Kinsale

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Summary

Mycroft is hustled off to Ireland in a semi-kidnapping, finding himself at a wedding where he knows only Anthea, who promptly abandons him to his own devices. Greg is travelling to see an old friend get married. Kinsale is where they first find their spark, but can they fan it into flames?

Notes

This is a long, slow burn, so get comfy, make a cuppa, settle in.
Kinsale is a real place, and I’ve done a reasonable amount of research into it. The landmarks are real, the weather is pretty close, and some of the businesses actually exist. Having said that, this is a work of fiction, and I have made up a lot of stuff (gasp!).
Extra tags will appear as needed.
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Chapter 1

Mycroft looked around at the hotel and sighed. Not a hotel, his brain corrected him, a ‘B & B’. Even the voice in his head used the distasteful tone he would have adopted had he uttered the words aloud.

Anthea had booked their accommodation and since it was at her insistence that he was here, he did not feel that he was in a position to object -that and the fact that there was literally not another room to be found in this whole town. The wedding was huge, he understood, and hundreds of people had descended on the town of Kinsale, Ireland to bear witness.

Kinsale was a tourist town, many of the businesses catering towards that industry, and it had been a stretch to find rooms for everyone in September as it was. Mycroft’s personal dislike of bed and breakfast establishments would be met with a complete lack of sympathy, he was sure. Nothing for it but to endure the next four days as best as possible, and leave as planned on Monday, hopefully with his mind still in one piece.

Why it was necessary for him to accompany Anthea for the whole of her trip, he did not know – she may be in the wedding party, but he was not, and his attendance at the rehearsal dinner was only a courtesy to him as her plus one. His nose wrinkled at the term – anyone could look at Anthea for five seconds and know she did not need an escort. Mycroft knew that she had asked him-slash-dragged him along to this because she thought he needed a break, and a social life, in that order.

He knew because she had told him so, while calmly handing him the plane ticket and details of their accommodation that very morning.

So despite his protestations, his driver had taken him home, given him a total of twenty minutes to pack (he’d done it in seven) and driven him to the private terminal at Heathrow, from which their chartered private plan would depart. Anthea had smoothly divested him of both of his phones and his laptop after the security screening, one look reminding him that she would monitor the Sherlock situation and that arguing would get him precisely nowhere.

Mycroft had sighed and accepted his lot – kidnapped and sent into exile in one of Dante’s circles of hell. He’d sat quietly through their short flight, into the car which picked them up at Cork airport, then the thirty minutes or so it took to drive to the little town of Kinsale.

The country was pretty enough, he allowed, though having to change his watch for their Daylight Savings irritated him no end. His watches were synchronised with the atomic clock in the National Physical Laboratory, as were all government employee’s, and for good reason – two second either way could mean somebody’s life. Mycroft had to grit his teeth and accept that, just this once, two seconds either way would not affect his, or anyone else’s, day.

Four days of nothing-too-important. Ghastly.

Now, having unpacked with the same efficiency with which he had packed, Mycroft sat on the bed, looking at his imprecise watch. It was 11.17am, approximately, he thought to himself. There were hours until he and Anthea had to be at the rehearsal dinner. She’d told him bluntly that she was not here to entertain him – he was to ‘find something to do’, and that was that.

Scowling, Mycroft flicked through the ‘Things to do County Cork’ plastic file that sat on the dresser. Restaurants, art, fishing tours, local walks…Mycroft perked up when he saw that there
were a number of historically significant sights within the town or within reasonable walking
distance. A 17th century fort, and several historical churches and buildings caught his eye.

His natural aptitude for politics had expanded over the years to an interest in history, particularly as
it related to Mother England and her Colonies, as he liked to think of any country that England had
held domain over, however briefly. He often took the time to explore when his schedule allowed it,
and County Cork, it appeared, had a few places that might be worth a look.

Mood slightly lifted by the idea of something vaguely interesting to do, Mycroft decided that he
should eat first, then familiarise himself with the town, as it was likely that he would be walking
home in the dark from the rehearsal today and the reception tomorrow night. He could look at the
opening hours of the churches while he was out. He hesitated before leaving his room – was his
usual work attire appropriate here?

Mycroft smoothed one long fingered hand down the front of his navy suit with the subtle pinstripe
– perfect for his job, but this was not work. When packing, he had focussed only on the small
section of his wardrobe dedicated to nonworking attire, then picked up the overnight bag he always
had ready, which contained personal effects as well as two clean suits with all the trimmings. He
was sure Anthea would have arranged to have his morning suit dry-cleaned for the wedding
proper, as it turned out she had.

Mycroft looked at himself in the mirror, critically analysing himself. Definitely too formal for this
seaside town, he thought. He’d look like Agatha Christie’s Hercules Poirot, stubbornly refusing to
change his suit despite the clear unsuitability of it. He sighed and started with his cufflinks,
removing his suit and hanging it carefully in the cupboard.

