. Greg was the nicest, most generous, the kindest man ... It wasn't fair that they couldn't do whatever they wanted. It was just this bloody awful situation; too many bad things happening to make sense of anything else right now. And for that matter, why was someone so determined to believe that either she or her mother might have anything in their possession ... papers, documents, whatever, that might be of value to anyone? And why would anyone ransack her office at the Apothecary centre if they'd already done the same thing to mummy's house in Harrow? What kind of papers did anyone imagine might be kept at her mother's house and, if not there, then at Freddy's office at the lab? It made no sense. What kind of document might either of them have without realising they had it? It couldn't be legal documents because they were all kept at the solicitors. The odd property deed still of any worth was also in the solicitor's care, so what else might there be that ... There was her father's old stuff somewhere, she supposed; some fading ancient photographs and a few letters and things. It had all been gone through and harvested of anything of any value years ago, so was it even conceivably possible that someone was looking for some old paperwork belonging to her father? The only reason mummy even kept his things was out of nostalgia. It was all lost up in the attic in Harrow, somewhere.

A little voice in Freddy's head agreed. But nobody else knows about his things, except you and Mummy, it added. It's always been one of her private little memorials of daddy.

But even if someone was after her father's old and dusty papers, what they might have been hoping to find was a mystery. Freddy stopped moving as an odd thought struck her. Straightening up, she looked down at the pile in the middle of the floor and frowned. It was such a wildly ludicrous idea that ... no, it was too mad for words. Nobody could possibly take such a thing seriously, not after all this time. And besides, even if there was someone taking the idea in earnest, why make all this fuss now? Why now? Another, colder, thought arrived. Who would be prepared to kill Roy Armstrong for such an impossible idea?

The sound of shared laughter broke her reverie and Freddy looked up to see her mother and Mr Lewis strolling in from the front door. Despite everything that was happening, it was rather sweet to see them both so obviously comfortable in each other's company. They seemed to remember all the same events and knew, or at least, knew of, many of the same people as contemporaries usually did. It must be nice for both of them to be able to talk about shared memories.

"Ewen has persuaded me to attend a City and Guilds dinner with him on Friday evening," Gwendoline shrugged in surprise at her eldest daughter. "It's a ceremonial Christmas thing, apparently."

"And not really the kind of do for a single man to attend, see," Ewen Lewis raised his eyebrows. "After Mrs Lewis passed, I never had the opportunity to go to another one, see? I thought your Mam might like to see everyone in their fine robes. They usually do a lovely dinner an' all."

"I shall have to see what I have in my wardrobe that's fit to wear on such an occasion," Gwendoline
caught Freddy's gaze and rolled her eyes theatrically. "The few nice dresses I have are in a wardrobe in Harrow."

"If you need anything, you know I'll be happy to drive you up there and back, Mummy," Freddy started to pull her work gloves off. "Do you still have that lovely Chanel number? The black one with the diamanté broach at the neckline? That always looks super dressy."

"Yes," Gwendoline nodded slowly. "That one would do very well. Chanel never dates and it's grand enough for such an occasion. I think it would do very nicely indeed. What a clever thought, my dear."

"Looks like I'll have to be dusting off my best suit then, in that case," the expression on Mr Lewis' face was one of amused satisfaction. "If I'm to be escorting a lady to a ball, then it seems only right."

Carefully not noticing her mother's charmed expression, Freddy turned back to the next wooden panel in line for her attention. "Are daddy's old papers still up in the attic at your house or did you throw them all out?" she asked off-handedly, whacking the wall by the screw with the claw-hammer.

"Whatever made you think of daddy's old things?" Gwendoline half-turned, a curious note in her voice. "It's been years since you've seen them."

"I remember he used to have some sepia photographs," Freddy kept her eyes on the screw she was trying to extract. "I thought it might be nice to have some of them cleaned up and framed, maybe hang them here in the house somewhere."

"They'd all be dreadfully old and tatty by now, darling," Gwendoline sounded uncertain. "Though I certainly have no objection to you taking any of them that you fancy, especially if you think they would make an interesting display."

"They'd be in a big box with his other papers, wouldn't they?" Freddy turned then to look at her mother. "Up in the attic?"

"I believe so," Gwendoline wrinkled her nose in thought. "It's been such an age since I even remembered they were up there. If you want to, you could have a look when we drive up to collect my dress for the party. Would that suit?"

"Then how about we drive up tomorrow?" Freddy picked up the power drill. "You can collect whatever else you want to have with you over Christmas, which might come in handy," she smiled slyly, glancing across to where Mr Lewis was casually inspecting the old kitchen fireplace. "I can have a quick scout around the attic while you get your glad rags together and then I can drop you back to the Dolphin in case you need to have the dress dry-cleaned in time for the bash on Friday night."

"Oh, would you darling?" Gwendoline patted her eldest daughter on the arm. "That would be perfect and gives me time to organise myself without rushing. You know how much I hate to rush."

"First thing in the morning then," Freddy smiled and returned to her task. *So her father's things were still up at the Harrow house.* After all this time. It would be very interesting to see what else might be there in addition to a pile of old sepia photographs.

###

"Is this what you were after, sir?" the young detective walked across to Greg's desk carrying both paper lists and the opened visitors' book from the Apothecary's centre. "I've gone through the lot from start to finish and it's the only one on all three of them."
Waiting impatiently as the paperwork was arrayed on his desk, Greg's eyes followed the detective's finger as it touched on a name first on the Harrow list, then the Heathfield House list and finally, high up on a page in the second of the two visitors' registers.

The name and signature were clear enough and Greg felt the air leave his chest as if he'd been punched in the gut. But why ..?

"And you're absolutely sure there's no other name across all three lists?" Greg's focus stayed on the name, already knowing the answer to his question, though it had to be asked, to be sure. To be safe.

"Positive, sir," the young man stood back and rubbed his eyes. "I double-checked, just in case."

"Good man," Greg nodded slowly, though his thoughts were already picking up speed. The first thing he needed to do was to speak to Freddy and her mum. Nor was the conversation the kind you could have on the phone; this had to be said to their faces. He inhaled slowly, wondering how they'd take the news after everything that had happened.

"Thank you," he nodded, pulling out his phone and calling Freddy's number. In only seconds, her voice was at the other end. "Freddy," Greg paused, unsure how to broach the topic. "I have some news about ... that you and your mother need to know urgently. Are you at the house? Can I meet you there?"

"I'm here," she said. "I'll wait for you."
He was even getting used to the traffic flow now. Straight down the Embankment, hang a right into Lupus Street and then sharp left into Westmorland Place. Ten minutes flat from the Yard carpark to his now-preferred spot to the left of the Pimlico House's main gate. Freddy's Landrover was in its usual place, parked on the right side. The main gate itself was closed up for the day, as it was already growing dark in the wintery mid-afternoon.

There were a lot more lights on in the house these days, as more power outlets had been made available for the tradespeople working in and around the house. Greg paused in the empty expanse of the denuded garden and squinted up at the roof which seemed, at least at first glance, to be complete. He'd need to come and have a good look around in daylight so he could see and admire the quality job Mr Lewis and the Clan Lewis had achieved. There was no sign of any lorries parked around the place and Greg assumed everyone had knocked off for the day. Not only was it getting dark early, this close to Christmas, it was also bloody freezing.

His shoes crunched across the iron-hard and already frosting ground as he headed for the main front door, a new one of which he was expecting to be delivered and installed before the week was out if Gwendoline was right about the arrangements with the Penge company. It would look grand too; Greg felt a brief smile curve his mouth. Things were definitely starting to come together.

Opening the makeshift front door and stepping swiftly inside, he was surprised and pleased at the difference in temperature. Nobody would call the place warm by any stretch, but it was a damn sight warmer than outside, significantly so. He pulled off his heavy leather gloves and unwound the scarf from around his neck.

"Freddy?"

"In here," her voice echoed hollowly from somewhere on the ground floor, though as it was a big ground floor, she could be almost anywhere.

"Where's here?" Greg walked unhurriedly towards the sound.

"Kitchen."

Unbuttoning his coat as he walked, Greg wondered exactly what the internal temperature of the house was. It was almost warm enough to do without his jacket. Looks like his guess had been right and the Lewis family had finished their job. What a difference a roof made.

"Am I having a hot flush or is it actually warm in here?" he called, walking down the long central hall towards the back of the house, peeling out of his overcoat as he did.

"It is quite nice, isn't it?" Freddy stood to one side of the large empty space sipping from an old glass jam jar half full of dark red wine in one hand while she wielded a large and ancient paint scraper in the other. The opened bottle and a second glass jar sat on a foldable picnic table. There was little else in the room except a small electric fan heater purring softly in the background.

"Where'd the old kitchen go?" Greg looked around, mystified and impressed. The last time he'd been in here, the place had cabinets and worktops and old lino on the floor and everything. Now, there was a rough pile of old canvas tarpaulins to one side and an absence of anything remotely kitchen-like.

"It's taken me all day," Freddy finished off her wine and plonked the jar down on the small table,
where she picked up a plastic bucket nearly filled with a great pile of long rusty screws. "There's over three hundred of these," she waved the bucket at him before dropping it down to the floor. "When Mr Lewis finished the last patch of tiling and was clearing stuff away, he offered to take all the old bits of unit and wood I had stacked up here," she looked around at the emptied space. "Makes a bit of a difference, eh? I thought it was worth a little celebration," she nodded at the bottle.

"It's huge," Greg looked around appreciatively. "Have you decided how you're going to lay the place out?"

Pouring herself another dollop of wine and adding a measure into the second jar for Greg, Freddy waved a hand generally towards the existing back door. "Lots of glass over there, lots of nice new units and stuff over here and an informal eating area right about there," she indicated where he stood, then paused, handing him the wine. "What did you want to speak to me about?"

"Ah," Greg took a hefty mouthful of the rich claret. Drawing in a deep breath, he exhaled slowly. "There's a limit to the specific details I can give you about an ongoing investigation," he began. "But it's possible we've identified a key individual in the proceedings. I've got uniforms out on the lookout as we speak."

"Oh, but that's marvellous." Abruptly, Freddy looked and sounded solemn. "And this person is connected to Roy Armstrong's death?"

"It's possible, though you'll appreciate I can't say anything much until things happen formally first. I just wanted you and your mum to know that we've been able to narrow down some of the leads we had and are actively pursuing inquiries."

"That's good," Freddy sipped her wine and sounded forlorn. "Roy Armstrong was a lovely old man and nobody had any reason to hurt him."

"We'll get whoever did all these things, Freddy. You know we will."

"Yes, I know," she sighed and stared down at the jam jar in her fingers, suddenly not wanting any more alcohol. She looked up and met his eyes. "And what will happen when you do?"

"Happen?" Greg took another mouthful of wine and frowned, his gaze fixed firmly on her troubled face.

"When you catch whoever is responsible for all the horrible things that have been happening. What happens after that? And after the house is finished?" Freddy looked away. "When everything is done?" She looked back at him, her eyes dark and wide and filled with a strange melancholic yearning.

Greg had no idea what he did with the jar, but suddenly both of his hands were sliding up her shoulders as he pulled Freddy towards him, tilting his head so that finally, his mouth was able to find hers and kiss her the way he'd wanted to the day before at the lab ... the way he'd wanted to kiss her for longer than he cared to admit, even to himself. And she was warm and soft and curving into his arms and her mouth was kissing him back and the dark wine burned a red candle in his chest and he sighed as his arms wrapped her tight. It was madness and he knew it was madness and this was a dozen different kinds of bad idea and he didn't give a damn.

There were no words, and no need for them, as Freddy slid her hands high up his back, pulling herself close against his chest, taking his kiss and making it her own. It had been so long since any woman had wanted him to kiss her and hold her like this; Greg's head swam as he kissed her lips apart until he could taste the wine in her mouth. Freddy's soft sighs told him everything was fine, that
everything was better than fine. A great spike of heat and wanting shot through him as he held her still tighter, winding himself around her body as his fingers raked upwards through fine hair and into the heat of her scalp. A shuddering groan left his chest, even as he moved to kiss her from a different angle, needing to have all of her inside his arms, inside his cresting desire.

"Oh god," Freddy's moan sent a thrill down his spine, as a powerful and overwhelming craving for her emerged out of nowhere, flaring instantly into total conflagration. Greg had no idea what was happening and lacked the time to analyse the sensation as the constriction of his jacket coat sleeves limited the reach of his hands. He shrugged it off impatiently, reaching down to wrap his arms more fully around Freddy's back and hips, unwilling to lose a second of the physical contact between them as the room suddenly seemed immensely warmer and his skin prickled with heat.

A coolness reached him as Freddy managed to open his shirt, the shock of her touch on his skin causing him to groan again as he tugged and pulled at her coat, wanting nothing more than to have the softness of her flesh in his hands. He could hear the harshness of his own breath and the erratic sounds of Freddy's broken murmurs. Feverish with the sheer physical need for touch and the exultation of someone wanting so much to have him touch her, Greg shivered, breathless.

It was unclear which one of them stumbled off-balance, but somehow they were both on the floor, on the wrinkled pile of old tarpaulins. With one arm beneath her head and shoulders, Greg found his body angled across Freddy's as he sought her mouth again, kissing her hungrily as his free hand caressed the solid curve of her breast, making her groan and press even closer against him. For something so long unconsidered, his cock was suddenly so hard it agonised; the ache of physically wanting Freddy so acute, he had to clench his jaw tight so as not to growl his need like an animal. Trying to find a more comfortable position, he hunted for traction with his foot which slipped and shot out. There was an almighty crash and the metallic ricocheting sounds of hundreds of old screws flying across the dusty wooden floor. He stopped moving, assimilating the situation. Beneath him, Freddy simply froze.

"I think you just kicked the bucket," she whispered from somewhere under his shoulder.

Relaxing his spine, Greg laid his forehead on the softness of naked skin at her throat, his breathing jagged.

"I did," he strangled out the words, closing his eyes and inhaling the warm scent of her, their moment of passion tangibly interrupted. He opened them again as he felt Freddy shaking. Lifting himself up, Greg saw her face creased in silent laughter as she shook and shook, eventually placing a hand over her eyes as near-hysterical tears came.

"How old are you?" he demanded in mock disgust as he felt her entire body shake with unfettered hilarity, the heat inside him cooling rapidly now that the rush of shared fervour had ended.

"Only a teenager would consider a pile of old tarps suitable for a bed, so I guess that makes me about seventeen," Freddy laughed on, taking great gulps of air which made her body rise and fall in Greg's embrace. She wiped the glaze of tears from her cheeks.

She was quite right. He'd known it was mad from the first second, though he wouldn't change anything even if he could. He sat up slowly so as not to have Freddy slip and bang her head on the floor. Assessing the situation with a more rational eye, he found his shirt was completely undone though he was still wearing his tie. One of his shirt sleeves was flapping open and a shoe had come off. His suit jacket was on the floor, as was his long overcoat, some several feet away.

Beside him, Freddy pulled herself upright, combing disordered hair from her eyes with her fingers. Her face was flushed and her mouth was pink and shockingly tempting. Just looking at her, Greg felt
another flare of desire which he tamped resolutely down. Somewhere along the line, her jacket had gone, along with her long-sleeved work top. Freddy sat in the tangled pile of canvas in her plaster-streaked jeans and bra and work boots. Greg absently noted that despite her pragmatic outer shell, Freddy liked having silk and lace next to her skin. She seemed to be ridiculously pleased about something. If she looked at him again like she had before, Greg knew he'd have her there, on the musty old tarps and to hell with rationality. He blinked slowly and bit the inside of his lip as he looked for his missing shoe.

"I suppose that answers my question, at least," she smiled, fishing around for her top and wriggling it on.

"There was a question in all that?" Greg's heartbeat was calmer now, though he could still feel a pulse of heat in his veins. He adjusted the seam of his trousers into a more comfortable position.

Resting up on her knees, Freddy brought both of her hands up to cup the sides of his face. There were only inches between them.

"At the right time, and in the right place," she leaned closer, kissing his mouth softly, lingeringly, "I would very much like to continue this conversation, if you don't mind, Inspector."

"Call me Greg," his voice a rough whisper, Greg's hand found the back of her head as he returned her kiss with gentle promise. "It's a date."

They helped each other up, hands touching, fingers brushing against each other as they collected various bits of clothing, making themselves proper again. Greg wished they were back at his bedsit, small and pokey though it might be, it was at least private and quiet and his bed was wide and soft. Freddy would look amazing wrapped up in his white sheets. Wrapped up in him. He coughed hard and sucked down a deep breath. Fresh air would help. Probably.

"I'll, er, let you know when we've got something substantial ... when we've got ... the person of interest in the middle of all this," Greg brushed down the side of his coat where it had lain on the floorboards. "Just stay in town for the time being and avoid meeting people for the next couple of days until ..." he paused, meeting her eyes.

Luminescent hazel eyes that made him ache all over again.

"Until I give you the all-clear," he muttered. "At which point, I'll be able to give you the rest of the story. Just stay here at the house or around town until I say," he said, trying not to drown in that fathomless dark gaze. "Promise me."

"I promise," Freddy's voice held all sorts of shadowy tones and Greg clenched his jaw again.

"Are you good to go home now?" Greg checked his watch. It was after six. "I'd feel happier knowing you reached home safely."

"Do I merit a police escort?" Freddy grinned as she leaned down to switch off the heater and collect her things. She could pick up the spilled screws after she came back from Harrow with her mother in the morning.

"If you can get a move-on and have that old banger of yours going inside of five minutes, then I'd say that might be strong possibility," Greg watched her mop of dark hair swing over her eyes as she picked up her bag. His fingers itched to push it back from her face. As he clenched his hand in his coat pocket, Greg realised he'd just given himself two new problems; one was to stay civilised around Freddy now that they had reached this new understanding. The second was that he had no
choice but to recuse himself from the case.

###

The next morning was bitterly cold and not the sort of day you wanted to be out and about on but she'd promised her mother and they were only heading up to Harrow and back. A few hours at most and then she'd either head back to the garden house or maybe see what was happening down at the Apothecary centre; Freddy wanted to know what everyone was doing for Roy.

The thought had crossed her mind that perhaps a trip out to Mummy's place was not the best idea given what Greg had said the previous evening, but it was only Harrow. Not even outside the London boundaries really, and Greg had only said to stay in or around town, so a quick jaunt out and back surely wouldn't be a problem for anyone.

Yawning widely behind a gloved hand, Freddy drew in a deep breath of icy air to wake herself up. She hadn't slept much last night as her thoughts returned again and again to that moment when Greg simply stared into her eyes and literally dropped everything in order to kiss her. Her pulse thumped hard as an echo of the sensation made her feel hot all over again. He had been both gentle and quite, ah; *keen* was the word mummy would use. Freddy smiled to herself. Yes. Quite keen indeed, and yet despite his obvious arousal, he hadn't pushed the issue when she'd started laughing so uncontrollably. Unsure whether to be relieved or disappointed that the moment passed, she knew the right time would present itself before too long. Freddy smiled again. Hopefully sooner than later.

"You're looking like the cat who got the cream," Gwendoline hurried out the side door of the Dolphin, clambering up the steps into the Landy. "You know I wish you'd get a car more suitable for driving around town than this," she said, fussing with the old seat belt.

"Mummy, you know I use it for work and I'd have absolutely no hope with anything less robust," Freddy reversed the big vehicle out of the parking spot and left the courtyard, heading for Buckingham Palace Road; she'd go up the A40 and turn off at Northolt. The god of London traffic willing, they'd be up there well within the hour.

"How are you getting along with Greg, dear?"

Mummy could be unnervingly on the ball at times. Freddy wondered if she was imagining things or if her mother knew more than she was letting on. Greg wouldn't have said anything to her, surely?

"Fine. He came by the house last night to tell me the police had identified someone who might be involved in Roy Armstrong's death," Freddy kept her eyes on the road, ignoring the traitorous flick of her pulse as her thoughts returned once more to the feel of his arms around her and the way his mouth had ... She cleared her throat. "He appeared quite surprised that I managed to clear the kitchen so quickly."

"Yes, but how are you getting on with him?" Gwendoline turned to examine her eldest child's profile. "Greg is a very nice man, in case you hadn't noticed."

"He is a very nice man and yes, Mummy, I had noticed."

"You've had dinner with him a few times, I believe?"

"We've been to the pub a couple of times, if that's what you mean," Freddy concentrated on the road; there was a turning coming up shortly. "And there was that time we all had dinner together, if you recall."

"Well, I think he's very nice indeed," Gwendoline turned to face the front again. "You could do far
"Mummy," Freddy kept the Landrover in a straight line. "Are you still determined to marry me off?"

"Well, you don't seem to be getting anywhere with Alex, darling. I wanted to make sure you didn't miss any chances." There was a momentary pause. "You would tell me dear, if you were a lesbian, wouldn't you?"

Freddy flipped the indicator and pulled smartly into the side of the road. "Would you care to tell me what the problem is?" she demanded, staring at her mother's face as the Landy clunked to a halt.

Gwendoline had the grace to look mildly penitent. "I worry for you," she said. "Both your sisters have done well for themselves ... I have several friends with very presentable daughters if that was the way ..."

Freddy stared forward and heaved a short, hard sigh. God save her from a well-meaning parent. "Mummy darling, I am not a lesbian, but if I was, I'd be perfectly capable of finding my own partner, thank you. As it happens, Greg and I are ..." how to describe last night without giving her mother a heart attack? "Greg and I are getting on very well indeed," she smiled discreetly.

"Have you gone to bed with him yet? Gwendoline scrutinised her daughter's expression closely.

"Right. Enough of prying conversations with old women who have nothing better to do than ask their children utterly inappropriate questions." Freddy turned the key briskly and started the Landrover back up in double quick time.

"I have no idea how you became such a prude," her mother settled back into the passenger seat and folded her arms.

They travelled in silence for more than ten minutes before Gwendoline's phone rang.

"Hello? Oh, hello, Alex. Freddy and I were just talking about you."

Freddy groaned. She was undoubtedly about to get another lecture on Alex Harper's suitability for her. Did her mother never listen to anything?

"No, Freddy and I are just heading out to Harrow so I can pick up a few bits and pieces. Freddy wants to collect her father's old photographs from the attic. She's thinking of having them restored and framed for display in the Pimlico house."

Rolling her eyes, Freddy wondered why her mother kept trying to bring she and Alex together. It just wasn't going to work. Especially not now that things with Greg were becoming so ... interesting.

"Well yes, of course, dear. If there's something you need to speak with me about urgently, then of course you can drop in at my place while we're there. It won't be the least trouble, though I'm not sure if I'll be able to offer you any tea, I'm afraid. Alright, see you shortly. Bye-bye."

Sighing internally, Freddy realised she was finally going to have to tell Alex she wasn't interested and that there was someone else. She doubted he'd be in the least surprised.

###

Fortunately, the Superintendent was able to make time for a brief meeting shortly after nine in the morning, though she wasn't best pleased by the unexpected interruption to her schedule.
"This sounds important, if you need to see me before the Senior Management briefing at ten." Leela Manju had known Greg for a number of years now, first at the old Yard and now here at the new Curtis Green building. Though her focus was mostly on counter-terrorism these days, she still met with all the senior Serious Crimes people at least once a month. It was unusual for someone like Greg to come to her with an urgent request for a meeting unless there was a very good reason.

"It is, Ma'am," Greg took the seat and met her eyes. "Thank you for making the time to see me."

"What's the problem?" Manju flicked her eyes across the list of incoming emails she hadn't managed to read this morning. Was Greg's visit connected to something she was yet to see?

"It's about the Hatton Garden robberies and the murder of Professor Armstrong at the Apothecary centre," Greg studied his fingers as he looked for the best words to state his case. "There's now a conflict of interest at play ... I can't be sure of complete impartiality at this point," he frowned, staring at the Superintendent's desk.

Leela Manju refocused her attention swiftly; a compromised investigation was something to be avoided at all costs.

"Tell me," she said.

Greg did.

Starting with the meeting of the Kerr family through the Pimlico renovation project, to the accidental involvement with the Harrow police after the break in at Freddy's mum's house. He explained the connections he’d discovered between the unsuccessful drug raids at the massage businesses, drawing lines of investigation between those and the drug distribution network and, through Billy Swithin, the link to the Hatton Garden jobs. He described the situation with Freddy. After speaking for almost ten minutes without pause, Greg sighed heavily and rubbed a hand over his face.

"Which leaves me in a somewhat compromised situation, I appreciate this," he added. "But as none of the investigations have moved beyond a theoretical position as yet," Greg paused and looked up. "If I step down now, someone else should be able to take everything forward without tainting the process."

Pursing her lips, Manju sniffed, unimpressed. This was exactly the type of situation the Met was trying so very hard to avoid these days, though she respected Lestrade's self-intervention. It sounded as though he was correct and, as yet, no proactive actions had been taken. If the next few steps were taken very carefully, this might just be a win-win.

"And who has been working with you on the analysis of these concurrent cases?" the Superintendent wondered who else she might have to sideline.

"Sargent Donovan has been with me right up until the Armstrong murder," he nodded. "I made sure that she conducted the questioning of Dr Kerr rather than myself, and Donovan was the one who accompanied me to the site of the failed drug raid in Limehouse, but other than that, I'm the only one with this problem."

"You made the connection between these cases alone?" Manju sounded sceptical and looked it. "Nobody else has been involved at all?"

"As I said, Ma'am," Greg shrugged. "I've been putting things together in my head to see if it made sense, and now that it does, I felt it would be for the best if I stepped aside."

"Do you want to step aside?"
It was the woman's tone more than anything that caused Greg's eyes to flick back to hers. "Not in the least, but ..." he paused, raising his eyebrows questioningly.

"Would you be willing to hand the case over to another's lead?"

*The sixty-four million dollar question.* Would he be prepared to hand everything over to someone like Taylor or Dimmock and play second fiddle? The idea stuck in his throat. But if it meant he got to get the bastard behind all of this ...

"It wouldn't be a problem for me, Ma'am," he responded formally.

"Then leave this with me. I'm going to table this as an urgent business in the senior team meeting due to begin ..." she paused, looking at her watch, "three minutes ago," she stood, gathering her things. "I'll contact you following the meeting to decide the way forward. Do nothing until then."

###

It was more than an hour later that Greg was asked to present himself at one of the small conference rooms on the fifth floor. When he arrived, he was mildly surprised to see not only Superintendent Manju, but also DCI Bosisto and Chief Superintendent Samuels. Nodding greetings to everyone in the room, Greg took one of the spare seats at the oval table.

"Thanks for coming to see me earlier, Greg," Leela Manju dispensed with any small talk. "I've discussed your situation with Chief Superintendent Samuels and also with DCI Bosisto here, and we'd like to propose a compromise."

"Compromise?" Greg narrowed his eyes thoughtfully.

"DCI Bosisto will take the investigations forward; he'll be the public face of the operation, but we all want you to act as operational analyst behind the scenes, providing an understanding of the links you spoke about earlier between the Hatton Garden robberies, the drug distribution network and the possible connection between the death of Professor Armstrong and the as yet unexplained harassment of Dr Kerr."

"And how exactly are you expecting me to work with DCI Bosisto?" he asked warily, sensing he wasn't going to like the answer.

"Tony Bosisto will be seen to run the investigations and do the work. You will sit at your desk and run Ops from there." Manju raised her eyebrows. "Problem with that?"

So. He was expected to keep doing the hard work bringing everything together while Tony Bosisto, a good enough bloke, was the one to reap the benefits of fronting the whole operation. A bit unfair to say the least.

*But you can't run an investigation when the woman you ... when Freddy Kerr is a key piece in the puzzle, can you?* He sighed. He couldn't have it both ways.

"I'm sure DCI Bosisto will do a very professional job of things, Ma'am," Greg kept his face straight, not letting on by so much as a twitched eyebrow that he had the slightest objection.


"Right. I'll let the two of you work out communication channels and deployment of both uniformed
and plain-clothes officers," Superintendent Manju also stood. "Tony, you've got the pieces," she
turned and looked carefully at Greg. "And DI Lestrade, you've got the chessboard. I want daily
updates please, and immediate notification if anything major goes down, good or bad, clear?"

"Ma'am," Greg nodded briefly, both men standing as she left the room. He turned to look the senior
man in the eye and let out a long exhale.

"Pub?" Tony Bosisto raised his eyebrows.

Greg checked his watch. It was barely ten-thirty in the morning. He raised his own eyebrows. "Bit
early, even for you?"

Tony laughed. "Perfect time. Nobody else will be there. Come on; I'll buy you a decent coffee."

In the lounge bar of The Clarence in Whitehall, sitting comfortably on the tartan-backed seating and
munching a toasted cheese-and-ham croissant, Greg swallowed too-hot coffee and wondered how
this arrangement was going to work out. Tony Bosisto needed a thorough briefing if nothing else, so
best to start there then.

"So who's this lynch-pin character that's got our lovely Leela so worked up?" pre-empting Greg's
plan, Bosisto shoved half a toasted croissant into his mouth and chewed intensely.

"His name," Greg sipped his hot coffee sparingly. "Is Alex Harper."
The house was cold, deep-down bone cold with an unaired smell about the place as they walked into the front hall. Hardly surprising since it hadn't been lived in for several weeks in the coldest and most lifeless time of the year. A sense of neglect and abandonment hung in the air, as if damp were leaching in through the walls and mould was deciding where to grow in the antiquated scullery. Once again, Freddy knew she had to find a way of getting her mother to sell the house and move somewhere easier to live. Some place that had decent heating, for a start.

As an adult, Freddy had never liked the Harrow house all that much; it was too close to town to be a country home, yet too far from the city to be convenient. There was also a feeling that the house itself had never really been a home for her family. After daddy had died so comparatively young, everything had been such a scramble to keep their lives working. The house had lost something after that, with all the plans for its modernisation discarded in the struggle for essential survival. It had never felt a particularly adult-friendly place to live.

"I think I have some long-life milk in the pantry, dear," Gwendoline called from the kitchen. "I'll shout when I've made tea."

"Alright, Mummy," Freddy was tugging the long iron bolts on the door at the bottom of the attic staircase. The metal was icy in her fingers, chilled like everything else in the house. The attic was probably freezing.

Finally yanking the door open, Freddy peered up the narrow wooden stairs that had been the pathway to such a fascinating place when she and her sisters were children. On slow November days when the weather was too wet or blustery to be outside for long, they'd all end up sprawled across the old furniture stored up in the attic, playing all manner of imaginary games, as children do. But nobody had been up here in years. There was a thick layer of grey dust everywhere and while Freddy took care not to disturb anything unnecessarily, she knew was looking for was not going to be easy to find.

With her hands on her hips, she stood in the tiny central portion of clear floorspace, wondering where on earth to start hunting for the small tin trunk her father has used to store all his old souvenirs and bits and pieces. Picturing the container in her mind's eye, Freddy scanned the heavily cluttered space around her, sighing heavily when nothing was immediately obvious. Like it or not, it looked like she was going to have to get her hands dirty. Turning to her left, she began a methodical search of everything that was underneath something else, as ancient dust filled the air.

"It wasn't until I saw his name on all three lists," Greg was on a second coffee. "He probably dropped into the big house next door to Dr Kerr's mother to give the owners advice on setting up a trust fund for their kids or something," Greg paused, sipping the creamy liquid. "He must have had a good look at the alarm system while he was there. The owners might even have given his a quick tour of the place and shown off their security measures to him," he shook his head wonderingly.

"People."

"People behave weirdly when they're talking to coppers too." Tony Bosisto had polished off his croissant and had gone for a sugar-dusted doughnut with his second coffee. "Anyone to do with the law, really," he mused, licking his fingers. "People will tell you anything you ask. It's the job, you know that."
"Yeah," Greg raised his eyebrows and nodded musingly. "But then Harper's name was also seen in one of the Apothecary Centre's visiting books from back in May this year. Whether he came looking for Freddy Kerr, or he was with her, or for some other reason, his presence at all three sites, Heathfield House, Gwendoline Kerr's house and the Centre makes him a person of interest, which is when I remembered he drove a shiny, late model Mercedes."

"Important, why?" Bosisto blinked slowly, listening. He was a good detective.

"I first saw Harper's car months ago outside the Pimlico property Freddy and I are renovating. I thought at the time it was pretty flash but then, the man's a solicitor who obviously has some wealthy clients, so he can afford a car like that."

"And?" Tony lifted his coffee, waiting.

"And then I remembered seeing a few expensive showy cars parked along the lane from Gwendoline Kerr's place out at Harrow the day her office was ransacked. If the Apothecary Centre had kept hold of their external security camera footage all the way back in May, we'd probably see the man drive up in the same bloody car. He's the type that likes to make an entrance." Greg wrinkled his nose.

"You're not a fan then," Bosisto lifted an eyebrow. "Just as well you took yourself off the case," he looked sage. "Anything to do with bloody solicitors and the legal-beagles just makes things too messy to work with."

"Yeah, and you remember that," Greg met his gaze. "I didn't give this case up to have some ham-fisted DCI fuck it up for me." Despite the mildness of his tone, there was a faint stress to his words.

"Message received," Bosisto nodded. He'd been in the same boat himself and nobody could afford a fouled investigation these days. "So, what's the plan, Kasparov?"

"We nail Harper down. I want someone out at Heathfield House talking to the owners about whether Harper might have seen the security arrangements when he was there. I also need to know who was at the Apothecary place two nights ago and see if you can get the CCTV footage from outside the sub-post office in Bermondsey, Drummond Street from last Wednesday evening."

"Why just Wednesday?" Bosisto finished his coffee.

"Because Wednesday night is the night Billy Swithins hands over his profits," Greg nibbled his bottom lip. "Swithins said a big man doing the collecting came around in a posh car on Wednesday nights and I'm just wondering if..."

"Nobody would be so bloody stupid, surely?" Bosisto frowned. "Use their own car on a drug run?"

Greg shrugged. "Depends how confident the man feels, I s'pose," he looked unimpressed. "Or maybe he's just plain arrogant; doesn't think us dumb coppers will connect him to anything. After all, there's a lot of black Mercs in London."

"What else have you got?" Tony Bosisto sat back in his chair, arms folded. "You got more, right?"

"The way the drugs were packaged," Greg looked down at his hands. "Each portion wrapped up in little twists of paper, exactly the way Freddy Kerr does at the Apothecary Centre. I'm positive someone watched her making her own little packages and decided to mimic them," he shook his head. "If Harper accompanied Dr Kerr to the Centre and saw what she was doing, maybe he thought it would be funny to copy the way she did hers, who knows? I'm still waiting on forensics for prints on the lot Swithins had under the counter."
"And the link between the drugs distribution and the Hatton Garden jobs?"

"The big man who delivers the drugs and collects the profits from Billy Swithins was the same one who was looking for fences to pass along the small stuff from the robberies, working for the individual he called 'His Lordship'." Greg wished he had a cigarette. "If we could track the delivery bloke down, we'd have a door into both cases."