For a moment he stood in front of the still open door, the mirror emotionlessly reflecting the
middle aged man with the soft tummy, receding hairline and a tendency to freckle. Mycroft
frowned a little, eyes automatically drifting to the parts of himself he liked the least. Not that he
was ever really looking, per se, but he often wondered if he really had anything to offer someone.
He worked constantly, except when he was saving his brother from himself, then there was the
intellectual distance he so often felt, and now, as displayed in front of him, an unfortunate set of
genetic gifts.

Refusing to allow himself to dwell, Mycroft reached back into the wardrobe and withdrew the first
things he found – a pair of dark chinos, tighter fitting than he would have liked, but it was that new
tailor who had taken them in. A white shirt and fine, deep green, merino jumper also made their
way into his groping hands, and he pulled them on without thinking.

Looking again in the mirror, Mycroft searched for positives, determined to find something. The
colour was good, he finally decided, its depth complementing the irrefutably reddish tone of his
hair. Resisting the urge to add a tie, Mycroft slid on his shoes, grabbed his coat (they’d made him
leave his umbrella, ‘a potential weapon’ behind, which had contributed significantly to his quietly
offended air on the plane) and left the B & B. It was a good thing he had not brought his laptop, on
reflection, as their security was woefully lacking, he thought, leaving via the unlocked front door.

As he exited the small house, Mycroft paused for a moment. The air was hardly warm but it wasn’t
raining, which was always a plus in Ireland. Recalling the map of the town he had memorised as he
flicked through the ‘Things To Do’ folder, Mycroft turned right, heading into the town as he
draped his coat over his arm. There would be cafes and restaurants, no doubt, and he could locate
the venues for the rehearsal dinner (Dalton’s), ceremony (Saint Multose Catholic Church), and
reception (Hamlet’s of Kinsale).
As he walked, Mycroft reflected on how long it had actually been since he had just…walked. Apart from the convenience of the car at his disposal, London weather was more often miserable, and his work schedule generally kept him indoors during daylight hours, anyway. Needless to say, walking along a cobblestoned street in a seaside town in the middle of the day was not something Mycroft had a lot of experience with, especially when you considered the facts that he had no phone, no umbrella, and no destination.

He smiled to himself, and a small shot of satisfaction made its way through him. Perhaps Anthea had been right – a break might be a good thing, he allowed. There were enough people about to hamper any effort to move quickly, but Mycroft found himself patient, not fussed at the wandering tourists as they stopped without warning. He had nowhere to be, no meeting to plan, no egos to soothe in order to save a country from a nuclear winter.

He might as well enjoy the journey, Mycroft thought. What a novel idea.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Greg arrives in Kinsale.

Chapter Notes

A few people have asked - this is planned to be a very long, slow story. The planning was easy, but the writing has been a bit harder to wrangle, so I make no promises about how long it will take me to get to the end - only that I will definitely get there.

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“Bloody hell!”

Greg’s voice was louder than he intended, and he winced. With any luck the landlady wouldn’t have heard him. He’d left his accommodation to Fiona to arrange, and either there wasn’t a lot available or, true to form, she’d forgotten until the last minute. He’d put money on the latter.

The bed was huge, which was the only positive he could see in the overdecorated room. Someone had loved the ‘bunches of roses on a cream background’ theme, and had decorated accordingly. The bedspread and curtains were made in matching fabric; a number of flouncy looking pillows adorned the bed, which appeared to be wearing a skirt in the same design; and every possible surface had a lacy doily adorning it.

“Perfect for my grandmother, maybe.” Greg muttered.

He dumped his bag on the bed, then sat down, bouncing a bit. It was comfortable, he’d give it that. Investigating the two doors off one wall, he found the bathroom (rose pink ceramics and even more doilies) and a walk in wardrobe. With ruthless efficiency, Greg stripped the bed of the pillows, the decorative rose covered bed cover and most of the doilies and deposited them in a fairly neat pile on the floor of the cupboard. That was much better. He added the spare blanket to the bed and it seemed a much calmer space.

Not bothering to empty his bag, Greg withdrew the invitation and information from his shoulder bag and started reading, stretching his neck as he went. His commercial flight had been fine, but the bus here from the airport was tiny, the driver was somewhat erratic, and he’d disembarked with more kinks in his neck and shoulders than he’d started with.

According to the information, the rehearsal dinner was tonight at a restaurant called Dalton’s. Greg shook his head again, amused that he was even invited to the dinner. He had known Fiona a while, sure, but they’d never been super close; she’d helped him out a lot when their kids had been at school together, and he’d been a little surprised to even be invited to the wedding, let alone the smaller event that was the rehearsal dinner.

Fiona had explained that even if he didn’t realise it, Greg had made an impression on her sons in
particular, in a time when they did not have much of a father figure. This was both surprising and humbling to Greg, who had not realised the casual games of footy and ‘man to man’ talks with the preteenagers and then teenagers had made such an impact on their lives. He’d agreed to come to the wedding, of course, and was curious to see the boys that he’d not seen for the better part of seven years now.

His mind wandered back in time, thinking over that period of his life.

Celia had left him, of course, deciding she’d not wanted to be a mother after all. Greg had been terrible at juggling his new single fatherhood until Fiona had taken pity on him, teaching him all she knew about stretching a dollar and keeping a busy household running.

They’d had a roster for collecting all their combined kids for a while, feeding and helping with homework without discrimination until the kids could get themselves home from part time jobs and activities. Greg had still taken Fiona’s boys out to play footy once in a while, and talk about girls and cars and the two side of the law. They were good kids who didn’t really need it but he wasn’t taking any chances.

Fiona had been wonderful with his girls, too – the nail polish phase was a particular point of gratitude for him, and teaching him how to do braids. He grinned now, thinking about how much he and Fiona had needed each other. God, he’d forgotten all that. A rush of affection came over him for his old friend. This would be a good weekend, he decided.

Energised, Greg looked at his watch. It was late afternoon, now, probably only really time for him to change and walk around a bit to find the places he needed – church, reception venue, tonight’s restaurant. He figured there would be a bit of drunken stumbling on at least two nights, so he should try and get himself at least a little bit familiar with the route. After all, it wasn’t like there was anyone to walk home with him.

Feeling himself slipping a little back into the melancholy, Greg stopped. This would be a good weekend, he told himself firmly, and who knew, he might actually meet someone. As he changed out of his jeans into the first of the two suits he’d packed, Greg reflected on his recent forays into the dating world. With his girls grown and gone, he’d decided it was time to try and ‘get back out there’ as his mother had quipped on more than one occasion. While Greg agreed, what she didn’t know was that he was dating men at the moment.

Everyone assumed that as he’d married a woman, Greg was heterosexual, but that wasn’t strictly true. Wasn’t true at all, actually. He’d dated men and women throughout his early life, until the unexpected pregnancy with Celia had made him do the right thing and marry her.

It had turned out to be a disaster, really, the only good thing being his two daughters and a lack of custody battles with his completely uninterested ex-wife. He’d still been attracted to men, though, and now that he was free from the guilt and embarrassment of dating while his girls were at home, Greg felt himself more drawn to men than women.

His dates had ranged from nice but no chemistry to disasters. He’d had a few shags with one nice guy, but they both knew it wasn’t going anywhere. As it stood, Greg was free and determined to be happy about it. He’d been discouraged for a while, wondering if he could really find anyone that was interested in a prematurely grey, workaholic with two grown daughters and more scars than your usual man on the street. That Black Dog was a beast he had learned to beat off early, though, lest he come to stay, and Greg had immediately started a course of almost aggressive pep talking. He was a silver fox, a career minded, responsible father who had put his body on the line for others. That sounded much more impressive, he thought. Now to find someone who buys it.
Greg looked at himself now in the mirror. His suit wasn’t bad, it was the best he owned, actually; for the wedding itself he’d hired a morning suit from a place Sherlock had suggested. He knew the suit he wore now was different from what he usually wore – another Sherlock recommendation, this time for a more flattering cut, one that made him appear more elegant, Sherlock had said without a hint of embarrassment. Greg had blushed anyway, and resolved to keep the ‘elegant’ suit for best.

Despite the increased paperwork in his job, Greg prioritised his morning run, getting out of bed at unearthly hours some days to plod around the park. He knew he was getting slower, but it kept the middle age spread more or less at bay. He’d has his hair cut, too, and the little product he used made the silver spikes stand tall, glowing silver against his olive skin. This was as good as it was going to get, he thought, not too bad at all. He always tried to end on a positive note at the moment, as part of the Anti-Black Dog Effort; he capitalised the title in his mind to lend it importance.

Ah the things we do, Greg thought, donning his coat. He hesitated, then added gloves and a scarf to his pocket. He had no idea how cold it might be later.

Wandering outside, Greg stretched, enjoying the freedom of movement after his cramped travel. He oriented himself, turning left and heading into town in search of his first target – Saint Multose Catholic Church. As he wandered through the streets, a small smile came over him. It had been many years since he’d visited a town like this; he remembered little children’s chatter, excited to see the boats in the marina; ice-cream melting down little wrists and arms; feeding chips to the seagulls. A father’s memories, he thought fondly.

The cobblestones and brightly coloured shopfronts were distinctive, though, and he was sure he had never been here in particular. Greg concentrated for a bit, making several turns until he reached the Church. It was plain and imposing, a tall bell tower rising up from its squat form. Greg found the sign that read ‘Saint Multose’.

Satisfied, Greg checked his sense of direction and his watch. He hesitated. There was not time to head to both the dinner and the reception venue; clearly the dinner won out, and he pulled his map out of his pocket, finding himself at the church, then tracing his route to the restaurant.