"Then, if your reasoning is correct," Tony Bosisto wrinkled his forehead in thought. "Then the person referred to a 'His Lordship' could be this Alex Harper? That right?"

"Yeah, maybe," Greg nodded moodily. "Arrogant prick. It would be just like him to take on a name like that."

Bosisto sat in deep thought. "Okay," he said. "But why? And if, as you say, this guy was romantically interested in Dr Kerr, then why would he have organised the break in at her mother's place or the ransacking of the woman's office? Makes no sense."

Greg shrugged. "This is where it all gets a bit fuzzy," he said. "There's got to be a reason but as yet..." he grimaced. "And as for the title... I dunno. Delusions of grandeur? Napoleon complex? Not really worried about that particular detail right now, to be honest."

"Right then," Bosisto leaned forward. "Where do you want me to send the troops in first?"

"I need to see the CCTV footage from outside Billy Swithins' post office for the last couple of Wednesday nights, if it can be got," Greg lifted up a finger. "I want to identify the man who drops the goods off at the post office and collects the takings on Wednesday nights and see what car he drives. Then I want to find bloody Alex Harper and keep an eye on him for a while, nothing obvious, just keep track of the man for a couple of days, see if he does anything stupid," another finger went up. "And I want to find out everything we can about his background; who he is, where he came from, that kind of thing."

"Anything else?" Tony Bosisto finished writing in his notebook. "You're the one calling the shots, don't forget."

Greg smiled wanly. He was indeed calling the shots, for all the good it would do him. "Swithins said something about two brothers being involved in the Hatton Garden robberies," he added thoughtfully. "It would be good to find out if there are any brothers anywhere at all in the whole mess and ask them to assist us with our inquiries, see if we can loosen anything up."

"Right. Anything else?" Bosisto was putting his pen away. "Last chance."

"Just make sure that Alex Harper goes nowhere near Freddy Kerr or her mother," Greg's voice went flat. "If we push him and he feels crowded, he may lash out and that's something we need to avoid at all costs."

"On it." Tony Bosisto had his phone at his ear. "Now you bugger off back to your nice shiny office and leave us working stiffs get on with the job."

Grinning, Greg gave him the finger as they headed back to the car.

###

With her jeans coated in a layer of clinging dust and cobwebs, Freddy seemed no further forward. Brushing herself off on the way downstairs for tea, Freddy complained about the proverbial needle in a haystack.
"See if you can find Daddy's tennis racquets," Gwendoline said. "I seem to recall your father kept all his old possessions together, and racquets might be easier to find than a small tin chest."

And so here she was, trying not to breathe too hard as yet another cloud of dust bloomed around her. *Where in God's name would anyone put a stack of tennis racquets?* There was an ancient sun-umbrella and several tea chests of old books and what looked like an antique television set. Cardboard boxes galore, but nothing in the way of small tin trunks or tennis racquets. About to try the other side of the attic in frustration, a bundle of old hockey sticks caught her eye. Sports equipment of a feather flocked together perhaps? Making her way carefully over and around the piled obstacles, Freddy wrangled herself into the corner where she moved a pile of tatty old baskets to one side. And there ... *yes,* hockey sticks and tennis racquets. If her mother was correct, then somewhere around here should be other things belonging to her father ... a case of decrepit watercolours ... his fishing rods ...

And there it was. Sitting quietly beneath some mouldering cricket pads and fishing magazines dating back to the mid-sixties. A dirty tin box hardly three feet long and barely more than a foot wide or tall. Daddy's box of treasure. *No, darling. Let's put all these old papers away in Daddy's treasure box, shall we?* Echoes from the long-distant past floated by along with the dust. As children, they all knew the tin box by sight. It was the final resting place of all the knickknacks her father had collected on his travels while he was in the army so many years before. Faded postcards, old letters, an envelope of foreign stamps. Just bits, really.

Pushing a variety of rubbish to one side, Freddy closed her fingers around the thin metal handle at one of the long ends and she pulled hard, trying to dislodge the thing from its long internment. With a clatter of fishing rods, the box came free, though it was heavy in her hand, a solid weight. She wondered what was inside to give it such substance.

Heaving hard, Freddy pulled the thing free, ignoring the sudden loud rattle and clank of falling objects and scraping of wood and metal. With a solid thud, the end of the trunk landed on the cleared bit of floor and she heaved a sigh of relief, coughing as the dust caught in her throat. Using the end of a once-white drop cloth to brush away the worst of the grime, Freddy decided to take the whole thing downstairs, rather than try and open it up here. With a clatter of fishing rods, the box came free, though it was heavy in her hand, a solid weight. She wondered what was inside to give it such substance.

Covering the polished surface with sheets of old newspaper, the tin box sat in state in the middle, as Freddy went to wash her hands before investigating the contents.

###

Instead of heading directly back to his office and staring mindlessly out at the lovely view the Met had been so kind as to give him, Greg decided that, after last night, it might be nice to see Freddy again and perhaps share a coffee or a chat ... his mind remembered the feel of her skin against his fingers and a tingle flushed through him. He smiled in anticipation. A stolen kiss would, perhaps, not be out of the question.

The first hint that all was not well was when he realised Freddy's Landrover was not parked in its usual place, though she had, on occasion, parked it inside the garden itself. Locking his BMW, Greg went to open the smaller of the two front gates, only to realise the thing was locked. He had a key, sure, but if it was locked, it meant that Freddy was elsewhere. Where elsewhere? He'd asked her ... warned her not to go anywhere, not to leave the safe confines of the city. Without conscious thought,
his phone was in his hand and he'd swiped Freddy's number open and hit Call.

"Freddy Kerr," her clear tones relaxed some of the tension in his stomach.

"Where are you?" Greg walked back to his car. "I thought I asked you not to leave town and to stay around the house."

"I'm only up in Harrow with mummy," Freddy sounded perfectly relaxed. "She's being taken to a swanky dinner on Friday by Mr Lewis and wanted to wear one of her nice party frocks so I said I'd drop her up here and then bring her home. It's only Harrow," she repeated. "Less than an hour on the road at this time of day."

"I asked you to stay in town," Greg felt his pulse quicken slightly. "I wanted to be sure you're safe."

"Safe?" Freddy's voice took on an uncertain edge. "You mean I might be in some danger? From whom? And why?"

"I told you last night I can't give out official information while there's an investigation going on," Greg forced himself to relax. The last thing he wanted to do was scare her. Besides, Harrow wasn't that far away. "I just wanted to be sure I knew where you were in case the person who broke into your mum's house and your office tried to pay you a personal visit, is all."

"But if you can't tell me who this person is, then how am I going to know how to avoid them?" Freddy asked with perfect logic.

"I just can't say anything at the moment," Greg scowled. "How soon are you coming back?"

"Well, mummy's sorting through her wardrobe and I've found daddy's old box of treasure and am about to dig out some of his photos," she said.

"Your father kept a box of old photos?" Greg felt a strange sensation prickle his skin. "Where?"

"Up in the attic beneath about a ton of dust, ancient fishing gear and dead spiders," Freddy laughed lightly. "I'd take a shower but the house is utterly freezing and I doubt the water temperature would be much better."

"What other kind of things did your dad keep up in the attic?"

Something in Greg's tone told Freddy the question was not a casual one.

"Oh, the usual stuff. Old photos, letters, that sort of thing. It's all been locked away up in the attic for years."

_Could this be why Gwendoline's house was ransacked? Why Freddy's office at the Apothecary Centre was trashed? The indirect cause of Roy Armstrong's death?_

"I'd very much like you to bring that box of your father's things into the Yard," he said carefully. "There might be something in there worth looking at."

There was a distinct pause. Greg could almost hear the grinding of Freddy's thoughts.

"When you say something worth looking at, you mean something someone else might have been looking for, don't you?"

"Look ... can you just bring the box of your dad's stuff and get yourself and your mum back to town as fast as you can?" Greg checked his watch. If Freddy left now, she'd get to the yard by ...
"We can't really leave until Alex gets here though," she sounded apologetic. "He rang mummy on the way up and said he had something important to discuss with her. He's supposed to meet us up here sometime soon," she said. "We can't simply go and not tell him."

*Alex Harper was on his way to meet them?* Christ on a crutch.

"Can you leave now and then phone him to say you'll see him back at the house?" Greg hunted urgently for a way to get the Kerrs back into London; anywhere Alex Harper couldn't get them alone.

"Don't be silly. He'll be here soon and then we'll all probably drive back down together."

*He couldn't tell them.* He didn't dare say anything or all hell would be let loose.

"Look, just humour me, will you?" Greg heard the note of desperation in his own voice. "I really don't want you or your mother being alone with anyone right now, not even her solicitor ... can you make some excuse or other and just get back here as fast as you can?"

There was another pause. Greg heard the slow inhale of patience being tested.

"Alright. If you absolutely insist, though I think you're making a mountain out of a molehill."

"Soon as you can, sweetheart, please." Greg felt his throat go dry. The very idea that Freddy or Gwendoline might be in any form of danger ...

"Fine. I'll hurry mummy up and throw her bodily into the Landy if she resists, though I warn you now that I'm laying the blame for all of this squarely at your feet, so you may have to buy her a large gin-and-tonic to get back in her good books."

"I'll buy her a bottle and a straw if needs be," Greg checked his watch again. Forty-five minutes or thereabouts and they'd be back. He couldn't leave them alone until he knew that Alex Harper was in custody. Anyone who was prepared to murder for what he wanted was not the kind of person he wanted on the loose. If the man was innocent of it all, Greg would be the first to let him know it ... but all his years on the force were telling him otherwise. Alex Harper was as guilty as sin and until enough evidence was found to put him away for a long time, Freddy and her mother needed to be protected.

"I'll try and get away ... oh ..." About to end their conversation, there was a lengthy pause before Freddy spoke again. "Sorry, Greg, Alex has just called again to say he's going to be here in about fifteen minutes. Mummy's already making fresh tea so I'm afraid there no way I'll get her to leave now, though as soon as Alex goes, I'll get her in the car, I promise."

*Fuck.*

He couldn't say anything and yet he couldn't just stand here and do nothing. He needed to *act*, and yet he needed time to *think* ...

"Okay, just don't hang around up there a minute longer than you need to," Greg forced himself to sound unworried, to be casual despite his heartbeat ratcheting up several notches. If he couldn't get the Kerrs away from Alex Harper, then there was only one thing he could do. "See you soon. *Bye.*"

The same second he ended the call with Freddy, he swiped down the list of names on his phone until he found Tony Bosisto's. Talking fast and running back to his BMW, Greg was already down the end of the street, blue lights flashing in the front and rear of his car as he floored the accelerator heading for Vauxhall Bridge Road and the A5, heading out of London by the fastest possible route
"Suspect's vehicle spotted crossing the North Circular at Tokyngton, sir," the female officer checked the screen in front of her. "Just had it called in by an area car ..." she listened intently for several seconds. "A black, late model Mercedes registration BD66 SMR registered to an Alexander S. Harper, just took the Harrow road at speed."

"If the bugger's speeding, get him pulled over," Bosisto snapped, standing in the main operations room with a phone to each ear. Greg's call had just raised the stakes to an undesirable level. "Where's the BMW?"

"On the A5, sir. Just crossing Westway."

"And where's the Astra?"

"Shepherd's Bush, heading up past Westfield."

"Jesus wept. Don't we have anything in that neck of the woods?" Tony Bosisto winced at the voice on one of the phones. "No Ma'am. I wasn't taking that tone with you."

"Got two patrol motorbikes at Wembley Stadium, Guv. They could intersect with the suspect before Barham Park roundabout."

"Get them on it! Tell them no arrest but we need a delay." Turning his head, Bosisto spoke quietly into the second phone. "We're going to pull him over for speeding but it's not enough to bring him into custody. It might give you just enough time to get the Kerr's away from Harrow. I've got Donovan heading up there as backup, but she's out by Shepherd's Bush. I hope you've thought of a story to explain your sudden appearance. Good luck, mate." Ending the call, the DCI wondered if this entire operation was about to hit the fan.

Knowing that he had at least a fifteen-minute respite, Greg's stomach unknotted slightly, though he knew he couldn't afford to relax too much. If there was no way of legally preventing Alex Harper from going to the Kerr's house in Harrow, then the only alternative was to be there himself, not as a copper, but as Freddy's ... friend. Passing Paddington Park, he knew there were fewer traffic lights up here. With the BMW lights flashing blue, he tore up the A5 towards Hyde.

"Who was that on the phone, dear?" Gwendoline was preparing a fresh pot of tea, listening for the sound of Alex's car.

"Only Greg. He's concerned that we don't get ourselves into trouble out here alone in the wilds," Freddy smiled at nothing. "He's really very sweet."

Pausing, the older woman looked appraisingly at her daughter. There had been an unusual nuance in her words. Was it possible her eldest child had finally found someone she liked? "I told you the Inspector was a jolly nice man," Gwendoline turned back to her tea-making. "Frankly, I'm amazed he's single."

Shaking her head as she headed back into the dining room after washing the dust and grime from her hands, Freddy eased the rusting clasp of the metal longbox and carefully lifted the lid. Having no real expectations at what she might discover, she was unsurprised to see the tin trunk filled to the brim with letters and envelopes, and fading photographs inside cardboard covers. There was a musty smell...
of things long kept away from the light and air. The brown envelopes were powdery against her fingertips. Having nothing better to do than wait for Alex to get here, Freddy decided to sort everything into piles in case there really was something in here that Scotland Yard might find of interest. Digging down through the layers of paper, she realised there must be years and years of accumulated correspondence in here. Puffing out her cheeks and exhaling, she got to work.

###

"What do you mean I was doing 70 in a 60 zone?" Alex Harper fumed at being escorted into a convenient layby by the two uniformed police officers on motorbikes. "I was on cruise control all the way up from the A40; it's not possible I was exceeding the limit I'd set in my own bloody car!"

"Now then sir," the older officer was entirely amiable as he unclipped a pocket on the thigh of his riding gear, extracting a notebook and pencil. "No need to get irate just because you were going a little bit faster than you should have been. We'll just need a few details, if you don't mind."

"I'm a solicitor going to a very important meeting with a most influential client," Harper tried again. "If I'm late because of this administrative cock-up, the Chief Constable shall hear of this, I promise you!"

"That will be fine sir," the officer's smile stayed where it was though his tone hardened. "Now, if you'll just give me your name and address and show me your licence and MOT papers, we'll have this sorted out in a jiffy."

With a face like thunder, Alex Harper slammed open the driver's door of his Mercedes, reaching over to the glove compartment.

###

"Suspect detained on Harrow Road just before the station, sir."

"Right, good," Tony Bosisto exhaled hard. "Where's the BMW now?"

"Just turned off the A5 onto Kingsbury Road. ETA twenty minutes."

"And the Astra?"

"Heading up the A40 towards Greenvale, sir, but ..."

"But what?" Bosisto was not in the mood for guessing games at this point.

"But there's major roadworks on the Western Avenue flyover, sir. All westerly traffic is being diverted via Northolt and there's a long tailback."

"There's always something," Bosisto growled. "Tell Donovan about the detour and get me a revised ETA."

"Request from RPU for verification of licence and outstanding warrants for one Alexander Stowe Harper of Five, White Horse Street, Mayfair, sir," the woman officer turned her head to see what Bosisto wanted done. If they were going to detain Harper, then now was the time.

"Is he clean?" Tony Bosisto hoped that there was something, some unpaid parking ticket or a long-forgotten speeding conviction that would merit a longer delay. Anything that would give Lestrade sufficient time to get the Kerrs and then get the hell out of Harrow before the waters became even muddier than they already were.
"As a whistle, sir," the officer shrugged. "Not even a late licence payment."

Damn. "Let him go, then," Bosisto scratched his jaw and picked up his other phone, dialling Greg once more.

"Lestrade." By the echo, Tony knew the phone was on hands free.

"Alexander Stowe Harper is clean of any misdemeanour and about to be waved on his way by the RPUs at Barham Park roundabout," he said. "Assuming he carries on as before, you've got about ten or fifteen minutes to do your thing," he paused. "Are you going to be able to make it?"

Greg's voice was remote and crackled faintly. "Just passing Kenton Station now," he said. "If the road stays clear, I'll be at the Kerr house in five minutes. I'll give you a shout when I arrive. Where's my backup?"

"Still on the A40. There's a tailback of detoured traffic and Donovan's caught in the middle of it, so no telling when she'll arrive. Sorry."

"I'm not waiting for anyone. Call you when I get there." There was a sudden silence on the phone as Greg ended the call.

The A4006 was a largely urban road with a correspondingly low speed limit of thirty mph. The BMW shot through doing sixty, partly because of the scanty traffic at this time of the day but mostly because of the blue lights which he'd had at full bore since he'd left Pimlico barely thirty minutes earlier. The tension in his stomach was easing a little; Greg knew he'd arrive before Harper. Neither Freddy nor her mother would be alone.

Three minutes out from his destination he slammed on the brakes as the road ahead was comprehensively blocked by a large and very stuck lorry. There was no way past and, by the time Greg made the realisation, he was already hemmed in by other cars at the rear.

He couldn't move.
Chapter 16

Without a moment's thought, Greg flicked the switch of the BMW's siren, the high-pitched and intensely aggravating wah-wah-wah blaring for several seconds, causing every car around him to slam on their brakes, searching wildly for the source. Ending the racket as quickly as it began, Greg got out of the car, waving his ID card,

"Police emergency," he shouted, waving the cars behind him into backing up until he had just room enough to move onto the nearest pavement and reverse beyond the blockage of cars. As soon as he'd cleared the stragglers, he hit the accelerator, spinning the steering wheel so that the car turned almost within its own wheelbase until it faced in the opposite direction. As soon as there was clear road, he yanked the wheel again, heading back down the road he'd just travelled, impatiently looking for another route to the Kerr house. There were so many small side roads and lanes here, Greg realised it was no good; he'd never be able to guess the correct one. He slammed the car to an abrupt stop and switched on the Satnav, simultaneously redialling the number of his most recent phone call; he needed to know where all the pieces were on the chessboard.

"Back so soon?" Bosisto's sounded surprised.

"Got stuck behind a lorry," Greg's eyes flicked back and forth across the small screen of his Garmin, swearing that his next car would have the inbuilt version if it had nothing else. "Where's Harper?"

"Jeez, Greg," the DCI sounded put out. "The RPUs let him go more than five minutes ago; there was nothing else they could do and he was screaming bloody murder as it was. Last we heard, he was on the Harrow road doing the max and heading up to the hill. Sorry mate, but we've done all we can at this end. I strongly suggest you wait for your backup to arrive and then go in officially if you have to go in at all."

"Donovan can handle the official part," Greg's eyes scanned the lines on the tiny screen on his dashboard. "I'm here in my unofficial capacity of worried friend and nothing more," he muttered, using a fingertip to hunt down the spider-scrawl of narrow country lanes. There. "Gotta go," he ended the call abruptly by shoving his phone in his pocket as he gunned the engine, looking for a turn-off that would take him, eventually, to the Kerr's place from the other direction. He checked his watch. The scant few minutes lead he'd gained through Harper's delay at Barham Park had been wasted. There was no way he was going to reach the house before him.

###

God. There was so much stuff. Ignoring the cup of tea her mother had produced, Freddy resorted to stacking things in heaps as they came out of her father's old box. A pile of photos of all sizes, some black-and-white, some in colour, usually of his time in the army with his various units. Her father had been an Acting Major when he died, though he probably could have risen higher had he taken all the overseas postings he'd been offered. Instead, he'd chosen to spend as much time in Britain as he could, unwilling to disrupt the family every five minutes by moving from one army base to the next. When she and her sisters had been very young, Freddy remembered the stint in Gibraltar where everyone had learned how to swim, and then twelve months in Germany where everyone had learned how to ski. Other than that, the family had stayed in Harrow where she and her sisters attended Heathfield School, while daddy had completed his various tours alone. It hadn't been easy without him for months on end, but it made the family reunions very worthwhile. And finally, Freddy was finally getting to see some of her father's memories from that time. There was a mountain of pictures.
There were also a mass of papers, memoirs handwritten in her father's small black script on old, yellowing paper, the kind used in offices before the advent of computers and complex printing machines. The surface of the paper had a thick, fluffy feel as the fibres disintegrated with age and desiccation. There were also two large sheets of what appeared to be maps, the thin paper folded in a concertina shape for ease of opening. She put them to one side for a later examination.

About half way into the stack of papers, there was a thick bundle of long white envelopes tied with pink legal tape. The name of a London legal firm with a Lincoln's Inn address was printed in the top left corner, *Hunters*. Why would there be collection of correspondence addressed to her father from Hunters? Untying the letters, Freddy flicked through them, idly noting the postage dates. The letter on top appeared to be the most recent, though it was nearly sixteen old. The remaining letters were even older. Curiously, she opened the first still-crisp sheet of white stationary, reading down through the few lines of print, it seemed that someone called Kenneth Jarnston from 'Heritage Law' had been discussing a matter of several strict settlements and fee tails arising from estates in Cessford and Cavertoun. Apparently, her father had decided not to pursue further action at the time the letter had been sent. *Estates?* What estates?

Her eyebrows rising, Freddy opened another of the letters, this one longer and with a secondary page attached, covered in names and dates. *Marquess of Bowmont and Cessford (created 1707), Earl of Roxburghe (1616), Earl of Kelso (1707), Earl of Apley (1804), Earl Innes (1837), Viscount Broxmouth (1707), Lord Roxburghe (1600), and Lord Ker of Cessford and Cavertoun (1616).* It seemed to be a list of all the titles granted to the various Dukes of Roxburghe over the years.

Pushing the letter aside, she reached for the next envelope in the bundle. It was signed by a different person from a different department of the same firm, a Lachlan Beaumont in 'Landed Estates'. What was this all about? The letter in her hand referred to several other documents questioning intestacy, together with a Grant of Representation. It was gibberish as far as she was concerned, legal, by the sounds of things, but gibberish nevertheless. Perhaps Alex would know what it meant; it was clearly a matter for a professional. Opening up an earlier letter in the series, Freddy frowned as she saw more familiar names and titles; *Earl of Apley (1804), Countess of Erith (1804), Countess of Stowe (1804).* Those were the titles given to the natural children of the third Duke of Roxburghe, so why were they being tossed around in a letter addressed to her father more than fifteen years ago?

There was yet another sheet of paper headed *Rules of Intestacy*. That was something to do with people dying without a legal will, wasn't it? But daddy had left a will, so it obviously wasn't him the letter was discussing. And why was this legal firm bringing up all these old names and titles? What on earth was going on? Opening yet another of the long white envelopes, there was a simple one-page letter with only a few small typed paragraphs.

*Dear Sir,*

*It is our collective opinion that there are now sufficient grounds and documented evidence for you to lay an absolute claim, complete and unconditional, to the vacant title of Earl of Apley and to the lands, estates and chattels pertaining to that title. In so much as the lines of descent of both the Countess of Erith and of Stowe are now without direct issue, then it lies with you or your eldest male heir to raise such a claim disputing the matter of William Kerr's intestacy. Generally, the descent of the peerage lies through 'heirs male of the body lawfully begotten', so that descent is usually confined to the male line.*

*However, since the rules of masculine primogeniture are set to be amended in English Common Law at some point before 2010, it may also mean that your eldest daughter, Frederica, might be considered a legal claimant at that time (as the Countess of Apley). If your eldest child were to marry any man with demonstrable connection to either the Erith or Stowe families, it may be*
possible that, through her lineage, her husband might also make claim upon the title of Earl of Apley.

My apologies for the confusing nature of this information; British inheritance law is a dense and occasionally labyrinthine process. I append visual documents which may clarify your claim to the Earldom. Please feel free to contact me should you wish to pursue this matter, or if you have any questions in regards to your right of claim.

I remain, sir, respectfully yours.

Henry Fitzwilliam, Senior partner, Family law.

Hunters.

Daddy had a rightful claim on the title of Earl of Apley? If she were to marry a male cousin, he might also have a claim on the title? She might lodge a claim to become the Countess of Apley in her own right? Freddy's head swam with outrageous notions. Her family were as poor as the proverbial church mice and, while there might be the odd bit of property still hanging around, there had certainly been no indication of any lands, chattels or anything else of the Apley estate. All that seemed to have remained for the last sixty years were debts and ancient tax-bills. Why hadn't her father pursued this? If he wasn't interested in following up a claim on the title, why would he keep these letters from Hunters? Idly, she checked the postage date on the outside on the envelope. It had been placed out of date-order in the bundle and Freddy realised, with a chill, that the letter had been sent to her father less than three weeks before his accidental death.

Oh god. Perhaps her father had intended to pursue the matter ... if he had lived.

Freddy sat back in the chair, her eyes staring at the letter without seeing any of the words. Apart from this chap at Hunters, she wondered who else might know about any of this. Mummy certainly didn't, or if she did, she'd chosen not to say anything to anyone. Holding a deep breath for several seconds, all thoughts of investigating the rest of the trunk's contents were put aside. Her notion of self and family rocked to its very foundation, Freddy sat in the chilly room, blinking slowly. Faint sounds in the distance were the only signs she wasn't alone.

"Oh, there you are. I've been calling you for ages. I thought you might still be upstairs." Gwendoline stuck her head around the door. "Alex has just arrived and wants to talk about some ancient annuity your father had put aside for the three of you," she added, glancing at the piles of paper and photos cluttering up the table. "Anything interesting in there, Dear?"

"There's a lot here to take in, Mummy," Freddy avoided her gaze. "I'll put everything into order and then I'll tell you about all the papers Daddy kept in here."

"Well, come and say hello to Alex while he's here," Gwendoline was already heading back towards the kitchen. You know he's always taken an interest in your welfare."

"I'll be there shortly," Freddy began hunting for the 'visual documents', whatever they might have been. There had been nothing included in the envelope. The wide, concertina-folded papers caught her eye. It was worth a look.

The fragile white paper was beginning to yellow around the edges and in the creases as she unfolded the first one with great care. A large sheet of paper, but not a map, at least, not a geographical map. The paper was about two feet wide and perhaps three in length. At the very top, in the centre of the
paper, a small white sticky label read John Ker, 3rd Duke of Roxburghe KG, KT, PC (23 April 1740 – 1804). There was a short vertical line from this label to an horizontal line beneath it, split with three downward pointing dashes, one for each of three names. Robert Kerr, 1st Earl of Apley (15 May 1770 – 1829). There were two other labels to the left of this; Justine Augusta, Countess of Erith (11 August 1775– 1858), and Sophia Alexandrina, Countess of Stowe (19 January 1783 – 1873).

Beneath these three names, a veritable raft of finely drawn lines descended down to other names and dates. William Kerr, 2nd Earl of Apley KG, GCB (17 March 1802- 1835), Victoria Agnes Kerr (2 November 1804- 1884), Frederica Violet Kerr (7 September 1807- 1889) ... the list went on.

The lines beneath all three names tapered off quite rapidly, the Stowe and Erith lines disappearing entirely before 1900 as various marriages and name-changes took the lineage off into uncharted territories. The earldom had been lost after William's tragic death in one of the interminable African Zulu wars where he died young and unmarried, though, like his grandfather, had managed to sire a son out of wedlock with his mistress, Bea Howard. The son, though illegitimate, retained the name of Kerr; Daddy's Great-great-grandfather. The illegitimacy of the birth meant that despite the family producing mostly daughters, the male line of Kerr was able to continue, though it was no longer recognised by the crown as having claim to any titles. Everyone had always known this; it was all ancient history.

Freddy's eye was caught by a faint pencilled note on the back of the paper. It was a name and a date. William Kerr – Beatrice Margaret Howard (?- 1876). Immediately before her name was a tiny, handwritten letter. It was the letter 'm'.

Frowning, she realised there would be only one reason for anyone to write the letter 'm' before a woman's name on a family tree. William Kerr had managed to marry before he died? That the woman who bore his son was not simply his mistress but his legal wife?

Frankly quite glad she was sitting down, Freddy checked the names and dates again. William Kerr's only child, a boy, had been born in 1835, the year William died with a spear-thrust to the heart somewhere on the Eastern Cape. He had left England by boat at the end on 1834, leaving a pregnant mistress, or so everyone had thought. For William to have actually married the woman meant that the ceremony must have taken place before he took ship, which meant that his only begotten son, Charles, would have been born within a legal marriage. The line of descent from William Kerr through his son Charles was, therefore, completely legitimate and on the proper side of the blanket.

But that meant ... that meant ...

This was what all the letters from the people at Hunters were about. Someone, somewhere, had discovered a legal marriage certificate; a wedding had taken place prior to the birth of Charles Kerr, 3rd Earl of Apley. William Kerr hadn't died intestate at all; his will provided his son, his legitimate son, with all the properties and lands pertaining to the title of Earl of Apley. The certificate might even be inside one of these envelopes from Hunters.

Hardly daring to breathe, Freddy sat frozen, letting the new knowledge settle around her like the dust in the attic. Dreamily, she opened the second sheet of paper, completely unsurprised to find it was another family tree, complete with sticky labels and dates. This one though, were the residual lines of the Erith and Stowe families, as far as it had been possible to trace them down through the direct line of descent. Down through the years, there had been all sorts of surnames; Fitzharris, Taylor-Hill, Morris, Harper, Somerset, Belvedere, Williams ... wait ... Her focus flashed back several names. Harper?

###
Holding the BMW to a reasonable speed was becoming harder to do, yet it was impossible to floor it in these narrow, high-hedged back lanes; you never knew if the next thing you might meet was a ruddy great tractor or a kid on a bike. Greg bit his impatience back and travelled as fast as safety permitted. The Kerr house was up at the top of this hill, though he had no illusions that he’d arrive before the solicitor. He just hoped nothing much had been able to happen in the few minutes that the man had been there. If Harper had done anything to upset either Freddy or Gwendoline, things were going to turn very nasty. He wondered how long it would take for Donovan to arrive.

Checking his watch for the umpteenth time, Greg inhaled slowly. The last thing he wanted to do was make a fuss. Apart from the fact he really shouldn’t be here in the first place, the last thing the investigation could afford, that he could afford, was to be seem to be meddling in anything. He couldn’t interfere unless there was a risk of real physical danger. Other than that, he’d just have to play everything by ear. *Play it cool, Greg.*

Sighing, he checked his watch again.

###

"Hello, Freddy," Alex stood in the dining room doorway, leaning casually against the door. "Your mother says you’ve been hunting out your father's old papers from the attic," he glanced carelessly at the various piles of papers and photographs heaped on Gwendoline’s dining table. "I suppose it’s mostly junk, is it?"

Her mind still in a turmoil from the enormous discovery of her true legal lineage, Freddy struggled to put words together. In the space of thirty minutes, her entire world had changed.

Her father could have been Earl of Apley.

She could claim the title of Countess of Apley in her own right.

If she married a cousin, a male cousin, he might claim ... might claim ...

Alex Harper, according to the line of descent produced by the people at Hunters, was a distant relative from the Stowe line. Alex was her cousin ...

*Had he known?* Had Alex somehow found out about this before her father died?

Her feeling of complete bewilderment must have shown on her face as Alex stood slowly, straightening his back, his eyes not moving from hers.

"What is it?" he murmured carefully, walking towards the table. "What did you find?"

She stood and turned to face him in one swift movement. "Stop," she said, lifting a hand to keep him from getting any closer. "Just stay there, Alex," she said, a line of unease furrowing her forehead. "There are private things here that I need to discuss with my mother before I discuss them with anyone else," she added, feeling the thud of a pulse at her throat. "Things that Daddy kept private from ... from everyone," she added. "This is not for you. Not yet."

A strange expression crossed his face as Alex relaxed, his shoulders losing their tension as he lifted his chin. "As your family's legal advisor, I would hope you feel able to share everything of importance with me," he offered softly, his eyes returning to the papers scattered across the table. The large unfolded white sheets seemed to be of particular interest. "And you’ve known me for years, my dearest Freddy," his voice dropped, became velvet. "Are you saying you no longer trust me? Have I done something, anything to make you think badly of me?"
"No, of course not," Freddy was aware of his closeness, of his physicality in a way she hadn't noticed for years. This wasn't just her old university friend ... Alex was her cousin. It changed things.

"You know I've done nothing that wasn't in your family's best interest, don't you?" Alex smiled charmingly, lifting a piece of fluff from her hair. "All I've ever done has always been to improve your situation, your mother's situation, your father's situation ... you do know that, don't you, Freddy?" He stepped closer, his gaze flickering over the pile of white envelopes. It was impossible not to see the name of the legal firm from where he stood. Being in the business, he could probably identify another legal company's logo at twenty paces.

His smile grew wider. "So," he said. "You found your father's letters."

"My father's letters?" Freddy felt as if she were wading through icy chest-deep mud. "Nobody knew about these letters. They've been up in the attic since he died ... I only discovered them today by complete accident ..." she paused, her heart thudding. "What do you know about my father's letters?"

Alex smiled again. "He told me once, you know," he said. "He told me about the famous missing marriage certificate and what it would mean if the thing ever turned up," he smiled some more, sliding both hands into his trouser pockets. "Though he never actually let me read them," he added, his eyes sliding back to the opened white envelopes and the pages Freddy had taken from them. "I wish he had. It might have saved a lot of time."

A dreadful sinking sensation filled her chest as she felt her skin grow cold and clammy. If Alex had known of the existence of the letters, had known what the letters said, then had his friendship with the family, with her ... had it been only a means to an end? Feeling as if she were about to choke, Freddy met his gaze levelly though her heart was doing somersaults.

"Did you ever come looking for them?"

###

The lane began to look familiar and in seconds, the BMW pulled up in front of the main gateway of the Harrow house. As he got out, a sour sensation curled in his stomach as he noted the shiny black Mercedes parked on the far side of the property. He didn't need to touch the skin of the bonnet to know the engine would still be hot. Striding across the open courtyard he saw that dried dead leaves had blown across the old bricks, lending the scene a slightly melancholic feel. He knocked on the door feeling an odd sense of déjà vu.

"Why, Gregory!" Gwendoline's expression was one of delighted astonishment. "I had no idea you'd be in the area this morning or I'd have brought fresh milk for tea. Do, please, come in, my dear boy ..."

Only Gwendoline would consider him a boy. Greg smiled despite himself. As he stepped through the low-lintelled door, he immediately looked around for Harper, listening intently for the man's voice. His car was right outside, he had to be in here somewhere. And if he wasn't with Gwennie ... there was only one other place he'd be. Unaware his features were settling into a dark scowl, Greg stalked down the long passage.

###

He laughed. "Freddy, my love, you really do have a vivid imagination, you know," Alex sat on the edge of the dining table. "Of course I've never looked for anything of your father's," his smile was wider than ever. "All I've ever needed to do is ask your mother and she gave me whatever I wanted," he smiled again. "I'm sure she'll allow me to have a look at the letters if I assure her it's in the family
"Mummy will do nothing of the sort if I tell her not to," Freddy felt a sudden heat as unexpected anger prickled through her veins. "I've already said that this information is going to remain private until I've spoken with the family and then, and only then, will we be bringing in legal advice," she paused, catching her breath and glancing back at the piled table. She swallowed. "And if I do decide to seek legal advice, it won't be from you, Alex." Freddy raised her eyes to his, a glint of temper in her dark stare. "Or should I call you Cousin?"

His eyes flicking directly to the large unfolded sheets, Alex inhaled sharply, all calm pretence falling away as he stepped closer. "So you have found the letters," he breathed, resting his hands on her shoulders, staring into her face. "That's fantastic! Just think what we can accomplish now that you've got them! I knew they had to be around somewhere," elation lit his features.

"I was going to make a madly romantic proposal, but now that you know the truth, we can be married as soon as you like," his face was flushed and there was a feral gleam in his eyes. "And then we can make the claim to the title between us," he laughed delightedly. "You won't need to mess about with that dump down in Pimlico anymore; you can sell it for the land value, and we can use the money to ..." his words faded into silence as he saw Freddy's unchanged glare.

"What?" Alex was confused. Surely she must know the importance of what she'd found? "What's the matter, Darling?"

"Get out," Freddy ground the words out between gritted teeth. "Get out now and do not come back unless you are expressly invited to do so." She turned to stack the documents back into some kind of order.

Alex reached for her wrist, forcing her to stop.

"Alex, that hurts!" Freddy winced as the force of his grip turned her skin white.

The dining room door slammed wide open.

"Get the fuck away from her," Greg hardly recognised the sound of his own voice. It was more subvocal growl than anything else. "And get out of this house if you can't keep your hands to yourself," he added, drawing himself up to his full height. Harper might be more than ten years younger than him, but Greg knew more about fighting dirty than an entire battalion of lawyers. If the situation turned violent, he'd lay the bastard out with a chair and fuck the consequences.

Abruptly releasing Freddy's arm, Alex turned to meet the threat in the doorway, his stance changing as he allowed an inner hostility to glower through narrowed eyes.

Greg's lips curved fractionally. There was no overt danger yet, but he recognised the signs. Alex Harper was the kind of man who'd key a new car or who'd kick a dog, simply because the act pleased him. He might be clever, but there was something twisted inside, something that meant the end always justified the means. He'd seen a similar look on Sherlock's face a couple of times, right before he'd loped off and done something really stupid. There was a heat in the man's expression that suggested he was considering his chances.

"Come on then," Greg murmured, looking straight into the solicitor's eyes. "If you're hard enough."

"You have no right to be here," Harper hissed the words. "This is a private residence and the police are not ..."

"I'm not here as police," Greg moved into the room, pushing Freddy behind him, his fingers gentle
on her arm. "I'm Freddy's friend and you've got no right to behave like this in her mother's house. Now why don't we step outside and have a nice breath of fresh air like two civilised adults, shall we?"

"Alex? Gregory?" Gwendoline stood at the door with a cup of tea in each hand, her face a picture of confusion. "What's going on? Is something the matter?"

"Don't bloody patronise me," Harper scowled back at Greg. "You have no relationship with Ms Kerr other than as an investor in a minor building project. Freddy is going to be my wife and the sooner you're out of her life, the better."

"Why don't we let the lady decide what she wants to do, eh?" Greg raised his eyebrows and looked mildly fatigued, as if all this Sturm und Drang was a bit much for a London lad to handle.

"Why don't you just get the hell out of here?" Alex seemed to be increasingly annoyed at his inability to make the other man leave.

"Alex, there's no need to be like that," Freddy's mother frowned as she heard the anger in the younger man's voice. "Come and have some tea, there's a dear."

"I don't want any of your damn TEA!" he rounded on Gwendoline with a ferocious glare.

"Hey, enough," Greg's fingers itched to grab Harper by the collar and heave him out the door, but he wasn't here as police. "There's no need to lose your temper with anyone. Let's just calm down a bit."

In the momentary lull, Freddy cleared her throat, glad that her mother had already walked away.

"Alex, I don't know where you got the idea that I wanted to marry anyone. I certainly gave you no indication that I was considering you as a potential husband, so I don't know where you got that idea from. I think it's best now if you left and Mummy can get in touch with you when she needs further legal advice, but right now, I think you should just go."

Turning slowly to meet her eyes, Alex paled into silence.

"You don't want to marry me?"

"No Alex, I don't," Freddy looked apologetic. "I'm sorry you thought that was going to happen, because it's not."

"After all these years ..." Harper stared down at the threadbare carpet. "After all the things I've done for your family, all the shit I've sorted out for the lot of you ..." His hands trembled.

Greg braced himself. Here it comes. He checked for any obvious weapons.

"I'm not leaving until I get to read those letters!" Harper lifted his head, his face flushed with rage and disappointment. "I have the right to read them!"

In the sudden silence, the distinct sound of two hammers being cocked back was as shocking as the sight of Gwendoline in the doorway with her old double-barrelled shotgun.
Though the shotgun wasn't aimed his way, Greg's pulse jumped. At this range, if Gwendoline took it into her head to pull either of those triggers, someone was going to die. Anyone stupid enough to try and take the shotgun from the older woman would probably be the one doing the dying. He swallowed in a suddenly dry throat but forced himself to make no other movement.

"You got the safety catch on that thing, Gwennie?" he asked softly.

"Gregory my dear, I know more about break-action firearms than you are ever likely to, so please do shut up." Freddy's mother had her eyes, and her gunsights, firmly on Harper who stood, slack-jawed, by the end of the dining table. As the younger man's gaze flickered between the business end of the gun, Gwendoline's face and the envelopes on the table beside him, his flush of anger faded, replaced by an expression of mild astonishment.

"I'd like you to go now, Alex," Gwendoline's words were calm and steady, her tone chillingly placid. "I have no idea what's caused you to behave so abominably, but I want you to leave my house immediately."

"You've got no right to point that bloody thing at me," Alex was dogged in his challenge. "I have as much right to know the contents of those letters as anyone in this room," he spoke heatedly.

"Just get out while you can, you fool. Greg's focus was entirely on Freddy's mother. The instant it looked as if she might actually pull the triggers, he'd force the muzzle upwards so that, even if the thing went off, the only casualty would be the ceiling.

"I have no idea why my husband's correspondence is of such great interest to you," Gwendoline's eyes didn't so much as flicker and her grip on the weapon was as steady as a rock. "And frankly, I don't give a damn. Get out."

His features falling into a foul black sulk, Harper flexed a hand, as if to pick up the envelopes. "You wouldn't dare."

Greg closed his eyes for the briefest of moments. All the years this idiot had been working with the Kerr women and he still had no idea about either of them. Maybe he should just let Gwennie take him out of the gene pool and do the entire world a favour.

"For goodness sake, Mummy," Freddy had watched the little drama unfold with increasing disbelief. "Put the gun down. Alex is going."

The unquestioning strength of the statement seemed to take the wind out of Harper's sails and his shoulders sagged. "You and your bloody guns," he shook his head with distaste at Gwendoline's unsmiling resolve. "It's clear now who Freddy gets her damn silly obsessions from."

Greg's blinked slowly as he wondered if there was a patron saint of complete and utter numptys. "I suggest you shut your mouth and get out," he murmured, his gaze not leaving the older woman's face for an instant. If there was a decision to fire the shotgun, he'd see it there first.

Standing straighter, a look of distain written plain across his face, Harper moved carefully out of the room as Gwendoline backed away down the passage, maintaining her distance. He walked slowly towards the exit, glancing over his shoulder every couple of steps. "You'll be hearing from me, you ridiculous old woman," he muttered as he reached the threshold. "As a descendant of the Stowe line, I have the right to know the facts about the Apley inheritance," he scowled. "You know I'll be able
to get a court order for those letters."

Saying nothing, Gwendoline kept the weapon aimed and level.

"Give me the gun, Gwennie." In the doorway of the dining room, Greg spoke gently as Alex headed towards the front door. "You know you're not actually going to shoot him, though I completely understand the desire to do so," he paused. "But it won't do my street cred any good if I have to put you in handcuffs, so be a doll and give me the gun, eh?"

"I want him out of my house, Gregory."

"And I'll make sure he goes, I promise," Greg soothed. "Just give me the gun first so there's no accidents, alright?"

"I wasn't going to kill him you know," she muttered. "Just wing him slightly," Gwendoline watched Harper like a hawk as the man paused on the doorstep.

"The gun, Mrs Kerr, if you please," Greg sharpened his tone just enough to make it official. The change was so surprising that Gwendoline blinked sharply and glanced at him, curious. Taking a deep breath and with a little nod, she broke the shotgun open and handed it over.

Taking the warm wood of the stock in his fingers, Greg felt his colon un-knot for the first time in five minutes. He looked down. The safety catch had been on the entire time, not that the solicitor would have known. Even now, the man stood poised in the doorway, uncertain as to his predicament. With the open shotgun hanging over the crook of his elbow, Greg walked slowly towards him.

"On your way, Mr Harper," he advised. "You're not wanted here."

"I'll have a legal order arranged demanding the release of the letters by tomorrow," Alex sneered. "I'll get exactly what I want then."

Saying nothing, Greg continued walking towards the door, the expression on his face enough to have the younger man step outside as the distance between them closed.

"Shit!" Harper shouted as the wonky paving slab just outside the door tilted beneath his foot and a gush of black water engulfed his shoe. "I hate this bloody house!"

Tempted to laugh, Greg merely watched as the solicitor stormed off across the brick courtyard to his car, leaving a trail of wet footprints behind ...

... Footprints that were oddly familiar.

Pulling his phone out, Greg open the folder of pictures he'd taken at the house the day the office had been ransacked. There was a single image of a trail of wet footprints that were uncannily similar in size, shape, stride-length ... he took several snaps of this more recent trail.

He stared down at the wet track. It was identical with the first one, he'd put money on it.

The sound of running footsteps was on him before he'd even had time to glance up, though he managed to lift an instinctively defensive arm, the pain as the heavy wheel brace smacked brutally across his bicep was shocking, the impact itself enough to have him stagger back against the wall of the house. Made him drop his phone.

Made him drop the shotgun.
In the second it took to regain his footing, Harper had the weapon in his hands, snap-closed and aimed, his fingers gripping the firearm with an alarming surety.

"Not so insistent without this backing you up, are you?" he scorned, backing away. "Not so cocky, **hmm?**"

With both barrels pointed directly at him, Greg wasn't about to say or do anything that might incite a negative reaction. He simply stood, lifting his arms slightly away from his sides, palms open. His shoulder was killing him. He hoped to Christ Harper had left the safety catch on.

"Alex?" Before he could warn her to stay in the house, Freddy was beside him. At the sight of the firearm, she stilled.

"Get behind me," Greg kept his eyes on Harper. The man was clearly paranoid and with a loaded shotgun in his hands, totally unpredictable. "Get behind me now."

"Don't be silly," Freddy lifted her eyes to look her old friend in the face. "Alex is just cross with Mummy. He's not going to shoot anyone, are you?" she asked him pointedly.

"You just stay there with your new boyfriend," Harper jeered. "He's about all you're good for, it seems. Your bit of rough trade," he laughed, high-pitched and querulous.

Greg revised his estimation of the man. Harper wasn't just paranoid. He was a fucking nut-job. An armed nut-job.

"Alex," Freddy began, holding out her hand towards him. "Just go now, and when things calm down we can discuss the situation more calmly. At your office, perhaps?"

Harper swung the muzzle of the gun towards her and Greg's insides slammed shut again.

"If you're not going to marry me, it doesn't really matter anymore, does it?" Harper's voice rose in a faint wail.

Greg had heard that kind of voice before. Without realising, his good arm had reached out and grabbed Freddy, dragging her bodily behind him.

"Yes, that's right, play the knight in shining armour," Harper was almost hysterical, flecks of spit at the corner of his mouth. "Is that what she likes, is it? To play the damsel in distress? Does she play the role for you? Perhaps I should have been less the gentleman all these years and simply taken what I wanted?" he laughed.

Greg felt his chest tighten. This conversation was going nowhere fast and had all the signs of a bad ending. "The police will be here very soon, Alex," he held the younger man's gaze. "I think you should put the gun down and go before they arrive and start asking all sorts of difficult questions."

"Oh, I'll go, alright, but I want those letters first," he demanded, holding his ground. "Go and get them for me, Freddy, and I won't put a bloody great hole in your bit of rough."

"You're quite mad, Alex," angrily, Freddy pushed Greg's restraining arm aside. "Perhaps you should explain to us how come you know so much about these letters ... how did you know my father had them ... how do you even know about the secret marriage in the Apley line in the first place?"

Ignoring Greg's attempt to keep her safe, she stepped forward, seemingly oblivious of the double-barrelled shotgun now pointing directly at her midsection.

Greg felt a trickle of sweat begin at his temple. Harper was clearly off his rocker and the smallest
thing could set him off. He had a dreadful sense that Freddy's confrontational response might be enough to push the man over the edge.

"Enough, Freddy," he kept his voice low. "Leave him alone and let's get back inside."

Turning her head to give Greg her opinion of that piece of advice, the sound of a car engine pulling up at the gateway to the lane caught her attention.

A white Astra slammed to a halt, allowing Sally Donovan and a uniformed officer to step out. Both were wearing heavy stab vests, bright yellow patches on the black Kevlar body-armour clearly identifying them as Metropolitan Police. As soon as the sergeant saw the pointed shotgun, she drew a weapon.

"Drop the gun, Mr Harper," Donovan held a neat black pistol which she brought to bear as Harper turned at the sound of the car doors slamming shut. Greg recognised the Glock with the xenon light attachment and groaned. Bosisto must have decided to sign out the gun for protective reasons, especially knowing that Alex Harper might be the man behind both the Hatton Garden robberies, as well as the death of Professor Armstrong. Clearly the DCI was taking no chances, but the situation here was dangerous enough without bringing more weapons into the equation.

In that same moment, as Harper half-turned to acknowledge the newcomers, Freddy took a step forward, calling out to Alex to put down the gun. Caught between two conflicting threats, he panicked.

As Alex jerked his attention back to Freddy and the potential danger she represented, Greg saw the man's hand go white at the knuckles as it tensed around the stock of the shotgun. The fingers of his other hand clenched convulsively at the trigger mechanism.

Even as he realised what was about to happen, Greg was already in motion, heaving himself towards Freddy, wanting time to slow at least until she was out of the line of fire. The magnified explosive sound of the shotgun's report was enormous in the confined space of the house's courtyard; the noise was impossibly loud.

But not loud enough to drown out Freddy's agonised scream as the impact of one barrel caught her right leg, the fabric of her jeans instantly shredded and pulsing with bright red blood. Blood was everywhere, already pooling on the ground.

"AMBULANCE!" Greg roared, leaving Donovan to deal with everything else as he threw himself on the ground, the belt of his trousers already in his hands to thread the heavy leather around the top of Freddy's thigh. But she was so comparatively small, her limb so slight that he had to wrap the belt twice around before he was able to get any traction with the buckle. His hands were clumsy with shock and difficult to control as he wrestled with the makeshift tourniquet which slid around and refused to tighten properly. There was too much blood. His hands and sleeves were already soaked with it, as were the legs of his trousers and the front of his shirt. Freddy's clothing was almost entirely saturated.

Lying partially on her back, her terrified, shocked cries pierced the quiet sky as Greg held her close in his arms, keeping her from moving, from pumping out any more of her precious life's blood. Her movements were already becoming feebler and more erratic even in the brief time since the impact of the shot.

"Ambulance on the way," Sally shouted though Greg barely heard her. "Two minutes".

If the femoral artery was severed, Freddy could die inside two minutes; bleed out on the uncaring
stones of her mother's courtyard. Greg clamped his jaw tight to silence his own anguish as he held her rigidly to his chest. Hot tears streaked his face and the muscles of his injured shoulder and arm burned as he fought to keep her still, no matter how much she jerked and shuddered. If she died, it would be all his fault, his fault that he hadn't been able to make the vital connections in time to prevent this bloodbath. He could not let her die. Not here, not like this.

How long he held her from the cold ground he had no idea, but suddenly there was more sound and new voices and movement around him as kind hands pulled his fingers away to allow others to reach Freddy and place her on a stretcher. There were flashing lights and the noise of vehicle engines and more unknown voices. Other hands were helping him to his feet, giving him a towel to clean his face and hands.

But none of this registered. The only thing in Greg's head was the sight of Freddy lying on the ground as her blood filled the cracks of the paving stones. And she was so motionless on the stretcher. Still and quiet, as if she had fallen asleep.

The ambulance siren made him blink and he stood, shocked and unsteady, his eyes making little sense of his surroundings.

"There's another ambulance here for you, Guv," Sally's words were quiet beside him. "You need to get yourself looked at," she said, placing a gentle hand under his elbow. "You've been hurt too," she continued, as he stood, heedless. "Guv?"

But Greg had seen Alex Harper standing, handcuffed, in front of the white police car and suddenly, all the sounds and words faded from his awareness. All he could understand was that Harper had shot the woman who had woken up his heart and that she was probably dead by now. There had just been too much blood.

*I'm going to fucking gut you*, the words were in his head as clearly as if he'd screamed them out loud. His legs moved of their own volition, stiff and zombie-like, as he staggered across the reddened bricks with only a single thought.

But Sally Donovan knew her DI, knew his temperament like the inside of her own head. As soon as she saw Greg's gaze fix itself upon the ashen Harper, she knew exactly what he was thinking. Grabbing him would do no good, though a flying tackle might slow him down for a few seconds, enough perhaps, to get Harper in the car and safely out of harm's way.

But the courtyard wasn't that big. This left only one option and Donovan took it, sliding her own body into the rapidly decreasing space between her prisoner and a bloodied, vengeful senior police officer.

*"He's already been cautioned, Guv,"* she raised her hands to try and catch Greg's clenched fists before he laid into the now-cowering Harper. *"You can't hurt him; the courts'll have the case thrown out before the opening statements are finished."* Sally was pushed backwards by the Lestrade steamroller until she was almost sandwiched between the two men.

*"Stop, Greg!"* she yelled directly into his face *"Stop ... just, stop."

He'd heard what she'd said, of course, not that he'd wanted to hear. What he really wanted to do was to rip Alex Harper's heart out through his ribcage and throw it onto the stones; let him bleed out like Freddy had.

But he'd heard.
And, having heard, he could not in all conscience deliberately fuck up the case. Greg wanted the solicitor to moulder slowly away in a max security prison for the rest of a very long life, and Sally was right. If the man could prove police brutality, that would be enough to let him escape justice. The boiling ice inside him calmed slightly.

"If Freddy dies, I'm going to see you get a whole life order, you little prick," he snarled, swiping the tips of two fingers diametrically across Harper's cheek. Two scarlet lines appeared. A vow of intent, signed in blood.

"You can't touch me!" Harper screamed. "I know my rights! You can't lay a finger on me!"

"Are you all right there, Inspector?" the uniformed officer held the prisoner firmly by the shoulder. "Nasty stumble you almost took then," the man added placidly. "I'm amazed you were able to stop yourself from falling on this gentleman much harder, given the state of your leg."

Greg stepped back, suddenly realising that not only was his shoulder unbelievably painful but his right leg was throbbing like blazes. Looking down, he saw his shoe was full of blood. His blood.

Oh. So that was what Donovan had said.

"You all done over here?" one of the waiting uniformed paramedics in a neon-yellow jacket wandered over to his side, his arms folded. "You done all the things you needed to get done, like?" he asked casually. "Didn't like to interrupt one of our brothers on the force in the performance of his duty, see?"

Numbly, Greg nodded. "My leg is hurt," he said slowly.

"Yeah, me and Johnno in the van kind of noticed that," he looked down at Greg's bloodied leg. "Us being medical types an' all."

Greg looked at him and the paramedic immediately silenced. Anyone with that expression in their eyes should be treated with kid gloves.

"Come on then," the medic's tone altered, suddenly gentled. "Let's get you to the hospital and get you sorted out, shall we?"

###

Gwendoline Kerr had celebrated her seventieth birthday earlier in the year, but as she waited at the Northwick Park Hospital, she felt more like ninety. Her entire body was lead. It was an effort to lift her head. Her hands shook and as soon as she was sure she had no tears left to cry, a fresh wave would catch her unaware.

Donovan was on tea duty, ferrying countless cups of the weak hospital brew from the visitor's kitchenette into the waiting room itself which was, thankfully, virtually empty. Sliding into the chair next to Gwendoline, Sally passed over the latest plastic cup of the hot liquid and rubbed the older woman's arm softly.

"They said there was hope," she repeated, glancing down at her watch. It had been three hours since the ambulances had delivered their precious cargo to the Northwick's A and E department, where Freddy and Greg had been whisked off to emergency surgery and x-ray.

"It's all my fault," Gwendoline covered her eyes with a trembling hand. "If I hadn't interfered all the time, if I hadn't kept encouraging Alex ..." she dragged in a shuddering breath. "Oh, god ..." her voice faded to a bare whisper as more tears slipped down her pale cheeks.
Donovan sagged back in the chair and closed her eyes. It felt like she'd been awake for three days straight. A headache had been thudding itself into her brain since they'd arrived at the hospital and her stomach was acid with tension and shock and too much tea.

One of the surgeons had already informed them that Greg had a cracked humerus and damaged shoulder ligaments. His lower right leg had also caught some stray shot pellets that missed Freddy and he was having them removed under a local anaesthetic. He'd be kept in for a couple of days to make sure there was no delayed shock or infection.

On Freddy, there'd been no further word other than she was in emergency surgery and was likely to be there for some time. Since both of her sisters were overseas and Gwendoline lived alone, Sally volunteered to stay until there was further news and a decision had been made on what to do next.

Another hour passed.

A senior nurse opened the half-glassed door of the waiting room and walked over, her expression calm, though not cheerful. She spoke to Donovan, already knowing she was a police officer.

"Your Inspector is in his room, resting," the nurse linked her fingers together. "He's going to be in some discomfort once the morphine wears off, but we can give him pain medication at that time. You can pop in and see him if you like, though he's a little groggy," she paused. "I take it you'll inform those people who need to know about his condition and arrange for him to be taken home when it's time?"

"I'll come get him myself," Sally felt a measure of relief that her DI was banged up but not too seriously. "What about ..?" she looked sideways at Gwendoline.

The nurse looked understandingly as she glanced down at the older woman. "I'm afraid your daughter is still in surgery, Mrs Kerr, but I promise you that she's getting expert attention; our trauma surgeons are some of the best in the north London area."

"Can I see her?" Gwendoline's words were barely audibly.

The nurse shook her head sympathetically. "Not yet. As soon as there's more to know, I'll come and tell you, I promise."

Sally slid an arm around Gwendoline's back and hugged her carefully. "You're staying at the Dolphin in town, aren't you? Do you want me to take you there for the night and bring you back ..." The words trailed off as the old woman shook her head and tears fell again. It looked like neither of them would be leaving the Northwick for a while yet.

"Let's go and see my boss, shall we?" Donovan wondered if it might take Mrs Kerr's mind of her own misery if she was able to speak with Greg. It mightn't work, but it could hardly make the situation any worse. "I'm sure he'd love a cup of tea."

"If you think I wouldn't be intruding," Gwendoline looked up at the younger woman, a sudden yearning in her face. "I'd like to see that Gregory's all right and tell him how dreadfully sorry I am about ... everything."

"Now stop blaming yourself," Sally stood up, stretching stiff joints. "There's only one person at fault, and it certainly isn't you. Come on," she held out a hand. "Let's get a cup of tea and then go have a chat to Greg, see if he wants anything done."

In a small single room, just down from the nurses' station, Greg Lestrade lay back in a pristine, white-blanked bed. His right arm and shoulder was in a heavy sling and a bandaged right leg lay
on a soft pillow on top of the covers. He'd been cleaned up, though Sally thought she could still see specks of Freddy's blood on his neck and under his fingernails. He looked pale and very, very tired. Perhaps coming in to see him hadn't been such a brilliant idea after all.

As soon as he heard the door handle turning, Greg blinked his eyes open. Things were spinning a little and he knew this was not going to be one of his better days. Both his shoulder and leg throbbed in unison, his stomach was queasy with shock and his heart ... his heart was numb. Knowing Freddy could not have survived that amount of blood loss and damage, Greg was almost glad that he felt nothing, because nothing was far kinder than anything else.

The door to his room opened slowly, allowing his sergeant to glance inside to see if he was awake and in any fit state for company. He groaned silently and closed his eyes. The last thing he wanted right now was to make polite conversation.

"Gregory?" Gwendoline's voice wobbled.

_Damn._ He opened his eyes again, moving his head just enough to see her face. It was a mistake; Freddy's mum looked terrible and her expression of grief nearly undid him.

"Hello, Gwennie," he rasped, his throat dryer than the Gobi in midwinter.

"Brought you some tea," Sally lifted a small plastic cup up for him to see. "Thought it might help a bit."

"You're a saviour," he mumbled, wiping his good hand across his mouth. "Feels like I've been eating sawdust."

"Hello, my dear boy," Gwendoline took the cup from Donovan, holding it to Greg's lips at the same time as lifting his head up from the pillow. He sipped and sank back, exhausted. Mrs Kerr put the cup on a side table and took the visitor's seat by the bed.

Waving her fingers, Sally slipped back out through the open door before Greg could say anything to make her stay, leaving the old woman alone with her boss. Talking would be useful for both of them. There was a lengthy period of silence. Greg couldn't think of a single thing to say.

"I'm sorry, Gwen," he whispered eventually. "I'm so very sorry about Freddy."

Mrs Kerr said nothing, but shook her head sadly.

"It was all my fault," Gwendoline's eyes immediately grew shiny again, but she swallowed hard and fought the tears back. "My fault, and now you and Freddy have paid for it ..." she rested a hand across her eyes and wept softly. "I will never forgive myself."

Greg felt his chest become unbearably tight as he witnessed Gwendoline's utter grief. But there was nothing he could say; his own heart was crushed into ice at the sudden knowledge that Freddy hadn't made it.

"I'll make sure Harper pays for what he's done," Greg felt his eyes burn. "I'll have him done for murder for this Gwennie, I promise."

A faint puzzlement lined Gwendoline's forehead. "Freddy wasn't dead, Greg. There's a lot of damage and she's lost a great deal of blood, but the doctors say there's hope her leg can be saved."

_Freddy wasn't dead?_
Greg felt a rush of heat that momentarily smothered the relentless throb of his injuries. He cleared his throat. "Freddy's going to make it?" he qualified his question. "The doctor actually told you this?"

"Yes, my darling boy, he did," the old woman was crying again, but more because of the sudden light on Greg's face than anything else. "My Freddy is going to make it and you'll be able to see her again as soon as you're better and she's well enough to have visitors."

"She's here?" Greg ignored the daggers in his shoulder and pushed himself more upright with his good arm. "In this hospital?"

Smiling and nodding and wiping her face with the side of her hand, Mrs Kerr laughed softly at the amazing transformation of the man in the bed in front of her.

There was a quiet knock at the door. A nurse popped her head into the room. "Just to let you know," she said. "Your daughter is out of surgery and, though she's going to be on the critical list for a while, the surgeons have advised that she will most definitely survive," the woman paused. "They also said that there was a very good chance she'd be able to use her leg again, though she's going to need a great deal of physiotherapy later on," she smiled brightly. "I thought you could do with some good news." Smiling again, the nurse withdrew herself, leaving Greg and Gwendoline alone.

"I want to see her," Greg chewed his lower lip. "I'm not sitting in a damn bed when I could be seeing Freddy," he frowned as he tried unsuccessfully to move his leg. "I'm going to need your help, Gwennie, and I'm not taking 'no' for an answer, so get your skates on."

"There were several wheelchairs parked out in the corridor," Gwendoline gestured towards the door. "I suppose, if you're absolutely determined ..."

"I am. Move your arse," Greg waved her towards the door.

Standing and taking a deep breath, Gwendoline felt a weight lift from her back. "Don't go anywhere," she said, a faint gleam in her eye that had nothing to do with tears.

###

"What on earth are you doing out of bed?" the nurse walking beside the hospital porter wheeling a hospital bed into a small two-bed ward stared at Greg sitting in a wheelchair in the passageway.

"This is a police matter," he tried to sound as official as he could given the circumstances, though there was a definite draft around his lower regions the hospital gown was doing nothing to prevent. He smiled.
"Nonsense," the nurse looked wholly unimpressed. "You may be a member of the police, but in this hospital, you're a patient, besides," she said, waving at the empty corridor. "If this really were a police matter, there'd be a uniformed officer here by the door to prevent access to the patient." Motioning to the porter to continue installing the bed into the room behind her, she stood firm, determined to let no one pass.

"My people are on their way," Greg tried to look both authoritative and convincing, not an easy thing with his nuts resting on cold vinyl. "And until they arrive, as I'm the only one here, then it's up to me to make sure no one gets to this witness," he got into the swing of things and let command roll off him in waves. "Until my relief arrives, I am required to maintain a watching brief, even if I can't do much more," he added, glancing down at his bandaged leg. "This woman is a key witness to the culmination of an extensive and critical police investigation and I cannot permit her to remain without a guarantee of safety while she is in this hospital," he took a deep breath. "I don't want her moved around without me."

"Given this patient's condition, I'd argue nobody is going to be doing much moving at all in the near future," the nurse frowned, marginally affronted by the idea that any of her patients would be in more danger inside the hospital than out of it. "Besides, in her current state, the only people I'd even consider allowing in to see her would be immediate family."

Nodding sagely, as if in total agreement with this sensible hospital policy, Greg tipped his head fractionally over his good shoulder. "The patient's mother and next of kin," he said. "I have the required permission." The nurse stood in the ward doorway, undecided. Greg clocked her name badge. **Ward Sister Janet Bowman.**

Yeah. She looked like a Janet. The nurse stared at Gwendoline as if she had only just realised who she was.

"Sister Bowman," Greg tried again. "I'm not asking to speak to your patient or interact with her in any way," he smiled persuasively. "I simply need to ensure nobody else gets to talk with her before a police representative does."

Nurse Bowman sighed, unconvincsed. "Very well," she agreed reluctantly. "But for observational purposes only; I'll not have her upset or inconvenienced for police questions, is that understood?"

"Completely," Greg would have agreed to almost anything if it would get him into the same room as Freddy. He wondered what the nurse imagined he might do.

"Mr Kapoor, the operating surgeon, will be around shortly to provide further details of your daughter's condition," Bowman spoke a little more gently to Gwendoline. "Though there has been some significant damage, she is not in danger at this time, although we are going to be keeping a very close watch for possible infection. I understand the general prognosis is good, if that helps?"

Gwendoline nodded mutely, her eyes fixed on the half-open door only feet away.

About to enter the ward to ensure the monitors and medications had been correctly arranged, Nurse Bowman hesitated on the threshold.

"There was a man's belt," she said, meeting Greg's eyes. "Tied around the top of her leg as a makeshift tourniquet," she paused thoughtfully. "Would that have been yours by any chance?"
A bleak expression crossing his face, Greg nodded briefly. "It was," he said quietly. "Am I going to get it back?"

The Ward Sister shook her head. "I'm afraid it went out with the rest of your gear to the biological waste disposal," she said. "None of your things were ... serviceable," she added, raising her eyebrows. "You saved her life you know. There was substantial blood loss but without your quick thinking, things could have been ..." she paused, switching her sombre expression to a sudden smile. "All's well that ends well, I suppose." She looked down at Greg's bare and bandaged legs shaking her head in exasperation as she reached across the hallway into a tall cupboard, pulling out a heavy white cellular blanket which she laid out across his lap. "At least make some pretence of behaving as a patient while you act like a policeman." Turning on her heel, the ward sister entered the ward, leaving Greg and Gwendoline to stay or follow as they chose.

Tucking the thick blanket more closely around his chilled body, Freddy's mother pushed the wheelchair forward.

Freddy was lying in the bed at the farthest end of the small but longish room, pale and still in the long white bed. She was surrounded by a bank of flashing, softly-beeping machines and had a tall steel pole at either side of the headboard, one hung with bags of saline, the other, a bag of whole blood. Her skin was so white, even against the white of the hospital sheets, that her freckles stood out like paint against her skin. Her lips were bloodless and dry. But it was Freddy's sheer stillness that shook Greg to his core. She seemed to be barely breathing.

"She woke up in the recovery room following the operation but went back to sleep immediately after that," Sister Bowman checked the flow of medication through slender plastic tubes into a cannula on the back of Freddy's right hand. "Right now, sleep is her best friend, so please, no touching or noise or anything that might wake her before she's ready."

Greg felt like shit. It was his fault Freddy was here. If only he hadn't pursued the case to the Kerr's front door. Is only he hadn't pushed Harper into a position of stress. If only ... he heaved a deep breath and rubbed his face with his good hand.

"You saved my girl's life," Gwendoline rubbed his good shoulder gently. "I'm responsible for her being in here. I was the one who encouraged Alex in everything that he did. I should have seen that he wasn't quite right," she paused, sighing softly and taking the bedside chair, her hand resting on the top of the covers next to Freddy's hand. Close, but not touching.

"She always knew there was something odd about Alex, you know," she said, staring at the still form in the bed. "But I wouldn't have it. All I could think about was that she'd end up old and lonely ..." Like me remained unsaid.

"Not your fault," Greg sighed listlessly. "I'm to blame. I should have seen what was going down before it happened."

"What?" Gwendoline's tone was sharp, though the word was spoken softly. "What foolishness is this?" she gave him a hard stare. "Your own sergeant made it very clear to me that there was only one person to blame for all this and it certainly isn't you, you silly man," she said, smoothing a strand of hair back from Greg's weary face. "I'll have no more talk like that if you don't mind."

Greg tried a smile but his heart wasn't in it. He kept staring at Freddy's hand resting on the top of the bedcovers. It was so small. He thought he might be sick.

"I'll get Mister Kapoor to come around and speak with you before dinner," Nurse Bowman turned to them once she was assured of the correctness of things. "He'll be able to answer any questions you
might have and I'm sure he'll be able to put your minds at rest," she grimaced at Greg in his wheelchair. "Though I'm still not very happy about this situation," she said, giving him a hard look. "I'll see if the kitchen can organise some dinner for you both. It's chicken tonight."

###

Mr Kapoor was a neat, efficient little man, with a pencil moustache and an orderly haircut. He looked tired when he arrived, but took the time to clarify in straightforward terms what Freddy was experiencing. There was damage to the entire leg, he said, especially to the front of the knee which had needed a partial reconstruction. There had been major blood loss, though that was now under control. There would be a need for skin grafts later on and a stay at a rehabilitation hospital once she left the Northwick so that she was able to rebuild her muscles and tissue. It would take effort but the prognosis was good. Freddy was strong and healthy and, barring any unexpected infection, the process was now only a matter of time.