“You look like a tourist with that map out, Detective Inspector.”

Greg jumped at the sound of the familiar voice. He’d been concentrating too hard to hear Mycroft Holmes approach him, and now, here he was, standing before Greg.

“Mycroft!” he blurted. Greg blinked, his body somehow frozen. “What are you doing here?”

Mycroft allowed a small polite smile. “The same as you and half the visitors to this town, I suspect. The wedding of Mister Mark Edwards to Ms. Fiona Clarke.”

Greg stared at Mycroft. “You know Fiona?” He asked, surprised.

Mycroft shook his head, no. “I have not had the pleasure. I am here...accompanying Anthea.” Mycroft’s voice paused as he settled on the right description of his role in Kinsale.

Greg’s eyebrows rose. “Can I suggest that she came up with this plan?”

Mycroft nodded, lips tightening.

With a grin, Greg added, “Can I suggest that you found out about this plan about….three hours before your flight?”

“Ooh, how fancy.” Greg poked gentle fun at Mycroft, who rolled his eyes with impatience, though Greg thought he saw his lip twitch.

“I had nothing to do with it, of course.”

“Of course, Mycroft.” Greg frowned a little. “I’m here a day early for the rehearsal dinner tonight – are you…?” he let his sentence trail off, though the meaning was clear.

“Yes, Anthea is an old school friend of the bride, so we have been invited to this evening’s dinner.”

“But you’re not entirely comfortable with that.” Greg said, hearing the slight tone of disapproval in his voice.

Mycroft hesitated. “I had planned to change before the evening’s meal. I’m not dressed as I should be for this event.” Greg looked down for the first time, taking in what Mycroft was wearing. It wasn’t a suit, it was…tempting. He swallowed. The colour of his jumper was exactly right, and those pants were definitely tailored much slimmer than his usual suits. That jumper really was made for him, Greg’s eyes tracing it as it cling to the slim figure in front of him. He looked more approachable, if not relaxed, and it suited him. Greg had never noticed until now how attractive Mycroft Holmes really was.

“Where’s your umbrella?” he asked, noticing its absence.

Mycroft scowled. “It was considered a weapon and confiscated at the airport.”

Greg grinned. “I bet that went down well. Look, don’t worry about getting changed, you look great.” Greg’s compliment was sincere, but he still blushed at such a forthright comment. He’d barely ever talked to Mycroft except about work or Sherlock, and here he was complimenting his appearance? While he was wearing chinos, for God’s sake. To his astonishment, the tips of Mycroft’s ears had turned faintly pink, betraying his own surprised pleasure at the comment. Greg wondered how often he received genuine compliments, and decided it was not very often, if this speechless awkwardness was his reaction.

“I mean, you can if you’d like, don’t let me stop you.” Greg added.

Mycroft looked at Greg then shook his head. “It is too far, you’re right, I will have to apologise for my lack of formality.”

Greg grinned at him. “She’s getting married tomorrow, she will neither notice nor care what you’re wearing, Mycroft.” He glanced at his watch. “Come on, we should get moving. I’ve figured out where we need to go, I think.” He pointed down one road, but Mycroft shook his head.

“That road is shorter but passes a lot of cafes – the foot traffic is heavier and will impede our progress. Let’s go this way.” He put one hand to Greg’s back without thinking, guiding him in the perpendicular direction. Greg started at the contact, and Mycroft immediately dropped his hand.

“That road is shorter but passes a lot of cafes – the foot traffic is heavier and will impede our progress. Let’s go this way.” He put one hand to Greg’s back without thinking, guiding him in the perpendicular direction. Greg started at the contact, and Mycroft immediately dropped his hand.

“Err, to answer your earlier question,” Mycroft began, hating the non-speech sound at the start of his utterance, “No, I do not believe I am a necessary addition to this dinner. I have met neither the bride nor the groom, I don’t see how I can add to the experience for either of them.”

Greg looked sideways at Mycroft. “Perhaps you’ll be asked to speak or something.” He suggested, struggling to keep the mirth from his voice. He was teasing, of course, but he wondered if Mycroft would think it was too familiar.
Mycroft stared at him doubtfully. “I beg your pardon?” He asked, and Greg chuckled.

“I was kidding. You’re right, you’re probably invited because you’re Anthea’s date, and it’s polite thing to do.”

“I am not her date. She will know several of the other guests, not to mention the bride herself, so I will have no function.”

Greg squinted as they walked along a cobblestoned street. He had no idea where they were now, he was just walking wherever Mycroft led. The man probably had a map of the town in his head. “Well, I’m sure Fiona will be too busy to spend more than a few minutes with me, and you’ll be the only person I know, so perhaps you could keep me company.” Greg felt a little silly saying ‘keep me company,’ but considering he’d almost said, ‘perhaps you could be my date instead,’ he was chalking this up as a win. Mycroft had stopped, Greg realised several steps on, and he stopped too, turning to look at him.