Gwendoline sobbed softly as Greg passed over a box of tissues and held her hand until she calmed. It had taken all his control not to have a bit of a weep himself.

Ward Sister Bowman eventually overcame the dichotomy of Greg being a policeman while also being a patient, in the simplest of ways.

"I've had a word with my Ward Manager and, in this one instance because of the situation, we've had a brainwave," she said, smiling as the porter returned and, with a few movements of his foot, had the empty bed up on its wheels and rolling out through the door.

"It's unlikely any of my colleagues are going to be arriving tonight," Greg said in all honesty. "Though I'd expect them to be here in the morning."

"Which is why," Nurse Bowman turned as the porter re-appeared with Greg's already rumpled bed. "We decided to move you in here so that you can at least be lying down in comfort while you do the police thing," she smiled again, pulling back the bedclothes. "In you hop."

Truth be told, the sight of his bed was a welcome one as both his shoulder and leg had been throbbing madly for the last hour. The idea of being able to lie down again was surprisingly appreciated.

With Bowman's assistance, Greg got himself out of the wheelchair and heaved into the bed in an ungainly but effective manoeuvre. It wasn't until the blankets were being pulled up that he realised Gwendoline must have had a front-row view of his wedding tackle. Still, with three kids, it was nothing she'd not seen before.

With the ability to lie down in relative comfort, with a reasonable dinner inside him and a fresh dose of heavy-duty painkillers, Greg felt his body warming and relaxing. He turned his head to check on Freddy, something he'd been doing every few minutes since he entered the room. If only she'd twitch or something he'd have felt a whole lot better.

Lying back within an artfully contrived nest of pillows which supported his arm and shoulder, the warm quiet of the room made him progressively drowsy. He was suddenly feeling so exhausted he could hardly think and his body was calling in the IOUs he'd been making all day. His eyelids drooped.

"Sleep, dear boy," Gwendoline pulled the blankets up around him. "I'll wake you when Freddy rouses, I promise."
Easing his muscles against the cool softness of his pillows, his face still tilted towards Freddy, Greg closed his eyes and let himself drift.

And he was standing at the top of a sheer and precipitous clifftop, his skin stung by the elements and the salt-sea spray. A raw wind whipped by, making him brace his legs against the heave of the storm. His hair was tossed into the wind as the sky around him darkened and lowered. Far below, a thin line of white marked the edge of the sea and the salt strand and he knew, for whatever reason, he was here to see something. His narrowed eyes peered through the squall, his focus on the fringe of the water and ... there, there, a tiny craft, tossing and pitching in the surge.

Instantly, Greg knew his task. Flinging his arms wide, he grasped the gale and threw himself down from the cliff, diving and veering through the driving wind until, against all the odds, he managed to land in the rear of the boat. There was a woman lying in the prow, her skin and dress white and soaked, her short dark hair matted and tangled by the water. He had no idea who she was but knew that his work was yet unfinished.

Gathering the woman up into his arms, he realised there was only one way off the dinghy and he took it, stepping directly from the prow into the boiling, churning waters, which ...

... instantly calmed. He walked through placid shallows to the beach, laying the woman carefully out on the dry sand. She was small but no child. Greg wished he knew who she was. He stared at her, trying to work out why he'd so willingly risked his life for hers.

The woman opened her eyes ...

Greg opened his eyes ...

Freddy opened her eyes ...

"Oh, darling," Gwendoline smothered her cry, grasping Freddy's hand in her own. "My darling girl," she crooned. "Everything's going to be alright. You're going to be fine. Oh, Freddy ..."

"Mmmm," Freddy's voice was whisper dry. She blinked sluggishly. "I had the strangest dream."

Greg said nothing, letting his eyes focus on her pale features, observing the curve of her cheek, the bow of her lips. He swallowed hard, feeling his heart race.

Her eyes flickered across the gap between the two beds. "Hello, you," she breathed, huskily. "Thirsty."

"Would you like some water, my love?" Gwendoline frowned at the empty jug on the bedside table. "I'll fetch some right away." Stepping lightly away towards the door, the room was empty of her a second later.

Greg was still staring at Freddy's wan face and he realised he'd been metaphorically holding his breath until she woke up. Suddenly, being in the same room wasn't enough.

Using only his good arm, he managed to sling back the sheets and blankets, enabling him to slide out into the chair still warm from Gwendoline's body heat.

It also put him within reach of Freddy's hand, the one that had seemed so small and lonely. His good arm reached without conscious thought. He pulled the hand closer to his face which he leaned against the side of the bed. Closing his eyes, he pressed Freddy's warming skin against his eyelids.

He wanted to tell her how sorry he was, how furious he was; how sadness for her chilled his every
breath and how much he wanted to be the one she leaned on in the coming days and weeks. Greg wanted to say he was going to make sure everything was put right as far as he could put it right, that he would take care of all the bad things in her world. He wished he could tell that he would be with her every step of the way in the future, no matter how hard it was or how difficult; that she could rely on him. That, despite all the evidence to the contrary, she would be safe with him. He wanted to say all these things and more. But he didn't have the right.

And so he said nothing, simply pressed the back of her hand against his closed eyes and did his best to neither rage or weep.

"As we're in hospital beds, I assume we're both the recipients of my stupidity?" it was more of a croak than a whisper this time, though it was still barely audible.

Greg shook his head fractionally, lifting his eyes to Freddy's face. "Your mother and I have already had this conversation and I've been reliably informed that there's only one person at fault and it isn't anyone in here," he closed his eyes again and sighed against her hand which smelled of antiseptic and hospital soap. "The main thing is you're going to be alright, though the repair is going to take a little while."

"Is it bad?" Freddy moved her eyes from the top of Greg's head to the ominous raised structure under her bedcovers. She imagined her leg was in there somewhere, but all she could feel was a huge heavy numbness. "Do I still have the same number of legs I had this morning?"

Freddy tried to keep her tone light but there was a note of panic in her words.

"Exactly the same number," Greg smiled faintly, pressing his lips to her knuckles. "Though one of them is going to be painful for a while."

"Out of bed again?" Ward Sister Bowman stood at the open doorway with a large plastic jug of cold water in one hand and a piece of paper in the other. Her expression was more resigned frustration than irritation, though she had a point.

"Just checking on the wellbeing of my key witness," Greg threw the nurse a tired smile but kept Freddy's hand exactly where it was. "Assuring her of the Met's unceasing vigilance."

"Yes, well," Bowman said, offering him the note. "It seems as though your sergeant tried to ring you earlier but your phone was switched off. Apparently Mrs Kerr is being taken back to London this evening and returned in the morning," she glanced at Gwendoline who looked as if she were about to protest.

"A very good idea," Greg nodded. "We all need a decent night's sleep."

"I thought I'd stay ..." Gwendoline sounded vaguely fretful. "And sit with you, darling," she walked to the bottom of Freddy's bed. "In case you felt ... alone."

"Thank you, but Greg's here ..." Freddy gratefully accepted a straw in the water glass held for her by the nurse. "... and if you stayed, I'd worry about you as well as everything else," her voice improved with the water.

"Go home with Donovan when she arrives and get some proper rest in your own bed," Greg caught Nurse Bowman's eye as she glanced pointedly back at the bed that was, albeit temporarily, his.

"Excellent advice, Inspector," she stared at him over folded arms.

"Nag, nag, nag ..." Greg brushed a quick kiss over Freddy's hand and rose shakily to his feet though
he was pleased to find that, while his leg throbbed to a maddened Caribbean beat, he was at least able to put some of his weight on it.

With Bowman holding the bedcovers high, he managed to get back in while retaining a degree of propriety this time. Once again, he was padded up with pillows and tucked in by fiendish nursely sheeting so that his next escape might not be so easily accomplished.

Gwendoline stood silent throughout the re-bedding ritual, her mind digesting the fact that she had seen the handsome inspector kiss her daughter's hand. He had said they were good friends ... a small point of light appeared in the darkness of the day. Perhaps leaving the pair of them to themselves overnight would be the very best thing she might do.

"Well, if you're absolutely sure," she looked between them as the ward sister departed after checking Freddy's drips. "I rather wanted a cup of tea. Would either of you two like me to bring you one back?"

"Gwennie, you're a saint," Greg eased his shoulder, once more at rest in a nest of pillows. "A hot cup of char would be perfect."

"Right then," Gwendoline looked at Freddy who seemed more alert by the minute. "Won't be a moment."

"How are you feeling now?" Greg looked to his left, checking Freddy's expression. She seemed calm and without pain, and god only knew what was in those saline drips.

"No pain yet," she sighed drowsily. "But my leg feels very heavy and kind of numb ..."

Greg was about to try and ease her concern when Nurse Bowman returned with the surgeon who, by the fact that he was wearing his outside coat, had probably been on his way home.

There was a quiet scattering of words and much drawing of privacy curtains around Freddy's bed. Greg caught the odd word but everything was being said in very low tones. There was the sound of things being shifted and Freddy's soft groan of pain. Seconds later, the curtains were whisked back into place and secured out of the way by a tie.

"You need as much rest as you can get," Mr Kapoor patted Freddy on the shoulder. "I'll come and see you again tomorrow, but rest now."

As Gwendoline watched the surgeon and the ward sister walk quietly from the room, Greg turned immediately to look at Freddy's face. There was a faint glisten of tears and Greg experienced a massive sense of outrage. As if she sensed his anger, Freddy wiped a hand across her face and met his gaze.

"At least I know I have two legs, even if I can only feel one of them at the moment," she half-smiled. "It'll probably start hurting like mad now I've looked at it."

"If it does, you have to tell the nurses, dear," Gwendoline was back in her chair between the beds, three cups of steaming tea on a small tray.

Greg lay back in his bed, staring at the ceiling. It was going to be a long night.

###

It was mostly dark, or at least, as dark as it ever got in a hospital room, when Greg woke to nature's call. The problem with drinking hot tea as well as lots of water was that eventually, it all had to go
Donovan had turned up a bit before eight, bearing news from the Yard.

Alex Harper had been charged with attempted murder, in order to keep him in custody. In addition, images of his Mercedes had been discovered on the CCTV security tapes recorded outside Billy Swithins' post office, which meant there was now a clear link between the solicitor and the drug distribution network and, through Swithins' confirmation that the same man who dropped off the drugs and collected the takings was also the one who asked him about fencing some of the Hatton Garden stuff, there were a lot more things under heavy investigation right now. This meant they had Harper not only on the attempted murder charge, but the odds were very good that he'd also be facing dealing and distribution charges, as well as all manner of new accusations connected to the jewel robberies. Given Freddy's presence in the room, Donovan refrained from mentioning that a connection to Professor Armstrong’s murder was also being actively considered.

Sally looked between Greg and Freddy in their long white beds and sighed, shaking her head. "Superintendent Manju is flaming mad," she said, cracking a small grin. "Tony Bosisto's copping an earful about letting you leave your office, and it's just as well that you're in here, hors de combat," she sounded rueful, "or you'd undoubtedly be getting a few strips ripped off," she made a face and scratched her head. "It's only the fact that so much of the three current major investigations is being cleared up by this one team that's stopping her from busting everyone down to constable," Sally raised her eyebrows and sounded almost amused. "Though I dare say she'll calm down when we start making some juicy arrests," she paused. "You're a bit of a hero, you realise? The story of your death-defying leap to save a member of the public is already hitting the news."

"Fuck," Greg laid his good hand across his eyes. The very last thing he needed was any attention being drawn to what was, after all, an enormous cock-up on his part. He was probably in so much trouble that he'd be lucky to keep his job. "I really do not want to talk to the press."

"Just as well they think you've both been transferred to a hospital in the city in that case, innit?" she grinned. "Your secret's safe with me, Guv."

Oddly, Gwendoline hadn't put up even a token resistance when it was time for her to leave.

"Have a good sleep," she'd said, glancing from Freddy to Greg and back again. "I'll be back in the morning."

And now it was gone midnight and he was dying for a pee. There was a small ensuite bathroom at the far end of the room, though he could have rung for a nurse and got one of those awful bottle things.

Fighting his way out of a cocoon of bedding, Greg put both feet flat on the floor and debated his chances of making it to the bathroom and back under his own steam. He reckoned that, if he took it slow and rested against the wall, he should be able to make it.

After the first few steps, he began to question his decision and almost wished he'd asked to keep the wheelchair. After the world's slowest stagger, he eventually made it to the bathroom, closing the door and turning on the light. Despite his need to go, he looked at himself in the mirror and was shocked to see how ill he appeared. Must be the light in here.

By the time he limped back to his bed, his leg was throbbing again, but he seemed to be walking a little easier. Taking care not to jar his shoulder on the way back under the covers, Greg heard Freddy clear her throat.
"Can't sleep," she said. "Do you mind if I put the light on?"

"I'm awake too, so go for it." Greg closed his eyes, opening them again slowly once the light was on, dim though it was.

"Do you need more stuff for your pain?"

"Not right now," Freddy moved restlessly. "I just feel wide awake ... it feels as if I should be doing something."

"Not a lot you can do at this time of night," Greg felt the urge for a smoke though he doubted the hospital authorities would let anyone stretch the rules quite that far.

"It feels very strange us being in the same room like this," she mused, looking up at the ceiling.

"Yes, well, in some countries this would mean we're engaged, you do realise that?" Greg tried for levity, though his heart wasn't in it.

"What's going to happen to Alex?" she asked softly.

Greg felt a cramp in his stomach. "You worried about him?"

"About Alex?" Freddy sounded surprised by the question. "Not in the least, despicable beast that he is," she pulled up a blanket. "I was just wondering what would happen to him now."

"Depends on how much evidence we can bring against him," Greg flexed his sore leg gingerly. "How much we can prove."

"And then?" Freddy turned her head towards him on her pillow.

"And then it all goes to court and we do him for every single thing we possibly can," Greg felt a small wash of satisfaction at the realisation that, one way or another, Alex Harper was going to jail for a long time. "He won't be troubling anyone for a while," he added. "Does that bother you?"

"Only that I might not be in court to see his expression when he's being sentenced," Freddy sighed.

"You have to concentrate on rest and repair now," Greg changed the subject. "We've still got a house to finish, don't forget, and that isn't going to happen by itself."

"Mummy will be thrilled to step in," Freddy smiled up at the ceiling. "She'll be in her absolute element, organising things, you'll see."

"Maybe so," Greg nodded sagely. "Though I'd much rather it was you there, working with me, than your mum."

Digesting that comment for a moment, Freddy frowned slightly. "You saved my life."

Puffing out his cheeks and exhaling slowly, Greg wrinkled his nose. "Wouldn't say I actually saved your life," he said. "I didn't stop you getting shot, did I?"

"Nobody could have done that, once I'd made up my mind to be so stupid," Freddy turned her head again to stare at him across the gap between the beds. "Nobody's ever risked so much for me before," she murmured. "You could have been killed."

"Instinct," Greg grinned. "My ancient ancestors must have been knights in shining armour."
"It seems mine certainly were," it was Freddy's turn to exhale noisily. "Maybe being a damsel in distress runs in my family too."

"Then we're pretty well suited, I'd say," Greg meant it to sound as though it made them well-organised, only realising, once he'd made the comment, that it might be otherwise construed.

"I agree," Freddy's words were very quiet. "I think we are too."

"Though we've still not settled the troubling matter of the inside finish on the windows, you realise?" Greg watched her smile with a warm sensation in his chest.

"Or the flooring. We really should keep the big floorboards all the way through you know," Freddy sounded just like she did standing in the garden of the Pimlico house.

"Yeah, once we get rid of that atrocious staircase," Greg laughed quietly.

Freddy lay back, aware now of a low throbbing ache in her right leg. It wasn't too bad, but she could feel it now. The pain, such as it was, still wasn't enough to distract her thoughts from the reason for her sleeplessness. The contents of her father's letters. If nobody else had read them, then she and Alex were the only people who knew of her situation. That she might be able to make a formal claim to the lands and chattels of the Apley estate. She frowned up into the darkness and bit her lip as she thought.

Greg lay back in his bed, reassured now that Freddy seemed to be managing the situation so calmly. He wanted things to be calm because he needed to work out if the feeling inside him now really was nothing more than the desire to protect her, or whether, as he was beginning to suspect, he had fallen helplessly in love.
Chapter 19

He surfaced to a barrage of strange noises; not loud, just unfamiliar. Greg's mouth was dry and he suddenly wished for a toothbrush. His skin felt greasy and in need of a wash. Blinking his eyes open, there seemed to be nurses all over the place, swishing curtains on metal rings and rattling carts of equipment. They bustled.

Freddy's bed was surrounded by the privacy curtains and, by counting the number of feet he could see and dividing by two, there were at least three nurses in there with her. His stomach clenched. Had something happened during the night? Was she alright? Despite feeling like he'd been dropped repeatedly from the top of a very high mountain, Greg struggled awake. The pain hit him like the side of a house and he groaned, clutching his shoulder, gritting his teeth and actively willing the daggers in his arm to fade away and depart.

"There's some hot tea if you like," a younger nurse offered him a plastic cup of cold water in one hand, and a tiny plastic container in the other. There were two promising white tablets inside.

"Painkillers?" he croaked hopefully.

"You've done really well not to need much up until now," the nurse nodded supportively. "But even the bravest can use a bit of pain relief at times," she smiled, handing him the drugs before handing him the water. "Breakfast will be around shortly," she added. "You need to eat as much as you can to restore your energy levels," she nodded approvingly as the drugs went down without debate.

"Want the bathroom first?"

Washed and with his teeth brushed and with a comb through his hair, he felt fresher, though his outrageous stubble must have made him look like a right good-for-nothing. The curtains were still around Freddy's bed when the young nurse helped him limp back.

"Anything the matter in there?" he asked, suddenly tense.

"They're probably changing the dressings," she helped him back into his bed. "With the possibility of infection so high, we need to keep a very close eye on things," the nurse shrugged. "Not pleasant, but necessary."

Finding his imagination was entirely up to the job, Greg winced. But there was nothing that could be done and both he and Freddy were in the hands of the best hospital system in the world. He wished he could be there to hold her hand.

The drugs began to kick in and he sighed with relief as his pillows were once more arranged to support his aching arm and shoulder. The privacy curtains whisked back to show Freddy sitting up, wearing a clean gown and awake but looking somewhat drained.

"They got you too, huh?" Greg's eyes absorbed everything he could about her appearance. She was still dreadfully pale, though at least she was sitting up. His heart ached for her.

"I've just seen what's beneath the bandages," Freddy looked slightly green. "I may never eat steak again."

"This lot'll have you up dancing for the New Year," he grinned optimistically, even though he knew she was going to need care for a long time. "Things take the time they take to get better," he tried a one-shoulder shrug. "At least I have a lot of really terrible jokes I can try out on you," he grinned. "Captive audience and all that."
"Police brutality, Inspector?" she gave a half-smile.

"The name is Greg," he grinned, reaching over for his tea. "How's the pain?"

"Front and centre," Freddy grimaced. "Feels like my entire leg's on fire. They've got all sorts of antibiotics in the drip," she lifted her left hand fractionally, as if judging its weight. "I've got some fairly serious stuff for the pain in there too," she shook her head slowly, blinking owlishly. "No wonder I feel like I'm floating."

*Opioids*, Greg thought. *Morphine or Fentanyl, probably.*

"They give you what you need," he said, watching as a trolley was rolled ceremoniously into the room by a smiling nurse.

"Breakfast," she said, placing Greg's tray on a small bedside table that swung in over his legs. A dish of fruit, a glass of orange juice, a mug of tea and, amazingly, eggs and bacon with toast. "A little birdy told us you'd like this."

*Bacon and eggs.* From being almost entirely disinterested in eating to feeling starving took less than a second. He made a mental note to recommend Sally for promotion. He looked across to Freddy to see she was getting fruit and yoghurt and juice and a tall glass of what looked like a banana milkshake. Lots of high protein food for someone with not much of an appetite; he'd seen it all before. He bit into his toast.

"Great service at this hotel," he grinned.

"Make the most of it because you're being discharged this morning."

###

Fortunately, he and Donovan had a spare key for each other's places and had done for years, for just such a situation as this. When Sally rocked up with a cheerful Gwendoline, she also brought a bag of clean clothes for him, right down to socks and shoes.

In addition to bringing Gwendoline back to Harrow, she was also here to gather statements from both the Kerr women. "As soon as you're ready, ladies," she brought out both her phone and a notebook as a ward assistant collected the breakfast dishes. "I'll talk to you once you're sorted out, sir," Sally nodded over his shoulder at the three nurses who'd just entered the ward, their collective gaze on Greg.

Ward Sister Bowman watched as two junior nurses drew the privacy curtains around his bed before carefully peeling back the bandages on his right leg. He was expecting a grim discovery but found that, apart from a scattering of tiny, perfectly circular holes in the side of his calf, there wasn't that much damage. The holes, small though they were, looked unpleasantly deep. Some inflammation, some bruising, but otherwise, it wasn't too bad. No obvious infection, for one thing.

"Let me see you walk on it, if you can," Bowman waited until all the dressings had been removed and she stood, her eyes taking in the way Greg was able to place his foot on the floor. "Does it feel any better than last night?" she got Greg to walk a few steps at the side of his bed.

"Sore, mostly," he admitted, flexing his foot cautiously. "Not so stiff, though," he added. "Hope I'm not expected to sprint for any reason."

"Your shoulder is going to take longer to heal," Bowman frowned. "Make sure you go and see a physio as soon as you can for exercises to stop the joint from freezing."
After his leg was re-dressed with waterproof patches that had to stay in place for three days, he was told to dress while the necessary paperwork was being put together. He was given a week's certificate from work and a small box of analgesics for night time use. His shoulder needed no further treatment except rest until it healed. Bowman told him to go and see his usual GP if he needed more time or more painkillers. One of the junior nurses helped him dress and then re-slung his arm. Thank god Sally had thought to bring him slip-on shoes.

By mid-morning, he was good to go.

Pushing the privacy curtain back, the young nurse nodded at him and vanished from the room. Greg sat on the edge of his bed facing Freddy and her mum.

Freddy was looking a bit better, he noted. Not so deathly pale, not so fragile. Gwendoline had been fussing around her like a tug boat around an ocean liner, so at least she wasn't going to be in here all by herself, though Greg was loath to leave her side.

"I'm going to be off work for a few days, I expect," he eased his aching shoulder inside the sling. "I've got to go in to the office and give my statement and see what's what, but then I'll see if I can get a lift out to see you tomorrow," he said. "Let you know what's going on with things."

"Why don't you come with me?" Gwendoline frowned at him. "I'll be coming out tomorrow afternoon with some things from Freddy's flat. Would you like a lift?"

"You're driving?" Greg tried not to sound too unsure.

"God save me from big strong men without a brain in their heads," Gwendoline almost threw her hands in the air. "Who do you think taught Freddy how to drive, hmm?"

"And you've got a car?"

"Freddy has graciously lent me the Landy."

"And are you, ah ..." Greg's words melted under Gwendoline's distinctly cool stare.

"I was driving jeeps and Landrovers before you were born, young man," her eyebrow arched scornfully. "But they cost so much in petrol these days that I'd prefer Freddy kept hers for use only in the country."

"Mummy's a better driver than I am," Freddy sounded amused. "Better not upset her or she'll be compelled to show you her handbrake turns."

"Then I would be very happy to take you up on your offer," Greg knew when to give in gracefully. "Once I've got things squared away at work, I should be all yours."

"That will be nice," keeping her expression neutral, Freddy smiled again, leaving all sorts of things unsaid.

Greg didn't want to go. He leaned down and picked up her hand, squeezing it gently. "I'm only leaving because Nurse Bowman frightens me," he whispered.

"You're an idiot," Freddy smiled for real. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Don't go getting into any fights." Her hand was so warm now; he couldn't bear to let it go.

"Yes, well," Donovan coughed discreetly at the open doorway. "You ready, Guv?"
It took a bit of clever manoeuvring to get him into the passenger seat of Sally's car and belted in. A cold sweat dampened his forehead by the time he was done. His leg was throbbing again and his arm pulsed with a dull ache.

"You need one of these?" Donovan waggled the clear plastic bag containing his box of painkillers. "There's a bottle of water here if you need it."

"Let's see how we go between here and the office," He said, taking a deep breath as she started the car and pulled out of the Northwick's car park. "It's going to take a few days to get sorted out, I expect."

"Greg, you've not only been shot, but you've got a cracked bone in your arm and a bashed up shoulder," Sally scowled at him. "You know the new occ-health regulations on taking certified sick leave."

"Yeah," Greg nodded, watching the buildings and trees go by and thinking about how much he wanted to be sitting at Freddy's bedside. Gone were the days when people turned a blind eye on anyone coming into work when they were signed off sick. These days, if you were off sick, then you were off and that was that. Something to do with invalidating insurance policies. "Just take me into the office so I can give my statement and see how the land lies with Tony Bosisto, assuming he's even willing to speak to me right now."

"I shouldn't worry too much about that," Sally concentrated on the road ahead. "Nobody is saying you did anything wrong, just that there should have been an easier way to bring Alex Harper in."

"Yeah. Laying the mad bastard out with a fucking two-by-four would have been an easier way."

"I wasn't trying to bring him in, just make sure he left without causing any more trouble," Greg groaned in disgust at himself. "Maybe I'm just over the hill," he sighed. "Maybe I should think about packing it all in."

Sally started to laugh. "Oh dear, someone's feeling sorry for themselves," she grinned. "Don't worry," she added, "there's a lot of evidence piling up against Harper from every angle. The case against him is looking very solid. People are in a good mood." By 'people', Greg took it that Donovan meant Superintendent Manju. He could only hope.

The roads were fortuitously clear and they made the Yard easily in under an hour. Sally held the door for him as he clambered slowly out onto his feet, breathing deeply to settle the ache in his arm.

Heading directly to the fourth floor, Greg hoped to avoid any fuss, but his luck was out.

"Hail, the conquering hero returns!" Duncan Brimacombe almost bumped into him outside the staff tea room. "You look like crap, my friend," he said, observing the slung arm and the limping leg.

"All for a good cause," Greg thought about going to his office and decided against it. Better face the music first rather than dwell on things. Heading to one of the larger offices on the same floor as his, he took a deep breath, gritted his teeth and knocked on the door. Instead of being called in, he was surprised to see Leela Manju open it herself.

"I heard you were in," she said, taking his debilitated condition in with a single glance. "Sit down and I'll get some coffee sent up."

Greg took one of the comfy chairs around a small meeting table as Manju called an assistant to bring
"Looking like this, I'm somewhat surprised they let you out so soon," she said, scanning his arm and his foot before returning her gaze to his face. "Have you given your statement yet?"

"It's the main reason I'm here, Ma'am," he smiled his thanks as he was handed a china cup of aromatic dark coffee by the superintendent's long-time clerical assistant. "I also wanted to see what was going on with the case, of course."

"And you thought you might be in line for a reprimand and so you came to me first to get it over with?" Leela Manju had been in the force far too long not to be able to read every subtext there was. Meeting her eyes, Greg squared his shoulders. "Ready when you are."

"You were an arse to get yourself shot in the line of duty," Manju leaned back in her chair. "But both you and I have been around the traps long enough to know that sometimes, even the best laid plans can go balls-up," she paused, taking a sip of her coffee. "Don't do it again," she added mildly.

Greg looked at her through narrowed eyes, waiting for his direct supervisor to unleash her legendary bad temper. But nothing came.

"How's the leg?"

"Ah, not too bad, thanks," Greg paid attention to the coffee, though he felt his eyebrows rising. Perhaps he wasn't in too much trouble after all. "The hospital signed me off for a week and gave me a box of pills to help with the pain at night, but other than that," he shrugged awkwardly. "I'll live."

"Good," Manju sounded a little relieved. "Feel up to a quick meeting with Tony before we send you off to your own bed?"

Nodding warily, Greg was still half-waiting for the other boot to fall. Manju went to her desk phone and called Bosisto's office extension. "He's in my office. Can you come here and brief him?" she turned her head, arching an eyebrow. "He's a bit worse for wear, so don't hang about."

Within a couple of minutes, a quiet knock at the door heralded DCI Bosisto's arrival.

"Ma'am," he nodded politely in Manju's direction as she put down her cup and headed out the door. "Not too long," she said. "Greg's not here officially, but I thought he'd rest easier knowing where we were with things."

"Christ," Greg waited until the door closed after Manju's exit before he shook his head. "Never thought I'd live to see the day. Thought I was in for a right bollocking."

"Yeah," Tony Bosisto made himself comfortable in the empty chair. "Looks like you're flavour of the month, my boy," he nodded. "We found the driver of the Merc in the CCTV footage outside Billy Swithins' post office and he's decided to sing us sweet lullabies about distribution networks and drop-off points," Bosisto grinned. "I think he's after a deal for some reason."

"Who is he?" Greg nibbled his lower lip as he thought. "Do we know him?"

"Oh yeah," Tony linked his fingers over his stomach. "Remember the Hackney GBH of two years back, where a dealer got himself beaten to a pulp? Same guy. Bloke called Michael Camer. Nasty bugger at the best of times. Did five years in Belmarsh for manslaughter back in the mid-nineties."

"You fancy him for the Armstrong murder," Greg felt his mouth twitch. "Don't you?"
Lifting his eyes to study the pristine white ceiling, Bosisto waggled his head from side to side, his lips pursed. "If the cap fits," he murmured.

"Did Camer say that Harper was the principal in the drugs supply?" Greg asked slowly. If Alex Harper could be linked without qualification to the drugs distribution, and if Camer really had been the one who killed Freddy's mentor, then both men were going down for a long, long time.

"Not yet," the DCI sniffed irritably. "But he's making nice for some reason, and it ain't because of my beautiful phisog, I'm fairly sure."

"Want me to have a chat with him?" Greg offered casually, finishing his coffee.

"Yeah, I would," Bosisto looked at him. "But if I let you anywhere near that interview room, our lovely Leela would likely attempt to remove a very special part of my anatomy with a rusty fish knife," he smiled ruefully. "Nah," he added, shaking his head. "This is big and it ain't going to go away in a hurry. You go off and loll about like the Queen of Sheba for a few days and leave us poor stiffs do all the legwork."

"You want my statement first?" Greg laughed. "Before I start my official lolling?"

"Yeah, may as well, since you're here." Bosisto reached into his jacket for his phone, setting it to 'record'.

By the time the cab dropped him off outside his small flat, Greg felt exhausted. His leg ached and his shoulder was too painful to lift. Thank god they'd given him something for the pain at the Northwick. Though his temporary flat was small, he'd kept it tidy and clean and he debated whether he should simply go back to bed or sit and watch the news on telly for a while.

Putting the kettle on for a cup of tea, he kicked off his shoes and, very cautiously, changed into a soft pair of track pants and a zipped top. He found that, if he moved his injured arm slowly and with infinite care, he was able to get it into a sleeve. Once the top was zipped up, he put the sling back on. After making the coffee and adding in a glug of half-decent scotch with the sugar, he sighed in relief and, grabbing a couple of the pain pills, went to sit on the small settee to catch up on what he'd missed for in the last day. It was the usual stuff; politicians declaring what needed to be done but probably would never get around to doing; some mad dictator threatening to end the security of the Western world; some president being unpresidential. He sighed as he relaxed and let the hot drink and the painkillers do their thing. He wondered what Freddy was doing right now, if she were sleeping again or if the nurses had her sitting up and wriggling her toes.

Greg found himself yawning and realised the TV was just making noise. He flicked the thing off and drew the heavy curtains in his bedroom against the light. Climbing into bed fully dressed, he piled up the pillows as the nurses had and lay back, thinking.

If Alex Harper was behind both the drug network and the Hatton Garden jobs, then the first obvious question was why? The man seemed to have plenty of money for the everyday things, his flash Merc being a point in case. So why would he get into drug merchandising and robbery? It made no sense, especially for someone who might have fancied his chances as a member of the aristocracy.

Greg paused his thoughts. Maybe that was it? Maybe he wanted the money so that he could live the lifestyle he hoped he'd become accustomed to living? Assuming that Freddy would have fallen in with his plans, then they'd have made the claim on the Apley title. They would naturally, have to have a society wedding and live fairly high on the hog to maintain the image of the Earl and
Countess of Apley. Blinking his eyes open, Greg saw there was a kind of logic. Though where the death of Professor Armstrong came in ... though if he'd been looking for Freddy's dad's letter in her office and he'd assumed the old scientist had actually seen him at it ... Yeah. It could make sense.

His eyes closed in the warmth of the bed and Greg slept.

As always, his bladder acted as the perfect alarm, waking him just before the six o'clock news. Flicking to the BBC, he made himself another cup of tea while he listened in case anything had been picked up yet by the media. It wasn't likely, but journalists seemed to get in everywhere these days. As he was wondering what to make himself for dinner, he heard his name being spoken in the dulcet tones of George Alagiah. Dropping everything, he limped around the kitchen counter for a better look.

Thankfully, it wasn't much. A few shots of the ambulances he and Freddy had taken to the North Hardwick, a blurred picture of the lane near the Kerr's house and an old stock photo of himself looking confused. Police were 'investigating', the news reader said in the peculiar way of BBC anchors. There was nothing more. Just as well, for until the whole scope of the illegality was uncovered, anything could go wrong if news of it hit the telly.

The sound of his door bell distracted his thoughts. It was Donovan, dangling his BMW's car keys between her fingers.

"Though you might need this at some point," she said. "Parked it in the usual place, all locked up," she smiled questioningly. "How's the walking wounded?"

"Just made some tea," Greg opened the door wider. "Come in."

While he poured a second cup for his sergeant, Greg shared his thoughts of earlier in the day. "Get Tony to have someone from forensic accounting to go over Harper's financials very carefully," he said, frowning to himself. "If my speculations are right, the guy's got a stash of cash hidden away somewhere he can get at easily. It won't be in property, or anything long-term or hard to liquidate," Greg paused, thinking. "If it's big enough, he can get it."

"So you reckon that he was doing all this to fund a showy society launch?" Sally made a face. "Dunno why anyone would want that these days," she shrugged. "But I've heard of dafter reasons."


"That place of yours down in Pimlico?"

"Yep," Greg considered. "But it's coming on a treat given what it was like at the start."

"I wouldn't know," Donovan's eyebrows twitched, but she carefully said nothing more.

"You fancy acting the chauffeur one more time?" Greg looked at her sideways, a small smile curving his mouth. He flexed his leg to be sure; it was sore and a little stiff, but clearly his repair system was working well. There was an ache but not much more.

"Depends where you need driving to and from," she lidded her eyes. "I'm not taking you out boozing when you're off sick."

"Would you like to come and have a look with me at the house I'm doing up?" he asked, standing
and taking his empty cup to the kitchen sink.

"Thought you'd never ask," Sally grinned back, handing over her cup. "I've been dying of curiosity."

"Yeah well," he gave a one-armed shrug. "Got to keep the riff-raff out." He dodged carefully as she made to poke his slung arm. "No damaging the boss," he laughed, locking his front door behind them.