“What?” Greg asked. Mycroft was looking at him consideringly, as though weighing him for something.

“Certainly, I will converse with you, Detective Inspector.”

Greg snorted. “I think we’ve ventured past that point, Mycroft. My name is Greg.”

“Gregory, then.”

“Close enough.” Greg grinned at Mycroft, who looked sideways at him before allowing a small answering smile to cross his face. It struck Greg how attractive Mycroft was when he smiled. His whole face relaxed and he looked less apprehensive, Greg thought. A pity he didn’t do it more often. The thought did occur to Greg that his perception of Mycroft had changed substantially in the last twenty minutes as they had wandered through the town, but he dismissed it. He was going to have a good time, and if Mycroft was prepared to relax a little, they might just have a good night’s conversation.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

The rehearsal dinner proves better than either thought it might be.

Chapter Notes

Okay, after a slow start at this story I've got myself together and scored an awesome beta who will keep me on track and in character. So there will be regular 'thanks Kara!' bits as we go.

Thanks, Kara.

They’d reached the restaurant in good time, Mycroft thought, and he was relieved as they entered to see a range of formality amongst the guests – some were even wearing jeans. Greg was probably right, it was unlikely that Fiona would even notice him, with her wedding scheduled for less than 24 hours’ time.

The conversation during their walk had flowed easily, Mycroft had been surprised to find, possibly due to his own relaxed state. He’d enjoyed wandering around the town, and hailing him had seemed to be the natural thing to do when he had recognised the Detective Inspector across the way.

Mycroft had noted the appreciative look, and the compliment only added to his embarrassment, tipping him past his point of control. His ears had burned, and he was sure it had not gone unnoticed. The jacket Greg wore had hidden the cut of his suit, though a tempting glimpse of charcoal had been visible, contrasting with the olive skin at his open collar. Mycroft had been surprised at his own reaction –he’d thought of the Detective Inspector as an attractive man for a long time, but never had his eyes wandered so freely without his permission, leading his thoughts further afield than they’d dared before.

He’d almost shaken his head at the idea, trying to concentrate on navigating through the streets rather than the undercurrent of flirtation in their conversation.

Before they entered the restaurant proper, a waiter appeared to take their coats. Mycroft’s jacket was folded neatly over his arm, and he turned to take Greg’s, passing it across.

The sight which met him made him stop short. He was immensely grateful that Greg was scanning the faces in the room, for there was no stopping his eyes as they worked their way down and up the new suit. Sherlock had had a hand in this, Mycroft recognised the work of his preferred tailor immediately; regardless, it was a significant improvement on the rumpled, off the rack suits that were the DI’s usual attire.

This suit was far more modern in its cut; it emphasised the broad shoulders and trim waist that had been largely hidden under the fairly shapeless work suits. The colour was perfect, a silver grey two
shades darker than his hair, and the white shirt he’d spotted earlier was the ideal foil. Mycroft swallowed hard. It would take all his considerable self-control to restrain himself tonight. A small voice, not often heard and rarely heeded, offered the idea that Greg, by way of his own surveillance and flirting might actually welcome any personal advances; as usual, Mycroft ignored such nonsense.

If he was interested, Gregory would surely be clear, Mycroft thought. There would be no risks taken on that front this evening.

His reverie was interrupted by a firm hand on his lower back, unconsciously mirroring Mycroft’s action from earlier. He’d evidently spotted Fiona and was steering Mycroft towards a radiant blonde.

As Mycroft surveyed the room automatically, his eyes connected with Anthea, who was wearing an expression that said, ‘I saw that, Mycroft Holmes, and I know what it means.’

He frowned at her and she winked in reply before turning back to the woman to whom she was speaking. Mycroft was not able to think on it any further as Greg introduced him to the blonde, Fiona, who kissed his cheek in greeting.

“I’ve heard, well, nothing about you, actually.” She said in a way that told Mycroft she was either very drunk or one of those nauseatingly sunny people who can tell you the worst news with a smile.

“That’s probably in the best interest of Anthea’s continued employment, I’m afraid.” Mycroft replied, and Greg chuckled, sending a spiral of warmth bubbling through Mycroft. He had triggered that delightful noise, and his immediate reaction was to do something to make it happen again. “Congratulations on your forthcoming marriage,” he said instead, his courage failing him.

Fiona thanked him, beamed at Greg and then left them both to take her seat at the bidding of the head waiter. As she left, she threw over her shoulder, “No assigned seats tonight, why don’t you find seats together?” before winking at Greg.

Mycroft had cringed at the clumsy attempt to push them together, though the idea of sitting with people he didn’t know and essentially working – making small talk and pretending to be interested – was incredibly depressing. He turned, expression deliberately bland, and raised his eyebrows. “Shall we see if there are seats at Anthea’s table?”