Avoiding the worst of the Christmas traffic, the drive took only minutes and they parked in Greg's usual spot. The place was pitch dark, but Donovan had a couple of torches in the back seat.

Unlocking the smaller section of the main gate, he ushered her inside the walled garden which, despite its barren emptiness, was still warmer inside than out.

"Oh wow," Sally breathed as she played her beam of light across the massive expanse of building ahead. "It's enormous."

"It is a bit," Greg found himself smiling enthusiastically. "Freddy's having the ground floor and basement; I'm taking the middle floor apartment and we're going to sell off the top floor for the biggest profit we can and share it between us," he said, leading the way to the front door. "So not only will I have a fantastic place to live in a very decent part of London, but I'll probably end up doing well financially out of the arrangement."

"Looks like you fell on your feet here then, didn't ya?" Sally was already walking ahead of his slower limp, when Greg located the mains light switch on the wall and flicked it on.

Instantly, the entire ground floor lit up like the proverbial Christmas tree.

"Oh, holy crap," Sally's jaw dropped as she took in the high ornate ceilings and the half-panelled walls, the solid oak floorboards and the new windows at the far end of the passage. "It's a bleedin' mansion."

"It's not a mansion," Greg felt laughter bubbling up in his chest. "Though I admit, it's bigger than I thought it was going to be. A lot of the things we've spend money on so far, you can't see; foundations and damp-proofing and stuff like that," he beckoned her towards the big kitchen space near the back of the apartment. He pointed at the smaller staircase coming in from the garden door. "Want to have a quick look at the floor I'm having?"

"Can you make it up those steps?" Donovan sounded dubious.

"I'll take it slow," he grinned, ushering her up ahead of him.

Again, finding the master lights switch for the floor, he clicked the thing on, throwing brilliance throughout the entire floor. While the place wasn't warm, he could swear it wasn't entirely freezing, either. Thank god for a decent roof and new windows.

Sally was turning in circles, staring around her with wide eyes. "This place is enormous," she gasped, taking in ceilings that, while not as high as the ground floor, were still at least twelve feet from the ground. The same heavy floorboards, the same solid oak wainscoting ... "You could have an entire family in here and you'd still be rattling around the place," she smoothed her hand over some ancient carved wood. "It's amazing."

Leaving his sergeant exclaim and explore over the work that he'd done in was balm to his frazzled soul. Greg knew this house was incredible, but it never hurt to get a second opinion from time to time, and Sally wouldn't lie.
"Just think of the house-warming party I can have in here," he grinned again.

Sally turned, shaking her head, her eyes darting off all over the place as different things caught her attention. Heading down the passage towards the front of the house, she stepped into what would be Greg's master bedroom; the faint light of a cloud-hazed moon filtered through the new window panes of the three tall windows, each still bearing the Glass-fragile stickers across them. Staring down into the shadowed spaces of the big garden, she nodded.

"I was dead pleased you finally called it quits with Cathy, you know," she murmured softly, her eyes still focused beyond the dusty new glass. "Though I couldn't say anything at the time, obviously."

It wasn't like Donovan to bare her soul without good reason, Greg frowned, pursing his lips. "It was bound to happen," he agreed, limping to her side. "Sooner or later."

"And this thing with you and Freddy Kerr," Sally half-turned to look up at his face, pale in the moonlight glow. "Serious, is it?"

Was it serious? Greg found himself remembering all the different things that had happened to him in the short few months since he and Freddy had met; all the new experiences he'd had, all the wild and strange things that had happened to him ... Gwendoline. An unaware smile shaped his face.

"Yeah, thought so," Sally nodded knowingly. "You two suit each other; you're both a bit mad."

"Freddy Kerr is possibly a Countess," Greg's expression sobered. "Her lifestyle and mine are completely different ... she probably knows how to use fifteen different kinds of forks in a restaurant," he rubbed his nose. "They learned to ski when they were kids," he added as a final nail in the coffin. "We're from entirely different worlds."

"Of course you are," Sally looked puzzled. "But are you serious about her?"

Was he serious?

"I wanted to kill Alex Harper for what he'd done," he admitted quietly. "If Freddy had died, I really might have done it."

"Then you love her?"

Turning his head to catch Sally's eyes, Greg nodded slowly. "I can't see the rest of my life without her, if that's what you mean."

Donovan lifted her eyebrows, smiling. "Right then," she said. "Time you did something about it."
With Gwendoline as chauffeuse, Greg managed to get in to see Freddy several times before the weekend, bringing samples for the window finishes and wooden floor treatment of the Pimlico house. Despite Donovan's less than subtle urging, Freddy seemed never to be alone; if her mother wasn't there, nurses trooped in and out of the room at a drop of a hat, as well as visitors for the woman now ensconced in the second bed nearest the door. Besides which, Freddy was in too much pain at times to talk about things that were best left for a private moment. He did wonder at the number of reasons Gwendoline gave in order to leave them alone, despite his determination not to be rushed. If he was going to court Freddy, he'd do it in his own way and in his own time. In the meantime, he wanted to crack on with the house so that, when she was finally able to get around on her own two feet, at least he'd have something to show her.

"Are you building a nest for my daughter?" Gwendoline asked him outright one evening as they were driving back into town. "You know I don't like to pry, Greg, but I am increasingly curious as to your intentions towards my eldest child."

Rolling his eyes and glad that the evening was already dark, Greg stared straight ahead. "Do I need to ask your permission?" he asked after a moment. "Because, for a minute there Gwennie, I thought we were in the twenty-first century."

"Oh, Gregory, my dear boy, you know I don't mean it like that," Gwendoline kept her eyes on the road. Despite her age and her small stature, Greg would have been the first to confirm her driving skills were very much up to the demands of London's streets. "But if there's the smallest thing I can do to help you ... either of you ..."

"It's going to take a while for Freddy to stand on her own two legs," Greg exhaled slowly. "And I mean that in every sense of the word," he paused. "I wouldn't be comfortable having her feel pressured by my being around when she's not able to ..."

"Run away?" Gwendoline smiled. "I'm fairly certain that's not the first idea that might come to her mind, but I do understand and you are being a perfect gentleman about the whole thing," she sighed. "It's just that I'm not getting any younger and I'd dearly love to see Freddy settled before I drop off the twig."

Grinning at the notion that Gwendoline was going to drop off anything within the next twenty years, he rubbed his nose. "Just let me do this in my own time," he said finally. "There's no rush and I want to do this ... right," he grimaced at his reflection in the side window. If anyone was going to win first prize for sounding like a wimp, it might well be him.

"Then I shall leave you both to it, but know that you have my blessings, for what they're worth," Freddy's mum slowed the Landy as they came into traffic.

"There is one thing you might be able to help me with, if you're willing," Greg wasn't sure how to explain what he had in mind without sounding too manipulative.

"Fire away, dear heart," Gwendoline kept her eyes on the traffic lights but her attention was all his.

"I have this idea, for want of a better word," Greg began. "For when Freddy comes out of the hospital, the rehab hospital, and I'd wondered how you might feel about it."

"And just what might this notion of yours entail?" the Landy swung neatly into a new lane and
slowed to accommodate the build-up of Christmas traffic in the city.

"It's about the house and about getting my flat ready and about keeping this all a surprise from Freddy until she's well enough to come home."

"Well, that certainly doesn't sound too bad," Gwendoline honked the Landy's horn as a flash Maserati cut in front of them.

"And do you know Freddy's friend who recycles antique staircases?" Greg added. "She said she knew someone who'd give us fifteen grand for the thing, as well as take it all away. You wouldn't know who she meant, would you?"


"You mean he's a bit of a crook?" Greg smiled. Trust Freddy to have friends in low places as well as high ones. "Some of my best mates are crooks."

"Well, possibly, you might say that," Gwendoline wrinkled her nose elegantly. "I've found it best not to ask too many questions where Archie is involved. Would you like his address?"

"There can't be too many large builder's yards in that area, so I'll probably be able to find him, no problem," Greg was still smiling, wondering what kind of person Freddy's mother might consider a 'scoundrel'. It might be amusing to do a bit of haggling with a knock-off merchant who knew he was dealing with the law. Could even be fun.

"I just want to get that enormous eyesore out of the way so I can get the builders in to fix up the flooring and the exits," Greg watched as buildings became familiar at the side of the road. "It's a major job and it's got to be done before we can really tackle anything else."

"Then speak with Archie, my dear. Just remember he's a bit of a scamp."

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Though stiff, his shoulder was feeling much better by Saturday morning. It ached when he turned sharply, or lifted anything, but it was moving more easily and Greg felt he could probably do away with the sling, shoving the thing in a coat pocket on the chance he might need it later. Next question; drive or grab a cab? Gwendoline was off doing stuff for Freddy and so he'd have to fend for himself. Weighing the ring of keys in his hand, he pursed his mouth in thought. As long as he took it carefully he should be okay. If worst came to worst, he could give Sally a call to bring his car back with him as a passenger. He'd owe her for that though. Unlocking his BMW, he slid into the driver's seat and belted up without too much difficulty. He reversed with only a slight twinge in his neck and shoulder and hardly felt anything once he was out on the road.

Freddy's friend 'Archie' had turned out to be one Archibald Smith, proprietor of *Smith's Recyclables & Collectables*. Greg was curious as to the kind of person Gwendoline would label a 'bit of a scamp.'

Driving through the big open yard gates, Greg parked on a semi-gravelled patch of ground. There were a few other cars, but the place wasn't busy. The yard around him was stacked every which way with old marble slabs, piles of different coloured bricks, carved stone columns and heaped flagstones and cobbles. There was an enormous great barn of a storage shed, its double-height doors wide open to the elements. Greg wandered inside, looking around at the ornate contents and less durable; wooden carvings, huge lines of doors balanced upright like so many dominos ready to fall; elaborate
picture frames hung from the roof. All around the walls were semi-constructed wooden staircases, spiral staircases, ends of staircases, polished banner rails and great tubs of wooden balusters. It looked like an entire country house had been disassembled and piled up as neat as you like. There was a lonely string of flickering party lights strung from one end of the yard to the other as a nod to Christmas.

A large man with a face that had been in the wars a few times was busy stacking up boxes of wooden panels.

"Hi. I'm looking for Archie Smith, if he's around," Greg put on his best smile as the man straightened up.

"Who wants to know?" The accent was pure London, though perhaps pure wasn't the best word for it. The guy looked like he'd taken thug lessons.

"I'm a friend of Freddy Kerr and she wants to do some business with Mr Smith." Keeping his expression even and unruffled, Greg took note of the man's battered features. He'd either been a boxer for more years than he should, or his head had got caught in a combine harvester.

The man thought for a moment. "Wait here."

As he waited, Greg looked more closely at some of the things standing, leaning or lying around him. There was a smell of old wood and a fainter scent of wood polish. Some of these pieces had evidently come from good homes.

A youngish Chinese man appeared, hands deep in the pockets of a thick jacket. "You want to see Archie Smith?" he asked. "Can I ask why?" His voice was soft and sounded educated. Probably Smith's accountant or bookkeeper, Greg thought. Repeating his early statement, it was clear Freddy's name was not unknown.

"Freddy?" the question was abrupt. "I heard she'd been in some sort of accident."

Greg shrugged and then wished he hadn't. "Sort of. She and I are working on a big house renovation down in Pimlico and I ..."

"Oh, so you're the guy helping her with the garden house?"

"You know about the Pimlico house?" Greg lifted his eyebrows.

"Yeah, sort of," the man handed Greg back his own words.

"And so is Archie Smith actually in?" Greg motioned around him.

"You're looking at him," the young man smiled easily.

"You're Archie Smith?" Greg frowned.

"God, what is it with all you round-eyes?" Archie rolled his own eyes, irritated. "Just because I'm not called Wu or something, everyone immediately assumes I'm lying."

"Sorry, sorry." Greg lifted his hands apologetically. "It's just that you don't sound like someone I'd expect to be called Archie Smith, though he would," Greg nodded over his shoulder at the ex-boxer, still stacking the panels.

"I'm adopted, okay?" The younger man sighed, folding his arms. "And now we've got all that out of
the way, what exactly was it you wanted to speak to me about?"

"Right, yes," Greg nodded. "Did Freddy ever talk to you about the carved staircase at the Pimlico
place? I'd like it shifted while she's in hospital, if that's possible."

"She's in the hospital?" It was Archie's turn to frown. "Is she going to be okay?"

"It'll take a while, but yeah." Greg was reluctant to go into details.

"Come to my office and we can talk about your staircase," Archie jerked a thumb over his shoulder.
"If it's the one I'm thinking about."

Archie's office was a window-fronted room, high up at the far end of the enormous building, able to
look down across everything and anything that happened within his domain. There was a huge desk
near the big windows. Barring a laptop, it was spotless. In the rear of the office were shelves and
shelves of tightly packed lever-arch files and thick ledgers. On a side table was an exquisite Chinese
tea service and an electric kettle.

"Tea?" Archie gestured Greg to one of the visitor's chairs as he filled the kettle from a large plastic
container of water.

"Sure," Greg wondered what kind of tea it would be.

"I haven't seen Freddy for a couple of months, but I remember the staircase," Archie took his seat on
the side of the desk, moving the laptop carefully to one side. "It's something of a monster, as I recall."

"It's pretty big, yes," Greg nodded, opening several photos on his phone for Archie's reference. "But
even I can see it's really valuable," he added. "And I don't want to damage anything by trying to take
it down myself. I'm not an expert in these things."

"Whereas I am." Archie stood as the kettle boiled and Greg waited to see the tea service in action.
What he actually got was a large mug with a tea-bag and the offer of milk and sugar. He grinned.
This was more like his thing.

"So, adopted, eh?" he sipped the scalding tea and felt himself relaxing.

"Yes. I stowed away on an old freighter out of Macau when I was five and ended up hiding in a
consignment of recycled exotic hardwoods on its way to old Henry Smith here in London," he
shrugged again. "God knows who my biological parents were. After that, things all went a bit
Hollywoodish."

"You don't sound London," Greg eased his shoulder. "Or Chinese, for that matter."

"Pops decided that any adopted son of his would get the best education money could buy," he
smiled, remembering. "I ended up at King's College taking an MBA. That's where I met Freddy, in
fact."

Greg's skin prickled. "Do you know Alex Harper?" he asked carefully.

"Yes, I do, for what it's worth. Tedious chap. We took an instant dislike to each other the first time
we met and I'm happy to say we've managed to avoid one another ever since. Why do you ask?"

"Only that he's a friend of Freddy's and went to King's College as well," Greg kept his tone
inconsequential.
"Can't stand him. Don't know how Freddy even tolerates the man," Archie sighed, finishing his tea. "And now, to business," he leaned back in his chair, a deeply meditative look on his face. "I remember the staircase very clearly. It's a behemoth and needs expert removal."

"Worth a few bob though, I expect," Greg looked vaguely down into his half-empty mug. "Must have cost a mint to have custom made, back in the day, all that lovely carved mahogany. I doubt you'd find many antique staircases like that these days."

"It'll take a solid week to get the thing out in the pieces it went in," Archie lifted his eyebrows ruefully, a faint sigh in his words.

"And you'd probably be able to sell it out of a place like this within days. You might even have someone already lined up for it, being a clever man like you are."

"I'll have to pay for labour and cartage and storage until I can get it to its new location," Archie wrinkled his nose in thought. "It'll cost me at least ten grand just to get the thing down and shifted."

"And then you'd sell it on for, what ..?" Greg smiled into his empty mug. "Forty, fifty thousand? Not a bad return for a week's work."

"I can offer you five thousand for the staircase and I'll charge nothing for the removal and freight." Archie leaned forward and met Greg's eyes.

"Twenty thousand and you start the removal in three days." Greg tilted his head slightly.

"Seven thousand and, as it's for Freddy, I'll get the men onto it within a week."

"Eighteen thousand and the removal starts the beginning of next week."

"Ten thousand and I'll get my people there by Monday."

"Fifteen thousand, with a Monday start," Greg linked his fingers together and leaned back in his chair. "You'd still be making at least twenty or thirty grand profit," he added. "I'm going no lower. If you don't like this deal then I'll go and have a chat with .. ah, what's his name," Greg fumbled in his pocket for a scrap of paper. "Craig James and Sons of Romford, specialists in the removal, restoration and installation of aged and antique house fittings," he read his own note.

"You'd go to the James place instead of here, the firm Freddy herself would come to for the job?" Archie sounded mildly disgusted.

"Fifteen thousand and a Monday start," Greg lifted his eyebrows.

"I hope you don't expect me to spit on my palm," Archie Smith leaned across the desk, right hand extended.

Lifting his right arm with great care, Greg shook on the deal. "Freddy will be pleased," he said. "She said you'd go to fifteen."

"Bloody woman," Archie scowled. "She knows me too well."

"Gwendoline likes you too," Greg laughed. "She called you a bit of a scamp."

"Those Kerr women are the bane of my life," Archie sat back in his chair, perfectly at ease. "I bought some nice bits and pieces from Freddy's mother and she all but screwed me into the ground on price," he shook his head at the memory. "The only way I made profit on the deal was to include
her bits in with a Viscount's deceased estate sale; frankly, her pieces were of a better quality, but his name added cachet."

Greg bit his lip. He really didn't want to jeopardise their business arrangement, but he couldn't afford to hear things he wasn't supposed to hear. "Did Freddy tell you I'm with the Met?" he asked thoughtfully.


"I'm also going to be looking for replacement floorboards to block in the breach made on the upper two floors of the house when the staircase is taken down," he said.

Archie Smith smiled brightly and clapped his hands together. "Funny you should mention that," he said, opening up his laptop.

###

He met Gwendoline at the Pimlico house early Sunday morning as they'd agreed. The plan was to walk through the house and make a list of everything that could be done in the next few weeks, given that Christmas was only days away. A number of the contractors they were going to need were either already on their seasonal break or were about to start it. Plumbers, electricians, cabinetmakers ... none of them would be lifting a screwdriver in anger for at least a couple of weeks. However, there were still things he could do, even with a sore leg and stiff shoulder. Thank god for the internet.

Archie Smith had proved to an invaluable help though Greg wondered if all his helpfulness might not arrive on his desk in the form of a favour at some point in the future. A consignment of heavy oak floorboards similar to those already in the house, would be arriving on Monday with the men to begin deconstructing the staircase. Archie had promised to bring something else that might be of use, though what that might be was anyone's guess.

Since Freddy would be spending Christmas in hospital, he'd already arranged to have a full Christmas lunch prepared by his favourite Irish café owner. His arm should be good to drive the distance, and he was to collect Gwennie and take her and the suitably packaged food to the hospital.

Having explained to Freddy's mum what he was planning to do in preparation for Freddy coming out of the rehab hospital, Greg had no idea how determined Gwendoline would be once she had the bit between her teeth. Thanks to the internet and online ordering, he'd already seen the kitchen units and benchtops he wanted, as well as locating a very well-reviewed bathroom installation company who said they'd be delighted to get all the things he wanted ready for installation early in the New Year. Archie's experts were due to arrive at the crack of dawn on Monday to begin taking down the staircase and Greg had also rented a couple of temporary steel staircases for use between the top two apartments until the new floors were in place and all the utilities had been wrangled into their respective locations. The specially broad windows installed at the rear of the house worked brilliantly. It would be a piece of cake to hire a furniture lift and move everything in and out with the minimum of fuss. Each widened window had a tiny little balcony; more of a safety precaution than anything, but they worked exactly as he and Freddy had hoped. It felt like everything was coming together.

Gwendoline had a clipboard and pen in her gloved hands, workman's gloves, Greg noted.

"Right then," she smiled. "What's first on the list?"
"My apartment need to be as fully finished as we can get it in the time we have," Greg was heading slowly up the stairs, unfolding a plan he'd drawn on a large piece of plain paper. "Here's how I'd like things to be, I think."

Gwendoline took the plan and gave it a critical examination. "This looks very nice," she nodded. "I see you'll have a lovely master bedroom overlooking the gardens at the front when they're done," she nodded again. "I know Freddy has such plans for the garden, though I'm not sure what she's going to be able to do now that her knee is probably never going to be the same again ..."

"Now, Gwennie," Greg squeezed her shoulder. "Let's not invite trouble we might never have," he smiled confidently though he acknowledged the point. Would Freddy be able to continue her gardening career once she was fully well? If not, would she return to the medical profession? "So this is what I want to do ..." Taking a deep breath, he explained his master plan.

"You are such a sweet boy," Gwendoline was full of smiles when he'd finished. "This is a wonderful idea and I'm sure Freddy will be thrilled. It makes so much sense as well," she added, giving him a sly look. "Start as you mean to continue," she laughed.

Greg felt himself smile too, though he had no intention of getting his hopes too high. There was so much work still to be done and most of it needed Freddy's input. Ah well, one step at a time. First, the staircase and then ...

His heart thumped hard.

###

Christmas Day. Colleen O'Donnell had done him proud, cooking a second Christmas lunch alongside her own family's food. On top of the cost, Greg slid an extra fifty quid into her hand as he picked up the large polystyrene container filled with equally well-insulated cartons inside.

"I've put a couple of heating packs in there as well," Colleen said when he collected the food. "It should stay hot for quite a while, but don't be eatin' it tonight and expecting it to be steamin'" she added, giving him a cautionary look.

Lugging the big white box to the boot of his car, Greg realised his shoulder and arm still had a way to go, though both were much improved. Traffic at this time of the morning was thin and Greg hoped they'd be able to make it up to Harrow before the lunchtime exodus began. Gwendoline was waiting at the side entrance of the Dolphin where he'd picked Freddy up several times before. He had the oddest sense of déjà vu. They zoomed up the motorway, making the hospital in good time for lunch. Dropping the box of food in the nearby kitchen as Gwendoline directed, Greg immediately went in search of Freddy, her room just down the passage.

Both beds were empty and unwrinkled. They looked as though they'd never even been slept in.

Recognizing Greg in the corridor, the increasingly less intimidating Ward Nurse Bowman smiled, pointing towards an open doorway at the end of the passage. Greg knew there was a small sitting room overlooking trees and lawn and he strode along the shining floor, wondering what was going on. Pausing at the entrance, his eyes widened as he saw Freddy, in a pretty red dress, hair shining and wearing a red lipstick. There was a white bandaged dressing covering her entire leg and a pair of crutches leaning against the wall near the big armchair in which she was sitting. There were no tubes or bleeping monitors or anything.

A grin arrived on her face so suddenly that he couldn't help but laugh.
"You look fantastic," he leaned over and picked up one of her hands. It felt warm and soft and perfectly relaxed. "You look great."

The smile seemed fixed to her face. "I felt much better once they'd taken all those things out of me," she said, reaching over to get the crutches, and look ...

Greg frowned as he saw what she was about to do. "Careful," he murmured before he could stop himself.

"Don't fuss, Greg," Freddy pressed down on one side of the armchair, pushing herself up onto her good leg. The crutches were in place a second later and there she was, standing easily beside him, still smiling. She smelled of flowers.

He had kissed her before the urge to do so even registered in his head. It felt brilliant. Placing a gentle hand at the side of her head, Greg leaned in some more and kissed her again, feeling her fingertips brush his hair.

"Oh, Freddy, how wonderful!" ignoring their closeness, Gwendoline bustled into the small room with one of the nurses' trolleys covered in plates and plate covers, before hugging her eldest child, mindful of the crutches. "How long have you been out of bed?"

"They took all the tubes and things out last night and waited to see I was okay before they helped me shower and dress this morning and here I am," she laughed happily, elated to be out of bed after so many days. "I'm not up to much just yet, but at least I'm a bit more independent." Handing Greg her crutches, she lowered herself back into the big chair.

"Then you'd better open this, I think," Greg reached inside his jacket pocket and handed her a fat envelope. "Merry Christmas. You can occupy yourself making up your wish list," he grinned as Freddy opened the envelope to see a gift token for a five hundred pounds at one of the better London nurseries. "I know that garden of yours will cost a lot more before you're finished with it," he sat in the chair next to hers. "But I thought this would get you started."

"Oh, Greg, that's so generous of you ... it's marvellous," Freddy's gaze was already fixed on the many-paged catalogue, clearly tempted to start reading it immediately.

"Don't you dare, Miss," Gwendoline was already manoeuvring a small table over Freddy's legs. "Greg has also treated the both of us to a lovely Christmas lunch and I suggest we begin before it cools."

"I don't have anything for you though," Freddy looked entirely contrite as she held the catalogue against her chest. "I never had the chance to get you anything ..."

"Pick me fresh peaches this summer," he laughed, delighted at her excitement. "And we'll call it quits."

Reaching down for the lower shelf of the trolley, Gwendoline brought up a chilled bottle of champagne. "The nurses said a little alcohol wouldn't hurt now that you're off the heavier medications," she said, passing the bottle to Greg to pop. Setting out some well-used plastic beakers, she shrugged pragmatically. One couldn't have everything.

"Mister Kapoor said I can probably transferred to the Clayponds rehab hospital in Ealing before New Year as so many people have gone home," she paused, watching her mother dish up three plates of traditional Christmas fare. Though the Northwick was an excellent hospital, she'd not had food like this in several weeks. She grinned contentedly at Greg.
Meeting her eyes again, Greg felt something stir inside him that had nothing to do with the thought of food or champagne or even the fact that Freddy might be able to leave this place of sterile sheets and antiseptic residues. She'd been truly thrilled at his gift and she'd wanted him to kiss her, he knew that without question. He had no doubt now that everything Gwendoline and Sally had said to him was right. He felt a heavy internal throb that caught at his throat and tightened his chest. After so many years of remote disaffection with Cathy, he'd finally cracked it. Greg realised with a stunning sense of insight that he was mad about Freddy and now he wanted ... what? *Everything*. He wanted her in his thoughts, in his arms, in his bed. He wanted to be with her at night and at breakfast. He wanted to help her in her sunny garden and feel her warm skin against his hands in the dark of night. He wanted to hear her laughter and her sounds of passion. An enormous wave of rising heat left him dizzy and feverish; he couldn't speak, he could barely breathe.

"Are you quite alright, Gregory?" Gwendoline held a filled plate out towards him.

"Just hungry, thanks," he took the plate with numbed fingers, almost dropping it onto the small table in front of him.

*He was in love.* His pulse thundered in his ears and his throat was parched. Greg found he was barely able to look at Freddy who was staring at him with a concerned expression. He lifted his eyes to hers and let his revelation sit there for her to see or not. Her eyes widened for a moment before she smiled again, a soft curving of her mouth that made Greg close his eyes as his body pulsed a second time.

Gwendoline raised her beaker. "Merry Christmas to all," she proposed, smiling at her daughter before frowning slightly and turning to stare at Greg, neither of whom were eating or, in fact, doing much at all, except ... *Ah.*

The champagne was most pleasant, Gwendoline decided as she draped a linen napkin across her lap and began her lunch. A post-luncheon stroll might be just the thing.
Greg woke early with the knowledge of a busy day ahead. There was a lot to do at the house, with the plumbing company due in at the crack of dawn to begin installing the new water and waste pipes throughout the house and, eventually, to leave him with a functioning bathroom on the middle floor. The electricians were also due in to wire up the various gas and water heating controls. He needed to get out of bed, have a swift shower and get cracking.

But the morning was dark and cold and he could hear the rain outside the window of his small bedroom. His bed was entirely too comfortable and he was warm and untroubled and just didn’t want to move. He thought about all the things he’d managed to organise at the house in the several weeks since Freddy had been in hospital, her recent move to Clayponds rehab meant she was a lot closer in terms of travelling and he was able to pop out and see her nearly every evening. She was improving all the time and the most recent prognosis on her skin grafts was very positive as the abraded skin was already showing signs of regrowth with only a couple of small places where a graft might even be necessary. Her knee was, of course, the biggest problem; it was stiff and unhelpful and she was spending hours moving and stretching her leg.

His thoughts of Freddy made him smile into the darkness. Every time he saw her now, there were kisses and touching and she seemed to be laughing a lot more than he remembered her doing before, though he might have been imagining things. Freddy hadn't wanted to let him leave the previous night, her small hand holding his until he kissed it goodnight.

The thought of Freddy, passionate and willing in his arms was an inviting feeling and he lay in the heavy warmth wondering what it would be like the first time they shared a bed together. Images of her pale skin and neat hands filled his mind and without realising he was stroking himself, feeling his cock harden and fill with barely a touch. His breath caught at the sensation, so well-remembered but so long unfelt. He focused his thoughts on Freddy in the spa at the Dolphin, her body all curves and sleek, oiled skin ... a soft moan closed his eyes and he stroked himself harder, imagining the touch was hers, that she was here with him in the warm dark and they had nothing to do but lie, wrapped around each other, skin sliding smoothly over skin, Freddy's gasps of pleasure, the feel of her muscles moving and tensing under his hands ... with a loud groan, hot semen filled his hand as he pictured Freddy arching beneath him, crying wordlessly against his chest.

Greg inhaled slowly as his heartrate eased, feeling the pounding slow to normal. Scrambling crabwise out of bed so’s not to make a mess, he headed to the bathroom for a hot shower. Whistling as he scrubbed his hair, Greg realised that, despite the gloominess of the day, he was in top spirits. He'd taken an additional two weeks of Christmas break from the Yard, as Personnel were still on his case about accruing too much annual leave. Tony Bosisto was still taking the lead on the drugs and robberies case and Greg was still not allowed anywhere near Alex Harper. It was therefore with a clear conscience that he'd spent most evenings with Freddy and most days at the Pimlico house and everything was coming along as planned.

Because of his private schedule, Greg wanted to get his middle-floor flat completed as fast as he could, before starting on the top floor apartment. Freddy had agreed an architect should be called in for the top floor to maximise space and the designer they'd chosen, a specialist in remodelling period properties, was arriving tomorrow, before too much of the utility work had been set in concrete, as it were.

Heading out to his BMW, the grey line of approaching dawn was just making itself visible over the rooftops. Traffic was still in holiday mode and it took mere minutes to drive down to the house and
park in his usual place. Heading inside, he flicked all the lights on, making the house gleam inside its own walls. Heading down into what was the old kitchen, he filled the kettle from the single temporary tap and set about making a brew. With a mug of tea in his hand, he wandered around the ground floor.

It was a proper building site these days, with all manner of cables hanging around the place in great loops, boxes of materials stacked in various corners. The solid oak floorboards were mottled with cement footprints and ancient wood dust. Lifting his eyes, he could now see right the way up to the top floor where the huge staircase had been removed and where now stood two substantial steel staircases. Most of the gap in the upper two floors created by the staircase removal had already been joisted over and the boards were ready to be laid as soon as all the utilities were in place. Greg sipped the hot tea and wondered how long the installation of all the piping would take, not only for the water for bathrooms and kitchens, but also the gas-fired central heating. There was a massive amount of work to do.

"Hello the house!" a call from the front door heralded the first of the trades to arrive; the house was so large that several different crews could be on deck without getting underfoot. These early-birds were the local plumbing mob, literally just around the corner, so they had no excuse to be late. An older married couple, both qualified and experienced plumbers, with three apprentices, two of them girls, Belgrays’ Plumbing were a tight little unit who worked quickly and tidily. This was the first time any of the apprentices had a chance of working on a really big old house and both Joyce and Daniel Belgrays were delighted for them to have the experience.

Danny Belgrays tromped along the bare hallway in his heavy work boots with a coffee in one hand and a rolled up magazine in the other. "You know those upmarket bathroom fittings you fancied?" he said, handing the glossy magazine over to Greg for a look at the opened pages. "Were they something like this?"

Giving the lustrous photographs a hard look, Greg saw that indeed these were very similar to the Italian porcelain he’d initially desired, only to admit that paying nearly thirty grand for a bathroom suite was a bit on the nose. He nodded ruefully as he passed the pages back. "Yeah, but as there's still a lot of spending to do on this place, I don't think I can lash out that kind of dosh on Italian imports for my ensuite," he shrugged. "There's plenty other nice local ones."

"This one's local too," Danny grinned. "A place in Ilford makes 'em," his grin got wider. "They can do you a full suite, delivered, for around two grand."

"Two grand for the whole thing?" Greg snatched the magazine back and walked to stand directly beneath one of the downlights for a better look. "Well, bugger me."

"Thought you'd like it," Smugly, Daniel turned back down the passage "Hurry up you horrible bunch of slackers," he yelled. "Daylight's burning."

"As it's barely dawn," Ginny, one of the young women, a tall, willowy thing, walked in through the door carting a toolbox that seemed far too big for her. "Then you can hardly accuse us of burning anything. Morning Mr Lestrade," she smiled cheerfully as she walked along to the kitchen space.

"Ah, the young generation," Danny shook his head, sighing theatrically. "Gives you cheek as soon as look at you."

Greg laughed. It was all flimflam; he knew the whole group worked just like a family and all the apprentices admired both the Belgrays enormously. "I'll leave you to it," he said, pulling a steel tape measure out of his pocket. "Got to measure up for my kitchen units and order them today."
"We'll know where you are then," Daniel Belgrays nodded placidly. "We should have hot water ready for you by the end of the day, all things being equal."

"I'll have a chat with this Ilford bunch as well, in that case," Greg felt a new rush of excitement. Things were really coming together and for once, he had the money in his hands to do everything just right and it felt really good. Whatever came of the end result, Greg realised that he was enjoying the process immensely; he just hoped he could break himself the habit when he ran out of cash.

With the Belgrays doing all the things they were supposed to be doing and it coming up for nine of the clock, Greg rang the Ilford bathroom manufacturers. Yes, in fact they did have the suite he wanted in stock and, as it was now technically last year's model, there was a sale price involved, if sir was interested. Grinning again, Greg suggested that he might just be able to bear a reduced price, managing to keep his yelp of triumph silent as the speaker said they would be able to deduct a further three hundred pounds from the showroom price on the proviso that it could be delivered immediately so as to free up space for new products. Would this suit?

"Don't suppose you can get it to me today?" Greg joked. Not in all his years had anything ever been able to be delivered on the same day.

_If sir would care to wait just one moment_, the disembodied voice on the phone went away for a few moments before returning with an update. Apparently, the delivery team had just arrived and were loading up for the first round of deliveries. If sir had his credit card details available, it might be possible to arrange delivery for some time after lunch.

Greg was so used to laying out vast sums of cash now, that sticking just over fifteen hundred on his card didn't even rate a blink. In exchange for a delivery address, he was given a delivery reference number and the promise that the entire Torino suite would be with him before two o'clock. Doing a little dance, Greg went in search of the Belgrays. Daniel was showing the other female apprentice how to ensure a watertight fitting of a drain valve. He waited until the older man was done.

"Hey Danny, you know that Ilford bathroom suite you told me about?"

"Yeah. Had a think about it, have you?"

"It's being delivered around two o'clock," Greg grinned mightily. "Any chance you might be able to plumb me in today?"

"Christ," Belgrays gave him an appraising look. "Grass don't grow under your feet and that's for sure," he scratched his chin. "Depends," he said. "I'll need to see the type of pipe fittings they use … the waste pipes are already up there, just need fitting to the WC and then the grey water waste from the sink and shower …" he paused, rubbing the end of his nose. "I'll give you a definite maybe," he said. "But if not today, then tomorrow might be better; let's see how we go, eh?"

"Fantastic," Greg didn't really mind either way. He'd begun setting up his new apartment and was getting a serious buzz from the whole exercise. Next was the kitchen. He'd already drawn up plans for the units he wanted and the location of where everything was supposed to go, though he hadn't chosen the benchtops or the steelware yet. He really needed to go to the kitchen showroom at the far end of Pimlico Road; Greg was all into this thing about buying local. He'd already been to the kitchen place once before and picked out a modern, clean looking kitchen; a rather masculine range in dark green cabinets and reinforced dark opaque glass doors. He also wanted a couple of big steel sinks and plain tapware, of which he hadn't a clue. Maybe he could get up to the kitchen place once everyone was in and working.

There was more banging on the front door as the electricians arrived. A pair of Jamaican-born
brothers who'd taken over their father's small business when he'd become too old to clamber around tight spaces on cold cement. Both brothers were tall and sported dreadlocks piled inside rainbow knitted beanies.

"Hey, Greg," Javel, the nearer of the two young men offered up his hand for a fist bump, his Caribbean accent sounding out of place on this cold, dark London morning. "Me an' Glenmore a' come to fix up ya master power board ya na," he grinned, a set of large white teeth gleaming in the electric lights. "An’ mi brought ya some of im madda's goat stew we tell you on."

"Yeah, cheers, mate. Ta." Greg took the sealed plastic container and wondered where to put it until he went home. Outside would be the logical place as it was bloody freezing out there. As Javel went about his business, Greg headed to the front door, dropping the container at the end of the top step. He'd take it with him on the way home.

With the Belgrays and apprentices already deep in the bowels of the house, no doubt already working out with the Clarke brothers who was going to do what and when, and with his bathroom already on its unexpected way, Greg was momentarily at a loss as to what he should be doing next.

Though that question didn't last long, as the overall scheme of his master plan kicked in. He needed a working bathroom; check. He needed a working kitchen, also check. Now he needed a working bedroom, a thing he'd never really had to think about in his entire life. When he lived at home as a kid, he simply lived with what was given him. When he left home, he stayed in a few places, usually furnished places and likewise, took what was available. Once he and Cathy had decided to set up a home together, she had been the one to pick out most of the furnishings and fittings, simply because by that time, he was already working flat out at the Yard. But now ... for the first time in his adult life, Greg was going to have to bite the bullet and actually furnish an entire bedroom all by himself. An entire apartment.

How hard could it be?

He'd already seen a few things he liked in the John Lewis catalogue and, as it was the time of the New Year sales, if he was going to get a good deal, it would be now. The thing was, could he possibly manage to deal with Oxford Street in the January sales? According to the catalogue, he needed to get to the third floor, a space devoted to furniture and house stuff. Could he make it without resorting to police brutality?

"Hey, I'm just heading into town to get a few bits and pieces," he yelled generally at the distant noises in various part of the house. "If anyone needs me, give me a ring."

There were several faint shouts of acknowledgement, and that was that. He was on his own.

While he wasn't dressed in his best street togs, neither was he in his real work gear so, as long as he kept his long coat on, he probably would be escorted off the premises as some sort of itinerant. Parking would be an absolute nightmare in town, so he drove the BMW to Pimlico tube station to catch a Victoria line train direct to Oxford Circus. The tube would be packed with shoppers but better that than spending an hour looking for a parking spot miles away from where he wanted to be and besides, the trip would only take about five minutes.

Fortune smiled on him; there were a number of empty parking spaces near Pimlico station. He slid his Oyster card over the scanner and joined the throng entering the building. It wasn't too bad; there were only so many people that could be crammed into a small space and he'd been riding the tube for decades, off and on. By the time he'd made a mental list of the things he needed to buy for his bedroom, the tube was already pulling into Oxford Circus tube station.
Getting off was another matter and Lestrade let himself be carried along by the massed surge of people until he came to the imposing storefront of John Lewis. Knowing exactly what he wanted and where he'd find it, Greg headed purposefully for the lift and the third floor. Serendipitously, the doors opened out onto a positive vista of bedroom furniture of all shapes, sizes and colours and, for the first time since he'd boarded the tube, he relaxed. It was busy in here alright, but nothing like as manic as it had been on the ground floor. Apparently, shoppers were more interested in plasma screen televisions than three piece suites.

Greg stood in the middle of a wide aisle, hands in his pockets, staring around at everything. He had an idea of what he wanted, though where to start ... he took a deep breath. People did this all the time; it couldn't be that hard.

It was hard. There were literally hundreds of different kinds of beds. Big beds, modern beds, beds with tall headboards, beds with no headboards but with drawers underneath. There were wooden beds and metal beds and beds with knobs on. He hadn't even started thinking about size and style yet. His upper lip felt moist.

"May I be of any assistance sir?" A quiet young man stood a few feet away, eyebrows raised.

"I need ... everything," Greg strangled the words out. "I need a bed and drawers and shelves, and all that sort of stuff," he waved generally towards the north-face of the mountain of quilts and pillows over by the wall.

"And this would be for yourself, sir?" the young man, Brandon, by his name badge, smiled faintly.

Nodding, Greg's eyes kept scanning and re-scanning the enormous floorspace packed with endless bedroom ideas.

"Have you decided what style of bedroom style you might like?" Brandon retrieved a small notebook and pen.

Digging in his own coat pocket, Greg brought out a somewhat crumpled John Lewis catalogue. "I quite like this one," he pointed to a modern bed frame with sleek lines in heavy dark wood, with a broad, dark brown padded leather headboard. The knap of the leather looked soft and inviting. "Though I can't see it anywhere around."

"Ah yes, the Jasper," Brandon nodded knowingly. "A definite favourite this year. I think we may have one or two left in stock. If sir would come with me, I'll have the stockroom.

Heading over to the nearest sales counter, Greg felt a little calmer now he'd enlisted help. Hopefully the sales assistant would be able to guide him on what was needed if he forgot anything critical.

"We have two Jasper beds left in stock, sir," Brandon rested the phone against his chest. "A Double or a King. Which would you prefer?"

"In for a penny ..."

"I'd like the king sized one, please," Greg smiled at having managed at least one adult decision.

"Excellent sir," Brandon smiled, still holding the phone. "If you'll give me a name, I'll have the stock room put it on the bed so nobody else can book it out."

Pulling out his wallet, Greg handed over one of his Met business cards. Brandon's eyebrows lifted again.
"Perfect, thank you." He spoke quietly on the phone for a few moment before hanging up and returning his gaze to Greg.

"And was that all sir required? You did say you wanted 'everything'?

"Yeah, right," Greg felt his spine relaxing. This guy clearly knew what was needed. "I'm furnishing a large empty bedroom," he said. "I'm going to need the, er, usual," he added, waving his hand generally and hoping to hell that Brandon understood code.

"Certainly, sir," the young man smiled smoothly, swinging a nearby widescreen monitor around and tapping in a few numbers on the keyboard. In a second, the entire Jasper bedroom suite popped up on the screen. "Some of these items, possibly?"

Greg peered at the screen. There were bedside tables, polished and hefty looking, with fine inlaid leather tops matching the leather headboard. Three different sized sets of drawers; a long chest thing with a thick padded top; matching chairs; free standing wardrobes; mirrors. Everything was in the same deeply polished dark wood, with plain, brushed-steel handles. It was what had attracted him to the bed in the first place. Nice and strong without being fancy.

But what did he need?

"Does sir have a walk-in wardrobe, or would one of these be useful?" Brandon tapped the screen, magnifying the wardrobes. They looked huge and solid and Greg liked them instantly, but the reason he'd chosen the big room at the front of the house was exactly so he could have both an ensuite and a walk-in wardrobe. Wardrobes would be redundant.

"No," he felt almost sad. "I won't be needing those," he paused. "But I'm going to be after pretty much everything else; it's a large bedroom," he tapped the screen himself, looking at the chests of drawers. "I'm going to need a couple of those," he pointed to the tallboys. "And I'll have one of those long padded things," he indicated the ottoman, topped with the same luxuriously suede-like leather. "And one of those nice mirrors," he nodded at the tall cheval mirror on the screen. "And a couple of bedside tables as well," he added, thinking he'd got everything he needed.

"And the mattress?" Brandon was scribbling everything down in the notebook before tapping details onto an increasingly long list.

Shit. He hadn't thought about the mattress.

"Er ..." Greg looked uneasy. Mattresses were a foreign country.

"This way, sir," Brandon saved the input on the computer and walked Greg around a nearby corner, gesturing at the ocean of futons and great padded slabs laid out before them.

"What kind of bed does sir prefer?" Brandon was discretion itself. "Firm or soft?"

soft soft soft, Greg remembered the bed he didn't want to leave earlier. It was gentle on his old bones and kind of squishy.

"Something on the, er softer side?" he looked at Brandon hopefully.

"Indeed, sir," Brandon directed him towards a minor inland sea of mattresses, each one with different names and colours and stitching. "Would you care to try these?"

There were four of them. Thick, heavy-looking things, with slabs of soft padding on the top and a depth of filling that seemed almost decadent. Toeing off his shoes, Greg, in the universal strategy of
all mattress-buyers everywhere in the history of mankind, laid himself down across the first one, bouncing a little. He lay there, letting his spine do his thinking for a bit. It was definitely springy but maybe … a little too firm. The second one was the other way; so soft that he could barely move. The third one was so indecently comfortable that for two pins he'd have a snooze right there. He closed his eyes for a second and felt things start to relax into the warm softness of the …

A low cough caught his attention. Blinking his eyes open, he observed young Brandon grinning.

"Yeah, okay," Greg croaked, not wanting to move. "This one will do me fine, I believe."

The sales assistant jotted an additional note. "And what about bedside lamps?"

_Oh Christ._ Bedside lamps?

"Two of them," Greg looked around, but less anxious by now. He'd crested the hill and was on the downward slope. "Something in the same metal as the handles, maybe?"

"A wise choice," Brandon nodded, gesturing around the vast expanse of furniture on sale. "Anything here take your fancy?"

Staring aimlessly around, a pair of lamps in a similar dull silver as the Jasper suite, caught his attention. Tall and slender and minimalist, he thought they'd suit anything. "Those," he pointed his finger until Brandon had made a note.

"And bedding?"

Fuck. _Bedding._

"We have a very wide range of bedding in the king size, sir. Perhaps you'd like to peruse the available patterns and make your choice once we have completed the furniture account?"

"Good idea," Greg sighed at the small reprieve. Walking back to the sales point, he waited as Brandon tallied up the purchases. He knew it wasn't going to be cheap, but as he planned never to have to do this again, he wasn't really that fussed.

"Fortunately, sir has arrived just as we have begun offering a twenty-five percent discount on the Jasper suite," Brandon smiled, printing out an invoice and handing it over.

It was indeed pricy, even with the discount, but then, Greg couldn't honestly say that he minded. For once, he was going to have something that made him feel comfortable and damn the cost.

As he was handing over his VISA card, he caught sight of a vast array of flowing fabrics. _Curtains._ He needed curtains. Those great tall windows weren't going to cover themselves at night.

With the paid receipt in his pocket as evidence of his new bedoomed state, Greg found the idea of soft furnishings slightly less terrifying than before. _He could do this._ He turned suddenly and looked at Brandon. "I don't suppose you could, er ..." he tipped his head towards the bedding section.

Whether it was the hefty commission Brandon had just made, or the thought that he could actually help a worried customer, Brandon lifted his eyebrows again and gestured for Greg to lead the way.

"This section contains various types of sheets and blankets, or does sir prefer a duvet?"

"Definitely a duvet, Greg knew that, at least.

"Then sir will probably be needing several duvet sets in a king size?"
"Probably," Greg felt less sure, but he trusted Brandon to know.

"And what colours do you have in the bedroom decoration?"

"It's not actually decorated yet, as such," Greg cleared his throat. "I'm getting ahead of myself, I realise but there's a bit of a rush." Feeling like an idiot, he'd not even thought about stuff like wallpaper or paint.

"Not a problem in the slightest, sir," the ever-competent Brandon smiled easily. "May I suggest you select basic shades which will ensure a match to almost any décor?"

Thank god for someone who knew the obvious. Greg watched as Brendon pulled out several large box-like packages, each one containing a duvet set in subtle shades; an earthy aubergine, a dull antique gold and a rich blue-grey. They were easy on the eye.

"I believe these will suit both the Jasper look as well as any future decoration sir may choose."

There was only one real issue now. "I, er, don't have a duvet yet, either," Greg felt slightly manic and suppressed an urge to giggle.

"Of course not, sir," Brendon was composure itself. "But you shall. This way, please."

Walking side by side, Greg jerked a thumb towards the fountain of drapery. "I've got three enormous windows to cover as well," he said.

"Leave it all to me, sir," the unflappable Brandon brought out his notebook. "I promise you will leave this store a happy man."

Feeling a damn sight better already, Greg was almost whistling when the young sales assistant brought him up to the great wall of quilts, duvets and blankets.

Brandon smiled and took out his notebook.

###

On the return tube journey, Greg managed to find a seat on the tube and flung himself into it, exhausted in body and mind. How women could do all of this without raising a sweat, he'd never been able to fathom, but he'd done it. He was now the proud owner of an entire new bedroom suite, with several attractive duvet covers and matching linen sheets to go along with the cloud-soft duvet he'd bought. He also had a card bearing the name and number of the senior curtain-maker the John Lewis store used to assist customers with all their curtain and drapery needs. He was to call the lady to make a date for window measuring and a discussion of fabrics. Brandon had assured him it would be a painless and relatively swift process. Delivery wouldn't be until the following week but that was fine; he'd organise a furniture lift for a couple of hours as an experiment, see how the windows worked.

Carrying several large, heavy bags with the sheets and things in both hands, he headed for the BMW. It was lunchtime and being in such a good mood, he stopped by the fish and chip place he now regarded as his local and bought an enormous package of fresh-cooked chips and a bucket of fried fish pieces. Taking care to pile things on the back seat so as not to get hot oil on anything, he was back at the house in a few minutes.

Leaving the John Lewis bags in the car, Greg was walking across the empty garden when he first smelled something burning; a particularly pungent, acrid burned wood smell that made him pause. Looking around, it was entirely by chance that he saw the open window of his bedroom and the grey
haze of smoke issuing out into the still air.

Grabbing the chips close to his chest, Greg dashed for the front door, flinging it open as he ran down the passage yelling for a fire extinguisher.
Flying through the kitchen, Greg dumped the package of chips and grabbed one of the dry powder fire extinguishers he'd located around the house, taking the back stairs up to his apartment two at a time.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," he yelled, stampeding down the hall to his bedroom where he skidded to a halt, a look of wild panic on his face. The stink of burned material hung acrid in the room.

"It's all right," speaking quickly, Danny Belgrays lifted both hands to stop Greg from barrelling any further into the room. "It's all right, Greg," he lowered his arms. "A mishap with a blow torch and some loose wood shavings," he added, pointing to a metal bucket covered with several layers of soggy, wet newspaper. "Young Jesse here got a little carried away with his copper pipe soldering and put the hot torch down without looking what was underneath it." Heaving a sigh, Danny turned to look at his youngest apprentice. "And my fault for not keeping a closer eye on him while he was working," he said in a more level tone. "I opened the window so you wouldn't be concerned about the smell."

"Fuck me," Greg sagged back against the nearest wall, letting the extinguisher slide from his fingers which he then dragged through his hair. "Nearly gave me a heart attack," he panted, bending over to catch his breath. As he drew in lungfuls of relief, his leg reminded him it wasn't entirely healed yet. Almost as soon as his leg began its little dance of pain, his shoulder decided to join in the fun with a few agonising twangs. "Fuck my life," Greg hissed breathlessly, wiping sweat from his face. "Got to give up the smokes." As his heartbeat slowed back to normal, he stood upright, glancing at the shocked white face of the lad who couldn't have been more than seventeen and who looked close to tears. "You okay, Jesse?" he asked, taking in the youngster's body language. "Didn't burn yourself or anything?"

"Sorry, Mr Lestrade," Jesse's voice cracked with nervousness. "I was just trying to do a really good job and when I saw I'd made a mistake, I put the ... the thing down and ... it all happened so quickly," he gulped, not knowing where to put his face.

"It's all right lad," Danny shook his shoulder gently. "No harm's been done and you'll remember to be more careful for the next time, won't you?"

Nodding vigorously, Jesse kept his troubled gaze on Greg.

"Right then," Greg heaved one final deep breath. "I got fish and chips for everyone for lunch," he blinked. "I dropped the package in the kitchen when I came belting up here," he stood more easily and forced his shoulders to relax. "What do you reckon?" he turned to Danny. "Make him eat the squashed ones?"

Jesse wasn't quite ready to laugh yet, but Greg saw the boy's face lose its pinched, upset look.

###

"So how," Danny had his arms folded across his chest, eyebrows raised. "Do you propose we get the bath up to your bathroom?"

As promised, the Ilford company had delivered, right on time, a bundle of bubbled-wrapped items in various sizes, most of them large and solid, all of them heavy. The largest of the lot was a deep, oval shaped bath. Greg had especially wanted a long tub and knew it would look right at home in the
ensuite he’d planned, though at present, there were merely chalked outlines of the eventual walls. It had taken the delivery guys, all three of them, equipped with a specially-made wheeled trolley, to manoeuvre the thing into the ground floor of the house. They had sought his signature on a clipboard, handed him a receipt, waved, and were gone before anyone had even thought about the practicalities of the situation. The smaller pieces could be manhandled up the stairs, but the tub ...

"It's bigger than I remembered," Greg pulled a face. The thing was enormous and there was no way even he and Danny together would be able to wrangle it up the steel staircase in the centre of the floor; the angle would be far too steep.

The slightly less-wretched Jesse, after clearing up all the detritus from lunch, walked past and look interested. "Skids," he said. "Up the back staircase," he nodded knowledgeably. "With ropes," he added, cryptically, walking by.

"Hey!" Greg called the boy back. "That sounded as if you knew what you were talking about," he frowned as Jesse returned. "Now say it again but more slowly, so us old folks can understand."

The apprentice returned, speaking deliberately so as not to confuse his elders. "It's a very old technique used by many different indigenous people before the wheel was invented," he said, very seriously. "Stonehenge, for instance," he added. "Lay down two or three narrow pieces of wood to act as skids, and then pull the weight up the skids with ropes or whatever," he shrugged. "It shouldn't be that difficult."

Meeting Danny's eyes, Greg nodded briskly. "Right then lad," he said. "You're in charge of this; go find us some, er, skids and I'll dig some rope out of my car."

With the eventual assistance of Javel and Glenmore pulling up the rope at the top of the back stairs alongside Danny Belgrays, Greg and Jesse pushed the heavy vitreous china tub from beneath, up to the top of the narrow staircase leading from the ground floor kitchen space. Still wrapped in copious layers of bubble-wrap, the bath looked even bigger in real life than it had on the glossy pages of the catalogue.

"It's a beast," Greg grinned cheerfully. "Beer all round if we can get it into my bathroom this afternoon." Danny coughed lightly, tipping his head towards the youngster among them. "Light beer for some," Greg added, raising his eyebrows at Jesse's suddenly hopeful expression.

Between them, every single bubble-wrapped item ended up in roughly the right place, though given the thickness of the padding, it wasn't easy to make out what was inside.

"So, tub along by the window," Daniel Belgrays pointed a calloused finger. "Pedestal sink over against that wall ..." he frowned. "WC and bidet over there, in that case," he nodded at the only real remaining space near the new water and waste pipes.

"Yeah," Greg was mentally sketching the walls in, so he could picture the room. Having the bath and the walk-in shower stall near the window would be nice; he could look out at the garden while he was having either; all he needed was the space to be tiled and one of those freestanding shower heads to be mounted on the wall ... he paused. "Bidet?"

"Yup," Danny nodded at one of the lower, rounder bits of wrapped package. "Didn't take you for a bidet man myself, but there's no accounting for taste."

Greg, who had never knowingly used a bidet in his life, wasn't entirely sure about having one in his new apartment, but since he'd actually paid for the thing as part of the suite he'd bought that morning, he'd give it a go. "Great," his smile suggested that had been the plan all along. He could always keep
a plant in it. He realised he was also going to have to get some builders in to begin setting up the walls, especially since his master-plan seemed to be coming together faster than he'd imagined. He'd need his bedroom, bathroom and kitchen finished to a working level before he could go any further. The experience of getting the tub up the stairs had also made him realise that the steel staircases weren't up to the job anymore; he needed something altogether more sophisticated, something big enough to move bathtubs ...

As he was contemplating the task ahead, he mobile rang. "Lestrade," he walked into the bedroom and stared down through the central window at the bare ground below.

"I know you're on leave," Tony Bosisto spoke swiftly and though the words suggested contrition, the man's tone was anything but contrite. "But Manju wonders if you might grace us with your presence for a brief interlude this afternoon," he said. "Alex Harper wants to talk to you, even though we've told him you're nothing to do with the investigations, the bugger's clammed up and won't say a thing unless you're here," he added. "Not sure what he thinks he's going to achieve by it, but ..."

"I'm working down at the house and will need to get cleaned up before I show my face anywhere," Greg's brain was already playing with possibilities. Why did Harper want to see him? Was it an attempt to put the mockers on him and Freddy? Maybe something to do with the man's aspiration of grandeur? Something about Armstrong's death? "Give me thirty minutes and I'll be there," he said, ending the call and turning to Danny, still contemplating the placement of the bidet.

"Gotta head into the Yard for a bit," he said. "Which means I need to get changed," Greg sniffed his t-shirt. "I stink of chips and sweat and I doubt my superintendent needs either of those in her office today," he grinned, handing over a shiny Yale key. "Hopefully, I'll be back before you lot knock off, but if I'm not, can you lock up for me and leave the key under the loose bit of cement on the front steps?"

"Yeah, sure," Daniel Belgrays nodded calmly, as if being appointed works foreman was an everyday thing. "But before you go, is this arrangement where you want everything to be?" he asked, waving at the now unwrapped bathroom fittings. "You'll be wanting to have your shower recess over here?" He waved at the largish corner space by the bath. "Though we can fix that up once you've chosen the fittings you want."

Giving the chalk lines a hard stare, Greg saw that everything, including the accidental bidet, was pretty much exactly as he'd seen the room in his imagination. Once the walls and mirrors and towel rails and stuff were all up, it would be perfect. "It's spot on," he smiled, already heading for the door. "Catch you lot later."

The afternoon light was already beginning to draw in as he parked in his usual spot at the Curtis Green building. Heading up to the fourth floor, he was met by Tony Bosisto almost at the lift. Whatever it was, it was clearly important.

"Where to?" he asked, even as Bosisto gestured him back into the lift.

"Interview room twelve," Tony looked tired, haggard even. Someone had been burning the midnight oil.

"There's a problem, then?" Greg had no intention of walking into the situation cold. "What's Harper done now?"

"He's being a pain in the arse, is what he's doing, that's what." Tony sounded gruff and impatient. "He knows we've got him bang to rights but he's playing his sodding lawyer's games and won't give anyone a straight answer."
"He's never representing himself, is he?" Greg was stunned. Nobody represented themselves these days, especially not anyone with even a basic knowledge of the law; it was far too easy to allow personal feelings to get in the way of objective thought; precisely the reason he'd be hauled off the case in the first place.

"Smartarse that he is, that's precisely what he's doing," Tony Bosisto sighed heavily as they reached the specially sealed interview area. There were a number of doors and passageways in this section that enabled victims and defendants to be interviewed in almost adjacent rooms and yet never know the other was in the same building. Interview Room Twelve had the most sophisticated recording and display rigs of the smaller rooms. "And now he's demanded to speak with you."

Given that they hadn't parted well the last time they'd seen each other, Greg chewed his lip, deep in thought as he walked into the room beside the DCI. The room was about ten by twelve and held a simple long table and several plain, lightweight chairs. There were two video screens on the wall, above a control panel of switches and dials right beside where his sergeant was seated. A uniformed officer stood several paces away.

Sally Donovan immediately started a recording. "Detective Inspector Greg Lestrade has entered the room at ..." she checked her watch, "... sixteen-thirty hours," she said, turning away from Alex Harper who sat, quite calmly, on the other side of the table. He seemed perfectly unflustered and wore a faint, annoying smile.

"I'd like to speak with Inspector Lestrade," Harper's tone was on the irritating side of polite. He waited as various expressions changed around the room. "Alone and without any recording taking place."

"Now, look here ..." Tony Bosisto went pink in the face.

"It's alright," Greg glanced around. "Never let it be said we don't cooperate with members of the public," his eyes widened and he smiled at the DCI and his sergeant, tipping his head towards the door. With an aggravated sigh, Bosisto yanked the door open and stalked out, closely followed by an uncertain Sally Donovan and finally, the other officer.

The solicitor had obviously been watching which switches Sally used, as he leaned over and flicked the recording switch up.

"You can't lay a finger on me because I happen to know there's two cameras in the room and everyone's going to be watching, aren't they?" Alex Harper leaned forward on the long table and grinned nastily. "But they can't hear a thing and so I can say whatever I want to say to you, you pathetic excuse for a detective, and there's not a damn thing you can do about it."

Taking a seat on the far side of the table, Greg looked meditative for a moment before folding his arms across his chest and nodding philosophically. "You're probably right," he said. "Though I'm assuming you wanted me here for a better reason than simply calling me names," he looked across the table into the other man's eyes. "Or is that all you got?" Letting his eyebrows rise, Greg eased himself back into the chair and made himself comfortable. "Your call, mate," he added, a mocking note in his words.

"Everyone's asking about my relationship with several known felons," Harper leaned back, not to be outdone by Greg's casual posture. "Apparently, the entire Met police force are convinced I'm some sort of criminal mastermind."

Greg didn't even attempt to resist the laughter that bubbled up inside. "Don't you worry about that," he chuckled. "You're not the type to be a mastermind of anything," he grinned. "Look what
happened to your scheme to take over the Lord high thingy wotsit from Freddy," he shook his head. "And she's going to be fine, by the way, no thanks to you, ya great knob."

The mention of Freddy set Harper's mouth into a thin line. "I did wrong by Freddy as I hope to make her understand when next she and I have an opportunity to speak," Alex sounded supremely confident that such an opportunity would inevitably arise. "I'm sure I'll be able to clear the way between us."

"You bloody shot her!" Greg was gobsmacked at the other man's callousness.

Harper shrugged slightly. "It was all a terrible accident as I'm sure Freddy realises."

Greg's eyes narrowed as he leaned a little forward, lowering his voice to a more confidential level. "You're not getting anywhere near Freddy again in your miserable life," he spoke quietly but with feeling. "She's with me now, and I'm going to do my best to make sure she never has reason to mention your name, you snivelling little man," he paused, enjoying the shock in the solicitor's eyes. "Not only are you as thick as two short fucking planks, but you're a bully and a thug and about as fucking incompetent as it's possible to be. Don't worry about people thinking you might be running some scams; I'll make sure they know just how pathetic you really are." With nothing but the deepest scorn and censure in his eyes, Greg sat back again and steepled his fingers.

A deep flush swept across his face as Harper's expression grew darker and angrier. He stood suddenly, slamming both hands down on the table top. "You think you're so clever," he hissed. "Think you know everything there is to know about me, don't you?" a sneer twisted his mouth. "Perhaps you'd think differently if I told you not only how I planned each and every one of the robberies in Hatton Garden, but also how I took a miserable stake and turned it into one of the most lucrative drug retail operations in London," he laughed softly. "I needed the money you see; being a lawyer, I knew exactly how much I was going to need to mount my campaign for the earldom, even with Freddy as my wife," he smiled. "And despite what you say, I'm confident she'll take me back when I plead my case and make her realise what she's giving up by letting me go."

"Not when she finds out that you were the one behind Professor Armstrong's death at the lab," Greg allowed himself to sound angry; he was angry at the total waste of a good man's life.

"Pfft," Harper wiggled his fingers in the air as he sat down again. "It was an accident," he shrugged. "And besides, I wasn't the one who ..." realising he had gone too far, Alex sat up straighter. He knew nobody could hear him so it didn't really matter what he said, but old habits died hard. "You will say nothing to Freddy on this matter, or I'll sue you for defamation."

"So that's the extent of your great plan, is it?" Greg looked entirely relaxed. "Get away with drug-running and jewel robberies, not to mention a spot of murder; get the girl of your dreams and carry on as if nothing in the world was wrong?"

"And because nobody can connect me to anything, no matter their suspicions, I'm confident I'll be able to do precisely that," Harper gave another irritating smile. "You'll have to let me go soon for lack of evidence, and I wanted you to know, directly from me, that nothing you have done has stopped me. Not one little thing," he leaned forward again. "Now who's the fucking incompetent?"

Greg frowned at the dirt under his fingernails, something he'd not had time to rectify before he came in. "You might be a clever solicitor," he said mildly. "But you sure as hell can't count," he looked up, across the table. Before flicking his eyes to the small cameras in the corners of the room.

"Two cameras," he said, nodding, his gaze moving across to the video monitors. "Got two of them things as well," he smiled cheerfully. "Shame it didn't occur to you that there might be two recording
systems in here too. Make sure you take some of those technical courses they let you do in prison,” he added, nodding at the control panel with its multiple switches and dials. "Get them to show you which is on and which is off before you go mouthing off in future."

Lifting a hand in the air, Greg made a beckoning gesture to anyone who might be hanging around outside. Within seconds, both Donovan and Bosisto strode in through the door, this time with two uniformed officers.

"He's all yours," Greg stood slowly, watching the incredulous shocked expression on Harper's face. It was a moment of pure theatre and Greg felt his soul sing.

"I am arresting you on suspicion of murder, armed robbery and the sale and distribution of prohibited goods," Sally had her cuffs already dangling between her fingers. "You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention, when questioned, something which you later rely on in court ..."

Ignoring the clamour of outrage behind him, Greg walked out of the room, a happy man. Seeing nobody waiting for him in the corridor, he stuck his hands in his coat pockets and whistled, heading to the lifts. As Greg's silver-blue BMW pulled out onto the Embankment, Superintendent Leela Manju watched from her office window. She turned away, a faint smile on her face.

###

The key was exactly where he'd asked Danny to leave it. Greg flicked on the lights and re-entered the house, climbing the ladder up to his apartment. Strolling along the bare boards of the main hallway, he was still whistling tunelessly as he headed into what would be his bedroom and bathroom. There was a small handwritten note on top of the toilet cistern.

'The flush works on the loo and you've got cold water as soon as you go and get some taps, Danny. PS. Might be a good idea to get some walls, too.'

Simply because he could, Greg immediately touched the flush feature, grinning madly as the toilet did exactly what it was supposed to do.

Things were coming together at last.

###

Freddy wasn't using her crutches, Greg saw, when they met later that evening. She stood waiting for him at the door to her room in a very normal way, with a walking-stick in her right hand to give a little extra support. Even the heavy bandages that swathed her leg had been reduced down to a light, stocking-type dressing.

"Excuse me," he grinned, getting down on one knee. "I just want to check this is still all you," he lifted the hem of her skirt a few inches and saw that, indeed, the stocking went up to her thigh. "Very fetching," he laughed, standing and leaning over to her, scanning her face with his eyes, anxious as always, to know she was healing from the experience on the inside as quickly as she was on the outside.

"The doctors tell me I can leave soon," she smiled into his eyes, completely at ease. "I've got to see a physio every couple of days, but I don't need to be in here for that to happen," her smile grew. "I can come home the day after tomorrow, if I want."

Warmth expanding though his chest, Greg knew there was still one thing he needed to arrange, but he should be able to get that done the next day. "That's bloody brilliant," he breathed, leaning even
closer and brushing her lips with his. "Where's your mum?" he asked, with an eye on the door. "Think she'll mind if she catches me kissing you like a teenager?" he moved his mouth down to the side of her neck, snaking an arm around her body as he nibbled softly along her skin while holding her steady.

"In a couple of days, I'll have my own room and some privacy," Freddy murmured as she relaxed in his embrace. "I'll even have my own bed again."

His arm tightening around her of its own accord, Greg smiled, breathing in the scent of her body. "So will I," he stood, grinning. "I bought an entire bedroom suite," he told her. "I even made the major adult decision of choosing sheets and pillows and things," he watched the surprise reach Freddy's eyes. "Got a few other things done at the house too," he arched an eyebrow and lidded his gaze.

"And you purposely aren't going to tell me, are you?" Freddy pushed him away. "That's incredibly mean." "Yeah, but you love me anyway," Greg laughed back, his breath stopping suddenly as he heard his own words. Hell ... but too late to unsay it now. "Don't you?" he asked more softly, a tentative note in the words.

Freddy lifted a hand to hold the side of his face, her eyes taking in the rigidity of his expression and the intensity of his stare. "I think I fell in love with you when you ate the peach straight from the tree," she whispered. "I can't imagine being apart from you," she looked at him, hopeful but hesitant.

"Oh, god, Freddy," Greg sighed, pulling her closer into his arms, his mouth taking hers in a passionate kiss. Winding himself around her, Greg allowed some of his pent up fear and desire add heat to the embrace. Freddy was small in his arms and he felt strangely powerful and fierce, almost lifting her from the floor as the kiss continued.

Outside, in the hospital corridor, Gwendoline remained seated. Selecting another magazine, she saw her choice was fortuitous. This one had a section on wedding planners ... 

###

"My girl's coming home," Greg slapped Danny Belgrays on the shoulder. After a marathon session on the phone the previous afternoon with the company who supplied the temporary staircases, Greg was in the best of moods.

The industrial rental company understood exactly what Greg had wanted and yes, they certainly had the item he was after, but not at their London depot. It had just been returned from a site in Reading. Could they redirect it to the Pimlico house? Unfortunately, and for health and safety reasons, all equipment had to be thoroughly checked out for compliance to OHS standards before it could be redeployed. How long would all that take? Well, as sir would no doubt be aware, some things could not be rushed. But could the item be brought around and installed first thing in the morning? Assuming all the safety aspects met expectation, then it would very likely be possible to have the item in situ by noon the following day. The mechanism did not require a great deal of engineering support to effect correct placement and function, though it needed a constant supply of power and, of course, the requisite space to operate. Having assured the hire company that all their requirements could be met, Greg had ended the conversation, his ear hot and sweaty by the close.

Freddy was coming home today! Greg felt himself flit between mild states of panic and excitement, wanting to ensure her good opinion of all the progress he'd made and all the things they'd discussed and agreed upon. There were so many things that had been accomplished, or at least started in the
last few weeks since she'd been in hospital; he'd lost count of the number of jobs that had been ticked off since December. There was power and water in the house; there was the shape of rooms and living spaces and of other things to come. The monstrous staircase had been rehomed and the payment was going to be used for ... yes! Greg hugged the knowledge to himself. Everything he could possibly arrange would be in place by the time Freddy arrived around lunchtime.