Greg looked relieved, Mycroft was glad to see – he’d forgotten for a moment that the Detective Inspector knew nobody and probably didn’t want to make small talk either. They moved together in the general direction of Anthea, though Greg swerved at the last minute, snagging two chairs at a table in the corner of the room. Mycroft frowned at the sudden change.

Pulling out Mycroft’s chair, Greg waited for him to seat himself before murmuring in his ear, “we can see the room from here, nobody can approach us blind, and all the other people at this table are already quite drunk so we don’t have to make small talk.” Looking around, Mycroft saw that Greg was right – these were perfect seats for two men so conscious of their strategic position in a room of strangers.

“You determined that quite quickly,” Mycroft noted, raising a hand to a passing drinks waiter. He took two glasses of champagne, the only drink on offer, it seemed, and passed one to Greg.

The silver head bobbed as he shrugged, answering, “Happens automatically now, I guess. This is okay with you, right? I mean, we could move…” he trailed off as Mycroft shook his head
“An excellent decision, Gregory,” he said, lifting his glass. Their eyes met at the same time as the glasses, and it seemed an oddly intimate gesture, especially at a wedding dinner. Greg lifted his eyebrows, then broke the gaze to glance around the room, and Mycroft wondered if his heart was also beating a little faster after that moment. He sipped at the champagne, allowing the small amount of alcohol to relax him.

“So,” Greg said, pushing his chair out a little so he could turn towards Mycroft. “Who do you think will end up regretting this evening?” the sparkle in his eyes was adorable, Mycroft’s brain thought before he could catch the idea. He looked like a schoolboy about to indulge in a game that was not strictly above board.

Looking around the room, Mycroft nodded to a dark haired woman openly flirting with a tall blond. “She’s married, but her husband’s not here. Unfortunately for her, his husband is, and I suspect he’ll not be happy when he figures out Mr. Blond is bisexual.” He sighed theatrically. “I wonder who will get custody of their dogs?”

Greg’s laughter was magical, he thought absently, as the sound burst forth. The deductions were easy in comparison to his usual subjects; nobody here was trying too hard to hide anything.

The next couple of hours passed easily, champagne and dinner breaking up their game as Mycroft supplied deductions and Greg made up wild stories about the subject’s motives or personal lives to fit the facts Mycroft could see so plainly. Mycroft was aware of how insular they were; they must appear as thick as thieves, he thought, heads bowed together in the corner, giggling together and whispering as they looked around the room. Their chairs were side by side now, and apart from the studied lack of physical contact, he knew they appeared to be very close indeed.

The heady smell of Greg’s woody aftershave had enveloped him, its alluring scent making the champagne even more potent; Mycroft fervently hoped the smell would linger in his jumper. He wondered how Greg was interpreting their evening. Was this how friends, male friends with no romantic interest, behaved in this situation? He suspected not, having observed so many interactions over the years. His knowing that and Greg’s knowing that, however were different things. Perhaps Greg was the kind of man for whom this was an enjoyable passing of the time, and the idea that they might seem closer than friends had not crossed his mind. The unknown always irritated Mycroft, but he would not risk this new dynamic by pushing things.

Finally, a short speech of gratitude by the best man released them from their obligation – they were free to go and rest or otherwise prepare for the ceremony tomorrow. Both Greg and Mycroft had sat up during the speech, the magic that had surrounded and segregated them during the evening shattered with the more formal moment. The house lights turned up, the music ceased. It was as clear a ‘go home’ message as anyone needed, Mycroft thought wryly, watching the guests, in their various states of inebriation, blink in the bright lights. Scarves were found, new friends farewelled until the morrow.

“Don’t forget to check the table chart on your way out.” Anthea said, passing their table. The best man had said something about that, Mycroft recalled, though he’d been too busy ruing the loss of the comforting body heat to pay full attention. He glanced at Greg, who was fiddling with his mobile, frowning at the screen.

“Haven’t seen you checking yours tonight.” Greg commented, and they rose together, joining the crowd slowly collecting their jackets and coats from the coatroom.

Mycroft scowled. “Anthea confiscated it.” he admitted, directing the scowl at Greg when he
chuckled.

“You’re not having a great weekend so far, are you Mycroft?” he asked sympathetically.

Without thought, Mycroft replied, “I am, actually.” His face flushed as he realised how far he may have tipped his hand, but he gamely held the startled look Greg shot his way. A slow grin spread over the tanned features, though he said nothing. Side by side they approached the table chart. Mycroft searched for the ‘H’s and Greg the ‘L’s, identical frowns appearing as they spotted the amendments to their seating allocation.

“I’ve been moved.” They both said, each peering at the other’s name and the penned-in alteration to both entries. It became evident to Mycroft what had happened, and a glance at the visual display confirmed it.

“I suspect Anthea had a word to the bride on our behalf.” Mycroft said, his voice careful, though a slight tremor marred his efforts. When Greg frowned, Mycroft pointed a finger to the table they had now been allocated – in the corner of the room, away from the band and the kitchen. “We are now seated at the same table as we sat in tonight, essentially. I would bet my umbrella our seats are in the corner again.”

Greg nodded, then a smile tugged at his mouth. “You can’t bet your umbrella,” he pointed out, trying and failing to keep from giggling, “it’s still in London.” At the look of exasperation Mycroft shot him, the giggles became full blown laughter. He allowed Mycroft to steer him outside, Mycroft’s hand once again having found the small of his back.

For a long moment, Mycroft stood in the cold night air, waiting patiently as Greg composed himself. Finally the giggles gave way to a sigh which sounded suspiciously like contentment.

“So where are you staying, Mycroft?” Greg asked. “I’m at the Silverston.” He waved his hand in a vaguely south easterly direction. “It’s over that way. Kind of.”

“Anthea booked us rooms at the Shuttle Inn on the far side of Lower Road.” He cleared his throat. “I believe I passed your accommodation on my walk in. Shall we?” he indicated the close to empty street, and they started walking, careful on the cobblestones in the dark.

After the closeness of the dining room, the outside air was a welcome change, though it was cold, even after several glasses of champagne. Mycroft breathed deeply, not feeling the need to talk. Greg seemed content to just walk, and they matched stride, close enough that their shoulders bumped occasionally. Mycroft’s chest was full with emotion, a swirl of unfamiliar sensations. Contentment, excitement, wariness, anticipation, and nervousness all fought for their share of his attention.

Mycroft was not prone to flights of poetry, but he could imagine the new connection, tentative and fragile, like fine filaments of golden potential enveloping them both. Was Greg experiencing the same, or was it all in his head?
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Mycroft and Greg walk back to their respective accommodation...together.

The crisp night air was exactly what Greg needed to clear his head. He and Mycroft had seemed to exist in a bubble during most of their evening – a wonderful, golden bubble. But as he donned his jacket and scarf, he’d wondered if it would translate out into the real world. Sometimes these things didn’t - they had a brief half-life, and would naturally fizzle out of their own accord, and there was nothing to be done about it. If that was the case, so be it, but something in Greg told him it was not so. This would be the first test, though – without the obvious game to play, the people to talk about right there in front of them, would they be able to weave the same magic?

Not that this was a typical ‘where’s the toothpaste’ boring domestic moment, Greg thought. They were slightly buzzed, walking along a dark riverside road in an unfamiliar town, stars sprinkling the sky above. The chill in the air only added a layer of sensation, another thing for Greg’s mind to keep track of, when his scarf shifted and a section of skin was exposed to the air, or his breath was momentarily visible as he exhaled.

It was still a bit magical, he thought to himself, and wondered how much the champagne was affecting him. He’d had three glasses along with dinner, but the bubbles were not his usual choice. The warmth and, if he was honest with himself, the heady knowledge that he had Mycroft Holmes’ attention only made his head swim even more.

Greg glanced across at Mycroft as they made their way along the almost deserted road. Though the town was largely full of wedding guests this weekend, most of them would not arrive until tomorrow for the afternoon wedding, and the cold night made strolling around a less than enticing prospect.

The road split ahead of them, and Greg followed Mycroft’s silent lead, taking the right hand fork, which followed more closely the edge of the river. It was dark, and Greg took out his phone, using the torch to ensure he did not faceplant in gravel. He widened the beam and moved closer so that Mycroft could benefit from the weak light as well. Both men slowed down as the last of the streetlight behind them disappeared, leaving the torchlight as their only illumination save the stars.

“Thank you.” Mycroft murmured.

Greg’s response was to grin, then he realised Mycroft would not be able to see him. “You’re welcome,” he replied.

They were walking close again, as they had when they left the restaurant, shoulders brushing as their strides mismatched. Greg wondered what Mycroft was thinking about. Did he realise how exceptional their connection had been that evening? Mycroft didn’t seem to be the kind to have had a lot of romantic experience, but really, Greg had no idea how astute his companion was when it came to the kind of atmosphere they’d built around themselves. Mycroft could schmooze his way around a room on a professional level, that was not in question, but what about personal relationships? Greg knew there was no rush to make a move tonight.
A kaleidoscope of butterflies took flight when he thought about the hastily changed seating chart for the wedding. Clearly someone had noticed the two of them, thick as thieves in the corner. Fiona was probably too distracted so Greg was betting on Anthea. She was far more socially aware than Mycroft, and from the way she had summarily taken over his weekend, she’d clearly decided he was due some down time. Whatever the reasoning, Greg was both pleased and nervous about her interference. While he was looking forward to spending more time with Mycroft in this informal way, he wondered what they would talk about. Would Mycroft realise he was that tired, old man he’d first seen this afternoon and dismiss him?