As good as its word, the rental company van drove through the big double gates at eight-thirty that morning and he went out to watch the equipment being unloaded. Seeing the mass of steel wire frames, cables and heavy steel beams, he began to wonder how the whole thing would fit into the available space, but he'd been assured it would and it was too late to back out now. After showing the technical team the location, he let them get on with removing the temporary steel staircases and installing the new apparatus.

The rest of the morning was a mad rush from one job to another as the power boards for the three separate apartments and the basement were finally wired in. The Belgrays finished sending pipes for water and gas central heating to all four levels of the house, leaving the ends covered and ready to be extended into any desired location. Glenmore and Javel had worked wonders with organising the various power conduits, again, leaving everything ready for final planning.

Shortly after eleven, the technician in charge of installing the machinery came looking for Greg.

"She's in and we've tested her already," he said, pleased. "This is such a small job, it's taken us a lot less time than we normally need," he grinned. "Want to give it a trial run?"

Dropping the hammer he'd been using to remove any old nails from the floorboards, Greg followed the man with alacrity. Though he'd got a basic idea of what to expect, the real thing was bound to be a little different ... he stopped as they reached the wide space of floor where the staircase used to be. And stared upwards at the gap in the ceiling ... where now ran the steel frame of a sturdy-looking, two-person industrial lift.

"Want to give it a try?" the technician asked, smiling as he handed over a surprisingly neat little box with three large buttons on it. Up, Down and Stop.

Stepping inside the protected cage, relieved to see that it could easily have taken his bathtub, Greg pressed the 'Up' button. With a soft whirring noise, the electric motor purred into action, taking him slowly but steadily upwards. Passing through the gap in the floor of his apartment gave him a strange feeling, but he carried on, all the way up to the top floor. There was virtually no vibration and very little sound. He'd agreed to hire the thing for a minimum of six weeks and, while it was costing several thousand pounds in hire fees, the knowledge that Freddy would be able to move easily from floor to floor now, was worth every penny. That it could also be used for transporting heavy goods and materials was a bonus.

Pressing the down button, he felt the whole cage shift softly back into a downwards movement, until it came to a velvet soft stop on the ground floor once again. About to have another go, Greg caught a waft of floral perfume. He looked out through the cage panels, straight into Freddy's eyes.
Chapter 23

He could have said a dozen different things. 'Surprise!' would have been an obvious one, or maybe 'I was going to wrap it for you'. As a cascade of possibilities filled his head, the rest of him worked automatically and Greg's fingers simply opened the cage door before holding themselves out to her.

Holding Freddy's bag, Gwendoline's smile was quietly delighted. She had waited a long time for her eldest child to meet someone who could make her happy and the Inspector was certainly doing that. Her usually introverted and solitary daughter had, like the gardens she so lovingly created, blossomed in the last several months, despite the terrible recent events. Gregory was bringing a new dimension into Freddy's life and he would continue do so with all the care, respect and love he had in him. Gwendoline Kerr had known men like Greg Lestrade before; her own late husband had similar traits and they made excellent life-mates. Watching as Freddy walked over toward the man whom Gwendoline believed would become her daughter's partner in life, while she kept her smile moderate, inside, a hallelujah chorus was rising to crescendo.

All Greg could see was Freddy's laughing face as she walked slowly across the dusty floor with her walking stick, oblivious to the expressions of everyone else around them. Her eyes were on him as she took his hand, stepping into the cage and his gentle embrace as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Pressing the Up button once more, Greg brought her close to him; not that the space was tight, but because he wanted to feel her warmth; he felt he had been waiting for this moment for years. Smiling down into her eyes, his stomach swooped and looped as Freddy smiled back.

Rising up through the space in the ceiling above, they still hadn't spoken, their locked gaze enough for now. Bending his head, and feeling suddenly, inexpressibly bashful, Greg pressed his lips to hers in a tender caress that hinted at other emotions. "Welcome home," he murmured, kissing her again as his arm tightened around her middle. Freddy closed her eyes and kept smiling.

"You promised me a surprise," she whispered, leaning back into his chest. "I never expected you to have built a lift for me."

"That's not the half of it," Greg chuckled. Bringing the lift to a careful stop on his floor, Greg leaned forward to undo the cage's safety clasp, before pushing the door open. "After you, M'lady."

Waiting until she was steady, Greg took Freddy's unoccupied hand in his as they walked side by side along the central passageway of the space that was slowly turning into his dream apartment. There were all sorts of small things for her to notice; the dark oak stain on the inside of the windows had been a treatment she'd agreed on while at the Northwick, but seeing the finished article in real life was different. It looked perfect and she was delighted they'd managed to select such a sensitive look for the house; it deserved nothing but the best after being neglected for so long.

To the right, Greg displayed the chalk lines describing the size and location of the kitchen units he'd ordered, showing her the catalogue pictures so she'd get to see the look he wanted to create. The dark shades and the clean, straight lines were undeniably masculine, but they felt strangely right in this old house. Freddy smiled again as she noted the near-permanent grin on his face.

"What else have you done?" she asked indulgently, enjoying his enjoyment.

*Christ help me*, Greg thought as a great wave of need shimmied through him. He could almost swear there were violins in the air as his brain swam with her proximity. Her scent of flowers wrapped around him like a physical thing and the air felt hot, as if he were coming down with something or had been out in the sun. He couldn't recall feeling anything like this in his entire adult life and his
throat dried even as he attempted to tell her. Freddy needed to know this; she needed to know how she made him feel. But had no idea how to describe the sensation without sounding drunk. He stared at her, dumbstruck.

Freddy's smile was radiant.

Holding her free hand, he tugged her carefully along in the opposite direction to the kitchen, leading Freddy into the long room at the front of the house that he was slowly turning into his master bedroom, especially the area in the far corner which was now home to an almost fully fledged bathroom. More chalk lines indicated where the walls would eventually stand, but the plain simplicity and elegant contours of the bathroom fittings caught her eye. She couldn't have selected a better suite herself; it was perfect for the age and ambience of the house. Freddy scanned all the shining new china pieces, her gaze pausing on one in particular.

"It's a bidet," Greg croaked.

"You installed a bidet?" she turned to meet his eyes.

"I bought the suite," Greg motioned feebly, still swamped by wild sensation. "I thought I'd give it a try."

"I love bidets," her smile returned. "I got used to them when the family lived in Europe," Freddy pressed herself flat against his front, resting her chin on his chest. "I think they're the most civilised of creations."

Greg felt his entire body pulse with the want of her, as his skin prickled with heat and his chest expanded noticeably with the depth of his breathing. If only the house were finished; if only they were truly alone; if only Freddy was in her full health …

"I dream of you at night," he whispered roughly. "Your mother asked me if I were making a nest for you and I think ... I think she's not far off," he raised a hand to stroke a strand of dark hair away. "I can't tell you how much I've wanted you back here with me," he husked as his throat tightened again.

"Not as much as I've longed for the moment I could do this," Freddy reached an arm up around his neck and pulled herself closer. "Kiss me," she breathed against his lips. "Please kiss me."

Unable to think of anything else, Greg caught her to him with both hands, wrapping his arms around her until Freddy groaned with pressure and pleasure as the kiss between them was finally of two adults, alone and in love.

Greg broke away first, breathing heavily, able only to gaze blearily into her eyes before closing his own. The uproar raging through his entire body was alien in its intensity; he'd never had to deal with this level of desire and need for anyone before and he felt out of his depth, at odds with himself. He was so aroused it actually hurt. How did people cope with this? He held Freddy tight until he felt able to meet her gaze without embarrassing himself.

A specific impulse lanced through him; something he wanted to say ... to ask ... Greg lifted his head to speak ... But sudden insight told him not yet. Not while the task was only half-way completed; he needed to prove, if only to himself, that he was able to do this thing, to finish something to perfection and to be worthy of ... everything that might come with such an achievement.

"I have a sort of a plan," he announced, unobtrusively easing his stance. "It involves you and this house and my apartment and a few other things," he added, taking a deep breath as Freddy looked at
him curiously. "I want to get this apartment up to a reasonable liveable standard and then I want you to move in and live here while we finish the rest of the work around you," he said in a rush. "We've already got the basic electrics sorted out on each floor, including your basement, and the Belgrays have got the gas central heating all plumbed in and I've lined up the Thermacool people to come in and set up the air conditioning ..." he paused, watching her face to see how the idea was sounding. "Once I've got my kitchen up and working, and the bedroom stuff moved in, it would surely be so much easier for you to be here, rather than having to deal with the hassle of having to come in every day from the Dolphin ..." Greg lapsed into silence, unsure now if his great brainwave actually made any sense.

"And where will you be?" Freddy was still leaning against his chest and could no doubt feel the indiscreet thumping of his heart.

"At my bedsit, of course," Greg frowned slightly, working out why she would ask ... where did she expect him to be ... oh.

"It's just until we have the ground floor ready for you," he offered. "Given that you're not going to be able to work much on the gardens just yet because of ..." he waved down at her walking stick. "I thought you might like to be here and watch as things changed around you," he smiled widely. "It's an amazing process, seeing things take shape," he shook his head, his mouth curving wider. "I didn't want you to miss any more of it."

"But what if I didn't want to be alone in this big house all by myself at night?" Freddy raised her eyebrows. "What if I hurt my leg or fell ..."

Greg shrugged awkwardly realising that perhaps after all, it wasn't the wisest of master plans. "Of course, it's a silly idea," he wrinkled his nose. "I just thought you'd like to be here and get a feel for things," he shook his head. "It was just a thought."

"And it's a terrific thought," Freddy stroked his arm. "I'm just not sure I'd want to be here alone while I'm still ..." she looked down at her right leg and the walking stick. "Hors de combat, as it were," she paused, looking at his face. "You could be here as well," she suggested. "It's your apartment; it would make better sense for you to move in first."

"I could," Greg nodded slowly. "But I wanted to make the situation easier for you, not me," he met her eyes again. "But if you aren't going to feel safe ..."

"I would, if you were here with me," Freddy spoke candidly. "I think we're both too old to worry what anyone might say, and I think we also both know that this isn't something we're doing lightly."

"What would your mum say?" Greg had developed a healthy regard for Gwendoline's opinion and was reluctant to have her think badly of him. "It would essentially mean we're living in the same flat ..."

"Mummy?" Freddy laughed with gusto. "She's so desperate for me to find a suitable partner; I'm surprised she hasn't attempted to bribe you into marrying me before now."

Greg's eyes glittered. He'd need no bribe.

"So you'd be happy to live here and work on the house as far as you felt like it," he reiterated, "as long as I was staying here along with you?" he observed her expression. "Is that about right?"

"Would you mind terribly?" Freddy was watching him too.

"I think I could struggle through it," his smile was gentle though his breathing was doing funny
things. "It means I have to get one of the spare bedrooms ready as well though," he raised his eyebrows.

Freddy looked entirely serious. "You don't actually have to, you know," she met his gaze.

*To be able to go to bed at night and feel her warmth and softness next to him ...* Greg was sorely tempted. "Not until the house is done and you have more than one option," he said, equally seriously. "Call me old fashioned, but that's the way it has to be."

"I don't think you're old fashioned in the least," Freddy's radiant expression was back as she leaned herself once more against his chest, fingers splayed at his shoulders. "I think, Inspector, that you're rather wonderful."

"The name is Greg," he wrapped his arms carefully around her body, nudging her chin up so that he could kiss her again, long and lingeringly.

"Everyone's going to be wondering what we're doing up here," Freddy brushed Greg's fringe back from his eyes. "Unless I'm wearing an engagement ring when we go back down, they'll assume all sorts of torrid possibilities."

"Pure jealousy on their part and nothing else," Greg laughed softly, taking her hand again and breathing deeply in a futile attempt to calm his loins. He'd just have to walk behind her until things got back to normal. "Let me show you the new power boards."

###

Whether it was because they could start to see changes almost every day now, or because Freddy and ergo, Freddy's mother were now onsite all the time, things that needed to be done seemed to be accomplished more rapidly than before. Even if Greg wasn't able to be there every minute of the day, he was certainly there every night and able to see the changes, even the small ones.

With the basic electrics and plumbing in place, attention turned to the completion of kitchens on the ground floor and in Greg's apartment. It had been agreed to leave the finishing of the top floor flat until everything else was virtually done so that nothing would distract them from doing a perfect job of it. His new bedroom furniture sat in carefully-wrapped splendour in what was still something of a building site, though once the walls were in and the floor was sanded and stained, he could set things up the way he wanted. The following Saturday he wondered if Freddy might like to get her bathroom and kitchen stuff organised. Since he had already organised his kitchen units, the building firm they'd engaged to install new internal walls and replace all the old doors got on with that job while he and Freddy started considering what to put in on the main ground floor. It was something that had to be done sooner or later.

"Mummy would be much better at this than me, you know," Freddy was far more interested in setting up her lab in the unoccupied basement below their feet than poring over kitchen or bathroom catalogues. "Besides," she looked momentarily bleak. "I think I have to accept than my knee is never going to be what it was before the ... before ..." she waved awkwardly down at her right leg. "I have to face facts that my career as a commercial gardener is more or less over," she puffed out her cheeks and sighed. "I've pretty much decided that I'm going to focus on my apothecary studies now, that and herbalism," she looked a little sad. "Perhaps I can do some work to carry on Roy Armstrong's research as well as my own," she added, taking a deep breath. "This being the case, then I'm going to need a really well designed and organised lab to work in and I'm afraid that setting up a kitchen doesn't hold a candle to getting my lab up to spec. Mummy and I usually like the same kind of domestic settings, as it happens," she smiled beseechingly at Greg who merely raised his eyebrows in fascination at such a blatant attempt at manipulation. "Would you mind dreadfully if I got on with
things in my lab first?"

As if he could bring himself to refuse Freddy anything after that little speech, Greg took a moment to clear his throat before holding his hands in the air as if absolving himself of all possibly blame. "As long as you don't come crying to me if your mum sets her sights on some Gothic monstrosity," he shook his head in mock concern.

"My mother despises Gothic monstrosities," Freddy slid an arm around his neck, pulling him down for a soft kiss. "And she's also far more interested in kitchens than I'll ever be," she added, nibbling his lower lip as her other hand slid around his hip to squeeze his right buttock in a proprietorial manner. "It gives me a chance to think of other things," she murmured huskily.

"The minute you don't need to use that bloody walking stick, you and I are going to have a long and private chat," Greg growled playfully against her neck. "It's the only thing saving you from a fate worse than death right now."

Gurgling a laugh, Freddy hobbled off to talk to the builders about the design of her lab benches, leaving Greg to her mother's tender mercies. Heaving a short sigh, he went in search of the Kerr matriarch, currently chatting with Joyce Belgrays, discussing the different merits of various hot water systems.

"Freddy has delegated the kitchen selection entirely to you," he said, resting both hands on his hips as the older woman turned questioningly. "If you're willing to take on such a responsibility," he added, "which I'm not suggesting you should do, by any means."

"But of course, my dear boy," Gwendoline was all smiles. "Freddy and I have very similar tastes, in any case," she added, waving farewell at Joyce over her shoulder. "Where are we going?"

"There's a kitchen and bathroom place just up Sutherland Road here where I got my own kitchen stuff," he offered her his arm as they walked across the uneven ground towards the main gate. "It's a massive warehouse set up and has more styles of things than you could poke a stick at," he added as they approached the BMW. "I know Freddy wants to keep things true to the feel of the house, but that doesn't mean everything has to be old fashioned, does it?"

"Absolutely not," Gwendoline dealt with her seatbelt. "In fact, the best designs compliment rather than pander to a specific style," she smiled happily, clearly in her element. "Let's see what they have, shall we?"

They hit the bathroom section first. As each apartment would need two bathrooms, both an ensuite as well as a main family bathroom, Gwendoline felt it would make sense, as Freddy had no particular preference, for the ground floor to have identical suites, providing a feeling of continuity. Since Greg had bought his ensuite set somewhat on the hoof, as it were, he paid close attention to the Master; for it was obvious that Freddy's mother knew exactly what was needed. He wondered how many times Gwendoline had wanted to do this at her old house in Harrow but never had the money to indulge herself. He grinned behind her back; she'd be able to satisfy her inner interior decorator today, if nothing else.

"Freddy told me she likes bidets," he offered, just in case that might be an option.

"Doesn't everyone?" Gwendoline smiled.

"Apparently so," Greg managed to keep a straight face and hoped Danny Belgrays kept quiet about the appearance of the one in his ensuite.
"Oh, this one's rather smart," Gwendoline stopped in front of a complete bathroom set that reminded Greg of something. The whiteness of the porcelain had an almost blue sheen to it, setting it off against a dark mahogany-coloured wooden setting. The cabinets within which the sink lay, the rich timber frames of the large mirror. The toilet seat ... the crisp white shone vividly against the classic tones of the heavy wood. In some ways the suite had almost a Victorian feel yet the modern lines of the individual pieces kept the feeling contemporary. Greg had never imagined for one second that his life might at some point focus on the relative merits of bathroom sinks, but here he was ... never say never.

And besides, Gwendoline was right. The setting did look smart; he could easily visualise the whole thing in place in the house. In fact, it was so nice; it might even do for the top apartment if Freddy liked it in hers. He peered over the nearest piece, whistling softly at the price. He'd been fortunate to swing the deal he had for his own bathroom, clearly this situation would need a great deal more finessing. "Are you happy to talk to the sales people about this or you want me to have a go?" Greg felt he had to offer at least.

Gwendoline patted his arm. "Why don't you go and have a recce of the kitchens and come back here in about, oh ..." she glanced at her watch, "fifteen minutes or so?"

"Roger that," suppressing a knowing grin, Greg went about his business, only marginally sorry for whomever came up against Freddy's mum. That lady had an enviable talent of persuasion, with or without a shotgun in her hands. Shoving his own hands in his pockets, he meandered slowly over to the other side of the big showroom, where the kitchen's held sway. There had to be hundreds of different styles and colours here other than the new units that sat, still unwrapped, in his own kitchen space. It was likely that Freddy would want to go for something easy to keep clean maybe, perhaps even something that had a vaguely lab-like feel to it. Looking around, he found it difficult to pick just the one option, there were so many and so many of them were very similar. If nothing else, the Pimlico house deserved something with a bit of style, even if it was on the pricy side. Pausing, He leaned against the side of the nearest display. Folding his arms, he stared across the main aisle in which he currently stood, trying to spot something that looked a little bit out of the ordinary. Nothing really grabbed his eye.

He vaguely noticed the timber against which he was leaning seemed to have faint stripes of colour within the actual grain of the wood. Standing clear, Greg brushed the pale grain with his fingertips, fancying he could almost feel the soft lines of pigment. An unusual effect if nothing else, almost like dried rushes.

"An interesting choice," the saleswoman stood off to the side behind him. "Not many people can spot something made from reclaimed timbers; it's a trial project of ours, stepping into the Green market."

Turning slightly, Greg took a closer look at the kitchen display. It offered all the usual cupboards and cabinets you'd see in any large kitchen, though he noticed now that the timber was a little thicker than most of the other displays. "This is reclaimed?"

The woman smiled. "Ah, I thought you'd already spotted the imperfect matching of the wood," she nodded, pointing to the side panels of an overhead cabinet. "It's all solid timber you see," she added. "There's no new wood here at all. Shame it's not to everyone's liking," she looked mildly disappointed. "We've had it here for a while and nobody seems terribly interested."

Peering closer, Greg saw that she was right. Each of the cupboards, though perfectly structured and proportioned, had irregular panels of wood, some wider than others, though the display had an overall greeny-grey sheen to it. There were fine streaks of darker green running vertically though
several of the doors and drawers.

"Reclaimed Cherry in this setting, for the most part," the saleswoman continued, seeming genuinely interested. "Though I believe there's also some white oak. It's all been cleaned and treated and then finished with a protective glaze also made from natural dyes and products. There's even some Lavender and Basil in the dyes, I understand."

Greg smiled back just as warmly, though for an entirely different reason. Freddy would love something like this, something real, made from real things. It would be like having a little piece of the garden inside. "If you'll excuse me for one minute," Greg stared around, looking for Gwendoline. "I have to bring my project manager over here for a look," he grinned, before heading back the way he'd come.

Gwendoline sat in a partially upholstered chair on one side of a large sales desk. On the other side sat a man in his middle years with a very jaded expression on his face. There was also a glassy look in his eyes.

"Mrs Kerr," the man sighed heavily, shaking his head. "I simply can't discount the price any more, simply because you want to purchase two full suites," he frowned as if this wasn't the first time he'd uttered those words in the last ten minutes. "I'm already looking at a price barely above cost as it is."

"Ah, Gregory," Gwendoline nodded at his approach. "Mr Symons here is reluctant to help us refurbish the Pimlico property at the budget we have set," she looked sorrowful. "Such a shame, but there we have it. Have you had better success than I?"

"There's a terrific kitchen set over there," Greg waved generally towards the far wall. "It's all reclaimed wood, all natural colours. I think Freddy would love it if we can do a deal," he looked hopefully at the seated man. "Would cash help?"

Mr Symons perked up at the mention of the potential kitchen sale, with a small smile appearing as the sound of the magic word, cash. Then he moderated his expression. "Which particular kitchen did you have in mind?" he asked carefully, unwilling to dig himself into an even deeper hole.

"The reclaimed one with the natural dyes in the finish," Greg frowned as he looked in the direction he'd walked. "Apparently nobody likes it very much."

"Ah yes. The recycled Cherry with plant-based stain," the man nodded thoughtfully. "I believe we might be able to come to some sort of an arrangement …"

"If we can also find a better price on the two bathroom suites, perhaps?" Gwendoline's smile was smooth and sympathetic and utterly ruthless. Greg reminded himself never to start an argument with the woman unless he held every single card and a couple of spare aces. "I'd prefer to see this setting before we discuss any further prices, I'm sure you understand," unleashing another smile, Gwendoline followed Greg back the way he'd just come. "Oh yes," she nodded, smoothing her fingers across the long natural grain of the timber. "This is very nice. Not overly sophisticated, perhaps, but it has good lines and Freddy will love the fact that it's all recycled," she turned to Greg. "Well spotted."

"So, we return to the negotiation table?" he smiled.

"We return," Gwendoline ran a hand over her hair as if girding her loins for another skirmish. Mr Symonds was exactly where they'd left him, his expression somewhere between hope and dread.

About to turn away to hide a smile, Greg's mobile rang. Stepping aside, he glanced at the caller ID
on the screen. Jeez, couldn't he even get a weekend to himself?

"Lestrade," he spoke tonelessly, unwilling to get involved in a lengthy conversation. It was Superintendent Manju. Would he mind calling into the office for a brief chat in the next couple of hours? "I'm somewhat involved in financial negotiations right now," he muttered quietly. "Can this possibly wait until Monday?"

Apparently it couldn't. Greg sighed inwardly, agreeing to meet Manju at the Yard within the hour for the swiftest of discussions. It was probably something to do with Alex Harper, he realised after ending the call. Maybe Manju wanted to give him some news before he went in on Monday. Quite possibly bad news. He scowled, shoving the phone back into his jacket's inside breast pocket. He returned to the negotiations.

Gwendoline was smiling and Symonds was looking bewildered, which meant the home team had scored big time and the visitors were trying to find their collective arses. It was impossible to maintain a scowl anywhere near either of the Kerr women when they emanated silent triumph like this. "Did we win?" he bent and whispered in her ear.

"Oh yes," Gwendoline watched with eagle eyes as Symonds was typing the details of the order into his computer, shaking his head with every second keystroke. "Did I hear that you need to be elsewhere?"

"Soon," Greg sighed. "But not before I drop you back at the house. With luck, I'll only be about an hour."

Symonds printed out a copy of the details. It was a long document. The cumulative price at the end was significant, but considering it was for two complete bathroom sets and a new kitchen, Gwennie had done a spectacular job of knocking the price down. Handing over the debit card linked specifically to the development fund, Greg keyed in the PIN number and made the payment on the spot.

Less than ten minutes later, he dropped Freddy's mother at the walled garden gates. "Tell Freddy I'll be back shortly," he said. "Just got to sort something out at the Yard."

Parking the BMW in his usual spot, Greg strode inside and up to the fourth floor, knocking on Leela Manju's door less than a minute later.

"Come in Greg," the voice sounded relaxed rather than troubled and Greg wondered afresh why he was here. Taking one of the seats his Superintendent indicated, he raised his eyebrows and waited.

"Thanks for coming in at such short notice," Manju wasn't in uniform herself which might account for the casual feeling of the meeting. "I'm off on a couple weeks leave as of Monday, but I wanted to give you the good news before I left."

Good news? Greg's eyes widened slightly but he remained silent.

"It's partly to do with the Harper case, of course,"

"Partly?" Narrowing his eyes, Greg waited for the hammer to fall.

Superintendent Manju looked pleased, she smiled. "And partly to tell you about your promotion," she added. "Detective Chief Inspector Lestrade."
February and March

The individual words made sense though he had trouble grasping the sentence as a whole. He could feel a frown shaping his forehead as he thought about it.

Manju's smile grew amused as she watched him struggling with the notion. "Come now, Greg," she raised her eyebrows. "Don't tell me the possibility hasn't crossed your mind in the last couple of years? Or don't you think you did a very efficient job with bringing Alex Harper in?"

"I've been a DI for so long that ..." Greg shook his head. "I kind of imagined that would be it for me until I retired," he shrugged. "I wasn't expecting it, to be honest and I'm a bit blown away."

"Tony Bosisto is moving up to Norwich and we need to backfill his position here," Manju made everything sound entirely logical. "Apart from all the years of solid service, your rather stellar performance with the recent investigations, the fact that you willingly recused yourself from the key investigative position and took a back seat in order to get the job done," Superintendent Manju leaned forward on her desk, fingers linked loosely together. "That's all good team work," she nodded thoughtfully. "It makes a difference at the senior levels."

"And this would be active as of ..?" Greg looked curious.

"First thing Monday. There'll be an email for you from Chief Superintendent Samuels asking if you will accept the promotion and then a formal notification goes to Personnel advising them of the change to your rank and associated benefits dated as of Monday." Manju grinned. "I've stolen his thunder by telling you, but I felt I had the right," she looked thoughtful. "How are you getting on with that house you're renovating ... and aren't you working with the woman who was shot?"


Something in the way he spoke had Manju's antenna twitching but she let it go. That the woman, potentially a principal witness, was recovering, was all for the good. "I'll let you get back to it then," she added. "Enjoy the rest of the weekend and the 'surprise' on Monday."

"Ma'am," Greg nodded, knowing when he was being dismissed. "Enjoy your leave."

###

Stopping at an off-licence on the way back, Greg still felt a bit weirded out by the time he'd returned to the house. It being Saturday afternoon, the Belgrays and the builders had knocked off for the rest of the weekend and he returned to a house quiet of electric saws, hammering and the ever-present sound of booted feet tramping through the rooms.

Freddy and her mother were seated at a wide work table in the middle of what would become the main reception room on the ground floor. There was a large paper diagram between them which they both studied closely. Even though the new windows were dusty and in great need of cleaning, the unhampered sunlight shone pale and clear across the room. Greg stood in the doorway, taking it all in. The muted colours, the dust, the two women seated at the table. It looked like an old master's oil painting. His heart, already filled with Freddy and the news of his promotion, soared with a strange kind of happiness.

"Behold, the mighty hunter returns," he announced grandly from the doorway as the women simultaneously raised their heads at the sound of his footsteps. "I come bearing gifts," he added,
plonking down a chilled bottle of champagne. "And tidings of great comfort and joy."

"Christmas was more than a month ago," Freddy dropped the pencil she'd been holding and rested both arms on the table in front of her as she smiled up at him. "Though I suspect you already know that."

"Hush woman," Greg swept through the room, striding out to the kitchen to grab three paper cups from the box load Freddy had bought from a recycling friend. Returning as swiftly as he'd left and still wearing his overcoat, Greg made short work of opening the bottle, pouring three goodly portions of the bubbly wine. "A toast," he held out his cup. "To the newest DCI in the Metropolitan police service," he grinned madly, staring between mother and daughter.

It was Freddy who twigged first, a dawning look of delight changing the shape of her expression. "Greg!" she squeaked. "You've been promoted!" Standing without thinking, she threw her arms around his waist to hug him hard before realising she hadn't used the walking stick.

"It'll be official as of Monday," his grin showed no sign of diminishing as his slid his free arm around Freddy, kissing her soundly. "My Superintendent wanted to let me know today before she went off on leave, but yeah. DCI," he said, shaking his head. "Hard to believe after all these years."

"And roundly deserved, my dear boy," Gwendoline toasted him with her paper cup. "And who's to say it'll stop there?" she added, slyly. "It's easier to maintain momentum than to create it," she added. "It would be so nice to have a Chief Constable in the family." Both Greg and Freddy turned to meet the older woman's eyes, a faintly quizzical expression on their faces.

"Honestly, you two," Gwendoline shook her head, exasperated. "Don't give me that look; it's disingenuous if nothing else."

"Mummy!" Freddy hissed. "This isn't the time."

"Back in my day, a gel used to know where she was," the Kerr matriarch sniffed, sipping the champagne. "You'd meet a boy at a summer dance, be invited to accompany him to a shoot at his family's country seat where you'd meet both parents, who would then meet your parents and then there'd be an announcement in the Times and that would be that. It was all much more straightforward."

"Got to get the house ready before anything else happens," Greg waved a finger at her. "Stop practicing."

"Practicing?" Gwendoline sounded intrigued. "For what?"

"You know very well for what," Greg poured them all a refill. "One thing at a time," he added with a slightly pompous air. "It's how I got to where I am today."

"Such an idiot," Freddy sighed happily before pointing at her drawing. "What do you think?"

Peering down over the top of his paper cup, Greg wondered for the briefest of moments what Freddy had been doing, but the lines and the general shape of things made it clear almost immediately. "The garden?" he asked, leaning down for an even better look. There was a great deal of detail, with names of shrubs and things printed in Freddy's neat handwriting. The design would have taken time to complete to this level and Greg raised his eyebrows, curious.

"I started that plan almost the first day I saw the walled garden and knew I wanted to live here," Freddy drew a fingertip gently along one of the pencilled borders. "I've been refining the design ever since," she sighed. "I can hardly believe it's going to be started in only a few months' time."
"Got to get the inside finished first though," Greg spoke softly, brushing a fallen lock of hair away from her face. "One thing at a time, eh?"

Turning to press her face into his chest, Freddy nodded against his shirt. "Yes. Let's get the house finished," she agreed. Her mother sniffed again but said nothing, her lack of comment a comment in itself.

###

Now that Freddy had stopped using the walking stick and was visibly more agile, things seemed to happen faster or maybe, Greg thought, he was imagining things because he wanted them to move swiftly. It was as if everything was rushing towards some invisible deadline. The builders had almost finished with his apartment on the middle floor; everything done apart from finishing touches of paint and paper, tiles on the new walls; sealing the passage floorboards with a heavy duty urethane. The same sealant had been used in the main bathroom and kitchen area once the new units had been installed and Greg liked the effect a lot; the old dark oak floorboards gleamed. The plasterers had finished several of the old walls, where time and neglect had left long cracks. He wouldn't be able to decorate those for a few months, until everything had time to settle in and dry, but that was the least of his worries. His flash new bedroom furniture had at last been unpacked and properly positioned and the woman from John Lewis had already been and fitted the long, draped curtains in a dark green velvet type fabric for both the master bedroom and the main spare bedroom. The various blinds he'd had fitted in the bathrooms looked so good, he organised for them to be put in all the windows, in the same semi-translucent shade of palest greeny-grey. It was a manly colour he privately thought of as battleship green, but was, as he was reliably informed, better known as Eau-de-nil, a favourite of Edwardian debutantes. Looking at the bare new mattress on his new big bed, he had felt initially reluctant to actually put linen and a duvet on the thing in case ... anyone might think it presumptuous. He started thinking about furnishing the largest spare bedroom ... if Freddy was going to be using his main bedroom, he'd need somewhere to sleep himself. Technically.

The Belgrays had done a bang up job with not only the plumbing, but also with the gas for the kitchen, the central heating and the water heaters on each of the three floors. Freddy had arranged something a little more specific down in her lab in terms of sinks and a gas line for her equipment, but all the main work was essentially done. Even the two long lab benches were in place, as well as the special lighting and ventilation Freddy needed. Once she had her fridges and other basic equipment installed, she'd be almost good to go.

The bulk of the work on the ground floor was also well underway, the wonderful electric lift being the last thing to be removed so that the ceilings and floors of the three apartments could be sealed over, finished and then either decorated or left until all the essential tasks were complete. This was good news as the fighting fund which he'd thought would be so difficult to spend at the outset, had begun to vanish like mist in the rising sun. There was still more than enough to get both the top floor apartment and the remainder of the house done, though Freddy's garden might have to wait for a little while. It was the one fly in Greg's ointment and he was determined to do something about it; somehow, he'd make sure Freddy's garden dream came true, even if it was only in stages.

They had decided to wait to close off the ground floor kitchen from the back staircase leading up to Greg's floor as it seemed silly to do that when things were becoming so ... anticipative. Not a day went by now but that Greg felt it was as if he and Freddy were already living together in this great house in everything but name. Gwendoline had stopped making her little observations as it was plain to anyone with eyes that her daughter and the handsome Chief Inspector were a match for each other.

The floorboards of Freddy's flat had been cleaned and sanded by professionals as there was far too much work for Greg to take on. His promotion at the Yard had resulted in a corresponding increase
in administration and subsequent paperwork, yet he found that it really wasn't as horrendous as he'd imagined or anywhere near as dire as the teasing he'd received from his peers on the fourth floor. He was even enjoying the ability to sit still in one place and get others to do much of his running around for him.

"Yeah, alright, ya bastards," he'd joked on the Tuesday after the announcement became common knowledge and he'd returned to his office only to find his chair had been replaced by a plastic golden throne, complete with a paper crown. "I know who did this!" he shouted out through his open office door. "I'll have you all working nights, ya buggers, don't think I won't!"

His grin was still wide and genuine on a morning more than a fortnight later as he sat at his desk to make a start on a department-wide staffing report for the January to March period. He paused as an email arrived from the Counsel of the Prosecution giving a court date several weeks hence when he was required to present himself to the central criminal court of the Old Bailey. It was the trial date for Alex Harper. Greg bit his lip. Both Freddy and her mother would undoubtedly be getting notification letters telling them the same thing. It would be especially tough on Freddy; even though her physical injuries were healing really well, he was very aware that the psychological injury and stress could last for years. If she wasn't such a key witness, Greg would have tried to get her excused from appearing.

The Pimlico house was also sounding different these days. Greg had first noticed it in his own apartment after the bathroom and new kitchen walls had gone up. The building was starting to feel and sound like a proper house. It was losing the empty, hollow ringing that had been so much of the place for so long. Even his bedroom, its style and furniture selected very much from a man's preference was shaping up differently than he'd imagined. He'd found the perfect large rug for the room, thickly woven with heavy shaggy wool and fine strips of soft leather, yet the whole atmosphere of his bedroom was becoming far more cosy than he'd ever intended. He almost couldn't wait for winter to return so that he could have a proper fire burning in the fireplace. He smiled at the thought; Freddy might like candles. He found himself hoping she would.

His apartment was virtually finished, other than some final touches and all the major work had been completed on both the ground floor and in Freddy's basement lab. The only space in the house that remained virtually untouched was the top floor and that, they'd both agreed they would work on together once they'd been able to move into the Pimlico house. It was a faintly grey Sunday afternoon in mid-March when Greg decided to give notice on his bedsit. He'd lived there for almost a year now, ever since he and Cathy had sold their Camden house and split the profits, more than seven months since Mike Stamford had introduced him to Freddy in a pub only minutes from the house they had both decided to live in. Other than the top floor, the house was all but finished.

Greg felt a heavy kind of peacefulness sigh around him.

Being a Sunday, the few remaining tradespeople had knocked off the previous day and Gwendoline was out, off visiting with Mr Lewis, both of them making up for lost time it seemed, as they'd been out to dances no less than three times in the last fortnight. There had been no indication when she'd be back. Freddy, he knew, would be in her new basement lab, fussing with light-fittings or rearranging her shelves or something. Taking a deep breath, Greg walked down the back stairs into the newly finished ground floor kitchen which glowed with pale wood and dark slate benchtops. From there, he headed up the central passageway until he reached the central space where the staircase used to be. The doorway to the basement was unobstructed now and he could see the door was ajar with light emanating from the cellar beneath. The door opened silently and he stepped down the polished cement steps.

"Put that pipette down and make yourself decent, Dr Kerr," he called out, a curve to his mouth. So
many times in recent days, he'd found Freddy with her head in a box of glassware or hunting for something in piles of books and papers. The lab was brightly lit, warm and showed no hint of the dark, damp cellar it once was. To his surprise, she was sitting motionless on a tall lab chair, gazing out of the new basement windows that had been in place now for several months. Freddy turned at the sound of his voice, a small flare of affection and warmth shaping her features. Greg felt his stomach clench as it always seemed to do when she looked pleased to see him.

"It's nearly spring," she said quietly, returning to stare out of the high windows. "I can start working in the garden soon. Getting things ready and in place for next year when we should be able to see a real change out there," she smiled again, a gentleness in her expression that made his knees go funny. Greg wanted her to look at him like that forever. He walked over to where she sat in the tall chair, their heights almost the same level. Sliding his hands around her waist, Greg moved himself in until he felt her legs part to allow him closer. Looking steadily into her dark hazel eyes, Greg took another deep breath and tried to calm the butterflies in his stomach as she stared at him with a wondering look.

"You know how I feel about you," he began, his eyes dark and thoughtful, the expression on his face part-wistful and part-serious as he looked at her. "I would really like to hear that you still feel the same way about me," his gaze held hers.

Scanning his face for any signs of concern or worry, Freddy ran fingertips down the line of his nose. "I love you," she said, her focus moving to the shape of his mouth as she stroked his lower lip very softly. "I've been waiting for you to make up your mind how you wanted me to feel," she leaned forward, brushing her mouth against his. "Have you finally decided?"

Greg's reply was as simple as it was sure. Sliding one hand through her glossy hair, he bent slightly, finding her lips with his own and kissing her slowly but with increasing purpose.

"Have you done something with that great big bed of yours?" Freddy whispered as she caught her breath. "It seems very wrong to leave it untouch ..." her words were lost as Greg pulled her hard against his chest, their kiss hot and increasingly physical as his mind abandoned logical thought for sensation and touch and heat. Dropping one arm under her legs and placing the other firmly around her back, he lifted Freddy straight off the lab chair and, holding her close, he headed back to the steps. She felt light in his arms, almost without weight as he walked steadily up to the ground floor and along the main passage to the back stairs. Without a pause, he ascended the single flight of wooden steps to his own apartment where he strode towards the front of the flat and the master bedroom. Negotiating the open doorway, once inside, he kicked the door closed with the flat of his foot.

Freddy saw that the blinds were lowered though the long, heavy curtains were not entirely closed, allowing a muted light to fill the room with gentle shadows. She could feel Greg's arms beginning to tremble as they held her and was unsurprised; he'd carried her a long way as well as up two flights of stairs. "Do you want to put me down?" she asked, leaning back in order to meet his gaze. "I'm heavier than I look."

"I never want to put you down," Greg murmured," though I shall as I'm going to pull a muscle if I try and kiss you like this." Lowering her feet carefully to the floor, and being very cautious with her still-healing leg, Greg brought her back into his embrace, his arms still trembling. Freddy realised, with what was left of her rational mind, that her weight that hadn't been the cause of it ... Turning in Greg's arms, she saw the huge bed had been completely made up with new linens and pillows, with several large candles glowing in the near-dusk of the room. She smiled happily.

"You are such a romantic man," she slid her arms up around his neck. "No wonder you like gardens
so much."

"I prefer the gardener to the garden, in this instance," he smiled as he bent to kiss her again, the heat between them rising slowly but unmistakably. Greg stepped back, pulling his heavy wool jumper over his head, flinging it onto a nearby chair. About to start on his shirt buttons, Freddy's fingers stilled him and he shivered as he felt her cool touch against his skin. With great concentration and a light touch, she deftly flicked open each one of the buttons, opening the thick cotton away from the skin of his chest as if she was unwrapping a thing of great value. Spreading her fingers wide on his flesh, Freddy leaned in, inhaling the warm scent of his body. Pressing small kisses all the way up as high as she could reach; the expression on her face was one of sheer sensuous pleasure. Greg felt his heart rate ratchet up another notch.

Pushing herself away, Freddy held out her arms and closed her eyes, inviting a reciprocal arrangement. Greg felt his fingers were far too clumsy and heavy to manage the job of undoing Freddy's buttons without ripping something but he managed in the end, bending down to take her mouth in another fierce kiss as he carefully pulled the garment from her shoulders. Taking his time, he moved his lips down the pale column of her throat and across the softness of her shoulders, the polished roundness of her bringing a soft groan from his chest. Unwilling to part from her and yet increasingly desperate now for the feeling of skin against skin, Greg stepped back, kicking his shoes to destinations unknown as he fumbled with the zip of his jeans, only to have the action halted once again by Freddy's small hands.

"So impetuous," she murmured, smiling up into his half-lidded eyes as she pushed his fingers aside and stroked him gently through the thick denim. He groaned again, feeling his breath catch at the exquisite sensation of another's touch, where he had been starved of contact for so long. "Like a teenager," Freddy laughed silkily as she continued to caress and trace his hardening shape though the fabric. "I expect more from you than a teenager's effort," she added softly as Greg closed his eyes and forced himself into stillness in case she took her hand away. He never wanted her to stop doing what she was doing right now ... it felt so ... so ... Allowing his head to hang back from his shoulders, he groaned again, pressing himself against her and breathing gustily.

But if she didn't stop, Greg knew the results would be precisely those of a teenager's and he moved her away as he leaned down to capture her mouth again with a kiss that sparked their growing passion into a sudden blaze. Without thought, he lifted her again in his arms and reached to lay her across the unrumpled sea of dark blue linen on his bed, before crawling over to lie beside her. Even now, Greg was very aware that Freddy's leg might still be uncomfortable and the last thing he wanted to do was cause her discomfort or, god forbid, actual pain.

"I'm not a china doll," she whispered, half-smiling. "Nor are you the first man I've ever been with, so will you please stop hesitating and ..." Again, her words were lost as Greg swooped down to kiss her breath away, his hands roaming confidently over her blouse, his fingers peeling the material away until he could press his face into the utter softness of her body. With far less reluctance than before, he helped Freddy off with the rest of her clothes, just as she teased him with her touch and her mouth and her gentle laughter. Every time she touched him, sudden stabs of pleasure made him weak and panting for his next breath. Grasping both her hands and holding them away from his body, Greg used his larger frame to hold her still as he began kissing her mouth and throat and ears as he had wanted to do for months. In moments, Freddy's groans and murmuring grew louder than his and Greg smiled; he hadn't lost his touch. Finally, they were both naked and the once pristine bed now creased and tumbled.

"How are we going to do this so it doesn't hurt your leg?" Greg gasped as she nibbled the back of his neck.
"Let me show you," Freddy slithered around to his chest, her skin scorched with desire and fervour. Greg had always fancied himself a quick learner. He grinned and followed her lead, though still faintly hesitating as part of his weight rested on her body.

"Greg, I don't need you to worry about me," Freddy's words were edged with frustration as she smacked his shoulder in annoyance.

"Call me Chief Inspector," Greg held her hands aside as he nuzzled under her ear. "And remember, I have handcuffs."

###

It was late when Gwendoline finally returned from her afternoon with Mr Lewis, the chill air leaving a rosy glow on her face. The Pimlico house seemed overly quiet as she walked through the as-yet unfinished ground floor, admiring the craft and the quality of the finished work. Reaching the kitchen without hearing either her daughter or Greg, she paused in the kitchen, debating whether to make herself some tea. They had to be somewhere as the front door was unlocked, which suggested they were either down in Freddy's lab, on the top floor or in Greg's apartment. Since she was already in the kitchen Gwendoline shouted up the stairs. "Anyone at home?"

"Up here," Greg's voice was clear though not overly loud.

Reaching the top of the staircase, Gwendoline hesitated, opting to head in the direction of the kitchen. It was the obvious place for them to be and, sure enough, both Greg and her eldest child were there, sitting either side of Greg's new kitchen table, drinking mugs of steaming tea. Greg, she noticed, was casually draped in an ancient blue dressing gown and slippers, while Freddy appeared to be wearing one of Greg's shirts and very little else. They were smiling at each other like a pair of lunatics.

The enormous feeling of relief and delight that flooded through Gwendoline's elderly veins put a smile on her own face as she immediately turned to locate a third mug and the teapot. "I hope there's some left," she murmured. There was still no sound and she turned to see the pair of them still mesmerised by each other's gaze.

"Oh for goodness sake," she sighed, completely abandoning the idea of tea, instead heading back towards the staircase to the other kitchen below. At least she could drink her own brew down here without embarrassing either of the lovebirds with the entirely ecstatic beam that was already making her cheeks ache. *Finally.* Her throat tightened and her eyes misted over. *Finally.*

Neither of them noticed they were alone once more, their gaze hardly shifting from the sight of each other's face or eyes or mouth or hands. When one smiled, the other blushed, looked shyly fond and smiled back.

"I've been waiting to ask you ..." Greg glanced down at his mug. "Now seems to be a good time," he looked back up, his eyes shining and dark in the hanging kitchen lights.

Before he was able to say another word, Freddy laid her hand across his. "Will you marry me?" her eyes as wide and glittering as his. "I've been wanting to ask you for ages but you were so bloody determined to wait until the house was finished."

"I'm glad I waited," Greg slid his other hand across the table to caress her fingertips. "And there's no chance of you getting rid of me now," he smiled gently, then grinned. "Of course I want to marry you."
Freddy wove her fingers through his as Greg grasped her hand. "I warn you now," she sighed, shaking her head knowingly. "Mummy is going to have half the County expecting invitations to the wedding."

"Do you want a white dress and fifteen bridesmaids?" Greg was so suffused with exhilaration that he'd probably agree to anything right now. Wedding on the Moon? No problem.

"Not in the least," Freddy shook her head and wrinkled her nose. "I'd much prefer a country church with just family and perhaps one or two friends. There's a nice little one not far from Mummy's house, in Harrow, Saint Mary's. Church of England, of course."

"Would you like to get married there?" Greg turned her hand over so he could stroke the palm with his thumb. "When the flowers are blooming and the skies are blue?"

"I would, but what about you?" Freddy reached over to hold his fingers in both her hands, a thoughtful expression on her face. "You've already done the wedding thing all before; the very last thing I'd want is to have you feel even remotely uncomfortable."

Greg just smiled. At this rate they'd both be in their dotage before they'd made a decision. He had an idea and again, his smile turned into a grin. "Why don't we ..." he tasted the idea slowly, "ask your mother if she'd like to arrange it?"
April and May

Gwendoline stood in the nave of the small church, the index finger of one hand lightly tapping her cheek, the other hand holding the elbow of the upraised arm. Inhaling slowly, she scanned the open expanse of empty pews standing on worn grey flagstones. Though it was unseasonably warm for late April, inside, it was cool and restful. There was a faint hint of Mr Sheen lemon wood polish and of the early David Austin roses in a large brass urn on the altar. Pursing her lips slightly, she shook her head as she turned to face the man standing beside her.

"No, I'm sorry, Vicar, but it simply won't do. I shall want to organise the flowers throughout the entire church and have the final say on the overall decorative theme, I'm afraid," her eyes scanned the several perceptibly bare locations simply begging for a floral display. "I don't doubt your usual arrangement with the local ladies is perfectly acceptable for your standard services," Gwendoline added, turning to face the Very Reverend, Mr Thomas Polglaze. "However, my family has not only lived in the area for a very long time, but we also have a certain responsibility to maintain the family ah, distinction, as it were," she smiled kindly, for the vicar was usually a pleasant and accommodating man. "If you recall, my husband's family did endow the church with a new Chancel roof."

"In seventeen-eighty-nine, yes, Mrs Kerr, indeed," Reverend Polglaze knew the Kerr family of old, having christened all three of the Kerr sisters and interred the late Mr Kerr following his early demise. He smiled accommodatingly, for despite her being marginally snobbish, the woman was indefatigable in her support for the local community and he had no wish to ruin a perfectly good lunch with indigestion brought on by arguing. "Though normally, Mrs Penders and her roster of helpers are the ones who plan and orchestrate the flowers for all our weddings," "And no doubt they produce an attractive presentation," Gwendoline smiled agreeably and nodded, her eyes avoiding the glaringly empty spaces. "But the occasion of my eldest daughter's nuptials is not what I would consider simply a 'wedding'," she continued. "Frederica is the eldest scion of our family and the 'usual' arrangements will be ... insufficient, I'm sure you understand. I will be looking for pageant rather than predictable."

Tom Polglaze had been the Vicar of St Mary's for a great many years and he knew when it was better to give in with grace rather than battle to the death over something as minor as this. He'd have to find a tactful way of breaking the news to Mrs Penders and her floral acolytes which, no doubt, would deliver him a significant amount of hurt reproach from certain quarters. However, if the wedding was going to be as prominent an affair as Mrs Kerr was implying, there might well be others who would consider the church for their own ceremonies. It was the way of the world these days to Instagram everything, and a smart and well-attended wedding would do the parish no harm whatsoever. By and large, though St Mary's was a well-liked house of worship and in reasonably good repair, even the smallest of improvements cost exorbitant amounts these days; a few substantial weddings would do wonders for the church funds. And besides, what harm did it do to let Gwendoline Kerr have her moment of glory?

"I understand entirely, Mrs Kerr," Reverend Polglaze nodded. "I also understand that you have taken it upon yourself to organise the whole ceremony?"

"My daughter is still recovering from a serious injury to her leg and her fiancé is a senior Chief Inspector of Detectives in the Metropolitan police," Gwendoline shrugged depreciatingly. "And both of them, as well as managing their work and various other responsibilities, are also in the final stages of completely refurbishing an old family property in town," sighing again, Gwendoline offered up
another forbearing smile. "One does what one can, Vicar," she said. "To help the young ones along."

"As do we all, Mrs Kerr, as do we all."

###

Even though she couldn't run terribly quickly, her leg grew stronger with each passing week. There would always be a fine longitudinally scar running down her knee, as well as several patches of pinker skin on her calf, but other than that, her muscles had recovered well, as had her balance. Which was all to the good considering that Greg had only given her a ten-second head start.

Muffling a giggle, Freddy scooted as quickly as she could down a long avenue of young trees, jinking left and then left again, finding herself facing a long arbour of hanging vines curtaining off a wide vista of shade-loving plants. Darting inside the draped creepers, she trotted down to the farthest, darkest part of the shaded overhang and looked for a place to hide. Finding a small, somewhat damp niche in the most shadowy corner, she ducked behind a tall variegated Hosta and tried to calm her breathing.

In only seconds it seemed, there was the faint crunch of feet on the long gravelled path outside. Slowly, the footsteps came closer, pausing, moving again, another pause. Freddy held the sleeve of her jacket across her mouth to forestall any emergent laughter. The footsteps seemed to fade for a few seconds before returning even more loudly. Holding her breath now for fear of giving the game away, she dared not peek out from behind the big leafy plant ...

"AHA! Gotcha!" Greg pulled the plant to one side, stepping into the dark niche and wrapped his arms around her. "I have you now, my proud beauty," he grinned, burying his face in the warmth of her neck where he nibbled and tickled in precisely the way he knew drove her insane. "You owe me a forfeit, I think, for being such an easy catch," he continued playfully, raising his head to look around. At this time of the day, the garden centre was virtually empty. "What say you and I do the unspeakable right here among the lilies?" He lowered his mouth to hers, kissing her with a passion that still surprised them both, his hands roaming down to her bottom which he grasped with theatrical enthusiasm.

"They're Hostas not lilies," Freddy struggled partly free, her face flushed and laughing. "And I hardly think it would do a Metropolitan Chief Inspector's reputation any good to be caught in flagrante delicto among the herbaceous perennials, do you?"

"Haven't you heard?" he asked, leaning down to capture her lips again, kissing her breathless. "I'm the golden boy right now; I could bugger a Bishop on Tower Bridge and get let off with a reprimand," he added, pressing her deeper into the shadows, his teasing suggestion suddenly a tantalising possibility as Freddy yielded utterly in his arms, her smaller body blazing heat against him. The fingers of his hand moved to the belt of her jeans as she murmured incoherently within his embrace.

They both froze at the sound of multiple footsteps crunching on the gravel path beyond their shady nook. Waiting, arms wrapped around one another for what felt like an age, by the time the footsteps eventually faded into the distance, the heat between them had cooled somewhat. "Later, then," Freddy pulled Greg's head down to her level where she took her time kissing him the way she liked. That it always seemed to make his knees go weak only added to the deliciousness of it all. "We can have a dramatic re-enactment of the crime scene."

"You are a wicked woman and will lead me astray," Greg pressed his lips to the palm of her hand, his eyes dark and full of feeling.
"I was innocence itself until you seduced me into that big bed of yours," Freddy glanced up at him, her eyelids lowered, the palm of her hand warm against the front of his chinos. There was a small but definite movement from within. "Such a pushover," she sniggered.

"I'll give you pushover," Greg rumbled in her ear, pulling her gently out of the dark corner and tucking her hand in the crook of his arm. They'd come to one of the large plant nurseries off Wandsworth Common to start getting an idea of some of the costs the garden was going to land them with and so far, the news wasn't terribly cheering. Greg had broken the mood by attempting to hide himself among the Silver Birch which he argued, should have concealed him completely. That had led to twenty minutes of hide-and-seek down the long rows of Poplars and young Liquid Ambers, culminating in Freddy's near ravishment behind the unwitting Hosta.

Freddy had brought a list of the major shrubs, small trees, creepers and feature plants she wanted for her grand design. It was a large design and a long list. One look at the eighty-five pound tickets on the Japanese Maples and Greg's heart sank. Freddy's design called for twelve of the things, and that was just one of the types of small trees she'd listed in her neat handwriting. By the time they'd looked at the azaleas, the rhododendrons and various types of gardenia and camellia, the vague number in his head rolled over into the high thousands. Given they had yet to even begin fitting out the top floor flat of the Pimlico house, there was absolutely nothing in the remaining budget that could possibly cover a fraction of what Freddy's plan demanded. They'd both done the sums and this determination was not news to either of them, but it gnawed bitterly at Greg and he compressed him lips in unspoken frustration. Of all the things Freddy should have had, it would be her garden. He sighed. If they had to wait until they'd refurbished the top floor flat and sold it, she could use some of the money on the plants, but the great irony was they'd get a far better price for the top floor apartment if the garden was already in place, or at least begun, before they put it on the market. It was a conundrum and no mistake.

The rest of the house was now virtually complete. Everything from the repointed brick chimneys to the freshly limestone-tiled front steps was now ticked off the to-do list. There were a few minor decorating things they could finish off in time, but essentially, the basement lab, the grand ground floor and Greg's mid-level flat were as complete as their original plans had intended them to be. That all three levels had turned out to be far more roomy than first imagined had been something of a surprise and there were still a great many unfurnished and empty places, especially in the ground floor reception rooms. Freddy's kitchen was being well used, but she spent her nights in Greg's flat, so hadn't bothered thinking about furnishing her own rooms downstairs beyond the absolute basics. Both of them wanted to get the top floor done and sold and then they could get on with the wedding and the rest of their lives.

"I've had a thought," Greg poured Freddy a cup of tea in his kitchen after they returned from their exploration of the nursery, both slightly glum at the realisation of the financial situation, though Freddy did her damndest to conceal the fact. "Hear me out before you say anything," he added, sitting down opposite her at his kitchen table which had become a de facto campaign office for everyone. Lifting her eyebrows, Freddy sipped the hot tea and waited.

Taking a deep breath and puffing out his cheeks, Greg swallowed some tea and met her eyes across the table. "I think you should come and live in this apartment with me on a permanent basis and that we ask your mother to sell that freezing dump of hers in Harrow and move in to the ground floor apartment instead of you," he paused, scanning Freddy's expression for any reaction. "Both these flats of ours are huge, far too big for only one of us, so I thought," he shrugged. "Why not?" Laying his hands flat on the table top, Greg gazed at her. "That way, we can look after your mum as she gets older, plus we know she'll have a much better quality of living, plus she can be here if either of us needed, y'know, deliveries to be signed for, or anything," he paused again a little awkwardly. Freddy had made no sign or sound and Greg wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. He'd thought about
the idea for quite a while but it wasn't until he'd realised just how big each apartment was going to be that the suggestion had crystallised in his mind. "Though if you don't want to live so close to your mum, I'd kind of understand," he continued slowly, wondering if he'd just made the worst mistake of all time. "What do you think?"

Freddy put her cup down and lowered her eyes, obviously deep in thought. When she lifted them again, they were full of tears. Her mouth worked, as if she were about to say something, before she burst out weeping, covering her face with both hands.

Greg was immediately vexed with himself. Clearly it hadn't been the best of suggestions, especially at a time when so much else was going on. "Oh, hey now," he was around the table and on one knee as he slid his arms around the sobbing woman. "It was only an idea, it's not something we have to think about if you don't want to."

"Oh, Greg," Freddy wailed, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and pressing a damp cheek against his. "It's a brilliant idea and I'm sure Mummy would love it," she sat back, wiping her face with the back of one hand. "But are you positive you want the two of us so close?" she asked anxiously, her eyes searching his face. "You know what my mother can be like, and I'd hate for you to make a mistake, only to feel obligated to let her stay on, even though you wish you'd never ..."

"I fell in love with your mother the first time she caught me in her neighbour's house and threatened to do me severe damage," Greg laughed, hugging Freddy more tightly. "I couldn't be happier to have Gwennie here with us, as long as you're okay with the idea too," he added, leaning back to assess her expression. "Only if you're sure you can live with her downstairs."

"I've been so worried about her and was thrilled when she said she'd come to stay with me at the Dolphin ... I've been wondering what to do about her situation ever since," Freddy sniffed hard and heaved a short sigh. "It would solve so many problems to have her here, especially as she'd been so closely involved in getting the place done up," she smiled finally, her eyes still watery. "It would make her feel as if it were more her home," she smiled again. "It's a truly brilliant idea and I'd love Mummy to stay here with us if you're sure you want her to."

"I want your mum to be comfortable and safe and this seems a perfect way of making sure of it," Greg smoothed back a lock of dark hair. "Despite the fact she's an interfering old baggage, I really do like your mother."

"I'm certain she'll jump at the suggestion and it means she can bring all her favourite old pieces of furniture and still be right in the middle of town for all her old cronies to come and visit. It's a brilliant bit of thinking," Freddy blotted her eyes on the sleeve of her shirt. "I know she'll love the idea."

Gwendoline viewed the hot cup of tea, in the decent china for once, with some suspicion. Both her daughter and Greg had been wearing wide-eyed smiles since she'd returned from having her little chat with Reverend Polglaze. She'd been about to raise the topic of hymns and music, when she'd been ushered into the one furnished sitting room on the ground floor, directed gently towards an armchair and handed a cup of tea. Both Freddy and Greg chose to sit across the polished circular occasional table from her, holding hands. There was an odd air of smugness about the pair of them.

A vague prescience prickled at the nape of her neck ... Freddy couldn't possibly be ..? Feeling her heartbeat jump at the very idea of grand-motherhood, she resolved not to cross any bridges before reaching them. Taking a surreptitious deep breath, Gwendoline blew across the rim of her bone china teacup and waited to hear whatever was about to be said.
Sharing a glance, Greg squeezed Freddy's hand. "Gwennie, Freddy and I've been thinking about a variety of things and we've got a proposition of sorts to put to you. We're not in any rush for an answer and would just ask you to think about the idea for a while before you say anything, alright?"

Not pregnant, then. Gwendoline wasn't sure if she was relieved or disappointed. Taking a delicate sip of her tea, she smiled urbaneely and raised her eyebrows in inquiry.

"It's like this, Mummy," Freddy nibbled her bottom lip, a sign since her childhood of a search for the right way of phrasing a request. Narrowing her eyes fractionally, Gwendoline allowed her natural curiosity to step forward. Clearly both of them wanted her to do something for them but were unsure how to ask.

"If it's something to do with the wedding," she interjected, "then please don't hesitate to tell me if you've changed your minds about having me make the arrangements," she said, sipping her tea. "I shalln't be offended in the least."

Shaking her head, Freddy leaned forward. "This is more important than the wedding, Mummy," she paused, sharing a sideways look with Greg. "We want you to come and live here, with us. I'm virtually living in Greg's apartment already which is more than ample for the two of us and which means I have no real need to have this great big space down here," she spread her arms wide. "We've discussed the idea and we want you to consider selling the Harrow house and come to live here in the ground floor flat for as long as you want."

Replacing the cup gently in its saucer, Gwendoline glanced between the two earnest faces on the other side of the table. Judging by the faintly hopeful arch of their eyebrows, this was indeed a shared desire. Feeling a flush of heat rise at the thought that the both of them would be so concerned about her welfare that they'd even **consider** such an arrangement ... Gwendoline blinked several times as her eyes pricked with incipient tears and she retrieved her tea to mask her inability to swallow past the tightness of her throat. Taking a deep breath and then a second, she realised she couldn't possibly speak for fear of embarrassing herself.

Thinking Gwendoline's silence was one of reluctance, Greg smiled, leaning forward. "It's entirely up to you, you know," he offered quietly. "Neither of us want you to feel compelled to do anything you'd rather not," he shrugged a shoulder. "It's just that we all seem to get on so well together and I know that I'd certainly feel better knowing you're out of that antiquated and freezing cold box in Harrow ..." he paused. "At least have a think about it, hey?"

Regaining her composure, Gwendoline summoned up her vaunted **savoir faire** and put the cup down, linking her fingers together and clearing her throat. "I have no need for extensive thought on the matter," she said softly. "Is this something that the both of you would like, or is it just your sense of chivalry speaking, Gregory?"

Frowning a little, Greg shook his head. "It's got nothing to do with being chivalrous and everything to do with having someone I care about being able to live in a decent bit of housing," he said. "Of course, if you feel that moving here would interfere with your independence ..?"

"Of course not," Gwendoline sighed. "But you're going to be married soon and I doubt a mother-in-law is someone you need hanging around."

"We'd thought of keeping the back stairs as they are but perhaps putting a door at the bottom," Freddy sounded meditative. "That way, we'd be more like neighbours rather than living in the same house and that way, we'd all have our privacy. Don't forget we'll have our own main entrance through the garden door at the back of the house."
"My dear child," Gwendoline shook her head. "If you imagine at my time of life that I'd have the slightest concern about you waltzing through the ground floor to reach your own apartment, then think again," she paused. "I think your offer is incredibly generous in both a financial and a familial sense, and I thank you, but I have to think about this, I really do. When would you expect an answer from me on the matter?"

"It's not a time-limited thing, Gwennie," Greg sat back on the sofa, his arm sliding around Freddy's back. "The offer is there. If you want to come and live here, we'd both like that very much. You'd have free rein of the place and can chip in with the utility bills and rates if that would make you feel any better, though it's not going to be necessary as we plan to invest the money we get from the sale of the top flat and use the income from the investment to cover the everyday bills and general household outlay, which it will, as well as help towards getting the garden into shape. On top of that, I have my full income, and Freddy may be able to swing some research funding as well, so neither of us is going to be short of the ready, especially as we won't have any mortgage payments to make. You can have the place decorated to suit your own tastes and we can arrange for all your things to be brought here from Harrow, it's entirely up to you."

"This is from the both of us, Mummy," Freddy added before her mother could speak. "We wouldn't have asked you if we both didn't want this. It's completely your choice, of course," she added, standing. "We'll leave you in peace to have a think. Whatever decision you make, Greg and I will do our best to support you and see you comfortable."

Hand-in-hand they left the room, leaving Gwendoline with the late afternoon sunlight spreading its long, pale fingers across the floor. The older woman sat deep in thought until dusk was upon the room and her tea had long gone cold.

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The occasion of Alex Harper's trial at the Old Bailey arrived two days later. Though he'd attended uncounted trials as either a witness for the prosecution or, on a few memorable occasions, as a witness for the defence, Greg found himself more than usually agitated. He'd not seen Harper since the interrogation at the Yard before Christmas and had kept himself on the periphery of the prosecution preparation. He brought his BMW around to the painted and polished, and rather grand, front door to collect the Kerrs.

Both women were dressed sombrely as befitting the occasion. Greg was wearing one of his better suits. Freddy looked slightly pale, though she'd been entirely normal since she had woken, even to the extent of initiating their dawn-lit lovemaking. Gwendoline seemed calm, though there was a certain set to her mouth that she got whenever she was at odds with something. There was a definite mood in the air.

"It shouldn't be that bad," Greg tried to ease the tense atmosphere in the car. "We'll all be called at different times and asked a range of questions. All you need to do is speak honestly and simply, let the Briefs do the rest of the work."

As soon as he was able to swing into the allocated underground police section of the court car park, Greg realised he needn't have been worried. Both women left the car with their backs ramrod straight, their shoulders back and a calm expression on their faces. He smiled as they walked passed him to the entrance to the Crown Court. Freddy turned and smiled comfortingly at him. The interior of the ancient building was often intimidating for new visitors, but both the Kerrs walked along the cool mosaicked hallways as if they did it on a regular basis.

The trial itself was depressingly mundane. In addition to Alex's own recorded and witnessed confession, there was also the evidence of Billy Swithins and Michael Camer, Alex's enforcer.
Though the trial was for the Hatton Garden robberies and the drug distribution, Freddy and her mother were called to testify as to Harper's character and behaviour, the shooting incident figuring largely in the questions they faced. The several questions surrounding the actual events leading up to the actual shooting and the personal consequences of the event had Freddy turning paler than before, but she stood strong and her voice was firm and unavering.

Greg was called last. It was clear he'd be returning in the near future for Camer's own trial which would include the manslaughter of Roy Armstrong. The proceedings were slow and deliberate and it was late in the afternoon before the jury retired for their deliberations. Greg was about to take the women home when the Clerk of the Court stuck his head around the courtroom door.

"The jury is coming back," he said, before vanishing back inside. Greg paused, looking at the two women.

"Then we shall see this through to the end," Gwendoline took her daughter's hand and together, they walked back the way they'd just come, taking seats near the back of the chamber.

Greg knew that such a swift decision could only mean that the jury believed Harper entirely innocent or entirely guilty and it wasn't difficult to work out which it'd be. Shortly after everyone had returned and the jury was back in the jury box, the presiding judge took his seat. After that, it was really only a matter of process and procedure. Alex Harper was pronounced guilty on all charges which left Greg feeling darkly vindicated. Remanded back into custody to await sentencing, that was the end of Alex Harper's grand plan to claim the title of Earl of Apley.

It was heading into darkness by the time they switched on the lights of the Pimlico house. By unspoken mutual agreement, everyone headed into the lovely pale green kitchen at the end of the house. While Freddy filled the kettle, Gwendoline walked over to a tall cupboard and brought out an untouched bottle of cognac.

"Louise sent me this last year as a sample of the first cognac they've made at the vineyard," she said, breaking the bottle's seal and sniffing the cork. The aroma of rich sherry and vanilla filled the air. "I can't think of a better time than now to test its mettle. Shall we?" she poured three solid measures into plain brandy balloons.

"You okay, Gwennie?" Greg wondered if the stress of the shooting and the house and the wedding was taking an unseen toll on the older woman. Maybe they shouldn't have asked her to give them so much help, after all, she was in her seventies. He frowned at himself for not thinking of this earlier.

"Never better, my dear boy," Gwendoline swirled the dark gold in her glass several times before inhaling the warmed scent of the fortified wine. A smell of raisins and sweet resin filled the air around her and she smiled. This was going to be a very fine brandy when it had been allowed to age more than the two mandatory years. "In fact," she said, sipping and closing her eyes as the flavour and heat of the wine flooded her mouth, "I have some news for you."

Waiting until the tea had been poured, Gwendoline sat in her chair at the wide kitchen table, admiring the way the pendant lights reflected off the shining windows and the gleaming wooden floors. It was indeed a lovely place and she would be a fool not to recognise the fact.

"I've been thinking a great deal about your suggestion that I come here and live in this house with you both," she said, swirling and smelling the cognac again. "And I think it's actually a very good idea," she nodded, smiling as both Freddy and Greg grinned. "Though I'd need to feel that I was not in any way going to be a burden on you, and therefore, I have a counter proposal to offer."

Settling back in his own chair, and vastly relieved his concern was uncalled for, Greg's grin grew
wider as he sipped what was pretty decent brandy. He wondered what Freddy's mum had up her sleeve. Freddy hadn't touched either her tea or her glass and sat, tensed and thoughtful.

"I think living here is a very sensible idea," Gwendoline continued. "I've also been wondering what on earth I could give the pair of you as a wedding present, which is the moment I reached my decision," she smiled. "I will come and live on the ground floor of this beautiful and beautifully restored house, on one condition."

"Which is?" Freddy leaned forward. "Don't keep it a secret."

Smiling triumphantly, Gwendoline put her glass down. "That, after I've sold the Harrow house, you allow me to pay for the garden."

There was a breathless silence.

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THE END (of Part I)

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