With a start, Greg stopped himself, both figuratively and literally, his feet pausing on the dark road. He felt the Black Dog’s influence in the path his thoughts were taking him, and he pulled himself up. No use borrowing trouble, he told himself sternly. Just enjoy the walk, no expectations, and see how it goes. Worst case, you had a great time tonight. His opinion doesn’t define you, mate. Somehow, he couldn’t make this last bit ring quite true.

“Gregory?” Mycroft’s voice broke into his internal pep talk, and Greg turned to where Mycroft was standing. He’d stopped at the edge of the circle of light provided by Greg’s phone.

“Yeah, sorry,” he said, stepping forward to catch up. Looking around, he saw they were about to make a tight right turn around the blind end of the river. He started forward again, breaking the silence that had followed them almost from the restaurant now. “Just lost in thought.”

“Anything in particular?” Mycroft asked carefully.

Greg considered. “Wondering if it was Anthea who had our seats changed.” This was true enough. Mycroft gave a dry chuckle. “I believe it was.” He sighed, and Greg realised how much more difficult it was to tell his meaning without the facial cues Mycroft used so often. “Anthea had clearly decided that I need…something.”

He sounded frustrated, Greg registered. “Like what?” he ventured.

“I have no idea,” Mycroft answered.

Greg thought about this for a moment. “What do you think you need?” He would never have been so bold had they been sitting face to face, but the darkness bestowed a privacy that gave him courage.

Mycroft did not answer for a long time, and Greg wondered if he had overstepped his boundary. Just as he was about to apologise, Mycroft spoke. “Before I arrived I would have said nothing.”

Greg’s heart started thumping. Their passage had taken them to the far side of the river now, and the lights of the town were visible across the water, reflected like a carpet of stars to mirror the clear sky. The road now had intermittent street lights, and Greg turned off his torch to conserve the battery. Mycroft could have shifted across as they walked, putting a more socially acceptable distance between them, but he didn’t; this lack of action kept Greg’s heart rate elevated.

“Today,” Mycroft continued quietly, his voice sounding small in the still air, “has been surprising. Not unpleasant.” He sounded hesitant. “I haven’t had an evening such as this in a long time.” He paused. “Never, in fact.”

They were still walking slowly, neither looking at the other in the dim light, clinging to the shroud of darkness.
“It’s been memorable for me too,” Greg admitted, feeling instinctively that Mycroft needed reassurance against his fears. He risked a glance at the other man, who, it turned out, was risking a glance at him.

A quirk of Mycroft’s eyebrow sent Greg into a fit of laughter, breaking the tension and relaxing both of them. He saw the broad smile bloom across Mycroft’s face and felt lighter. It was awkward, of course, but he thought that they just might be on the same page here.

Mycroft’s steps slowed and he stopped. Greg looked questioningly at him, and he indicted the building behind him. “This is the Silverston, is it not?” Mycroft asked.

Greg looked up with a startled glance. He grimaced at the faux lacework and nodded. “Yep.” He turned his back on the gaudy front, looking across the water at the lights, where they had come from. Greg leaned on the stone wall that served as a fence, registering Mycroft doing the same beside him.

“What will you do tomorrow morning?” Mycroft asked.

“Sleep, probably.” Greg answered without thinking. He was tired after a long week and the less-than-comfortable trip down here.

“And will you stay long after the wedding?” Mycroft’s question sounded like polite small talk, but Greg wondered if there was another angle to it. This stolen glance went unnoticed, Mycroft directing his gaze across the water. He looked completely at ease to the casual viewer, but Greg thought he saw a tightness to the set of his shoulders that belied his interest in Greg’s answer.

“My flight home is the day after the wedding.” Greg answered. “I couldn’t get any more time off, but I’m hoping to get up to see the fort before I go.”

Mycroft turned to look at Greg, and even in the dim light his interested face was evident. “It should be fascinating. There are a number of historical sites in Kinsale that would be well worth the visit, I believe.”

Greg raised his eyebrows, grinning at Mycroft’s enthusiasm. “I’m thinking Anthea did her research when she kidnapped you to this place, Mycroft.”

Mycroft looked abashed, but Greg laid one hand on his arm, arresting the defensive turning of his body away from Greg’s. “No, I’m just teasing. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so enthusiastic about anything.” He smiled encouragingly, hoping like hell Mycroft would be able to see it in the dim light.

He must have seen something reassuring, because Greg felt Mycroft relax, then shiver in the cold. The wind off the water had been picking up, but Greg hadn’t noticed – his attention had largely been on Mycroft and trying to figure out this new dynamic between them. Without speaking, Greg stood and turned so he was standing in front of Mycroft, who still leaned against the stone wall. Mycroft’s focus shifted as Greg moved into his personal space. He tensed a little but didn’t move, trust evident in his stillness. Greg removed his scarf and leaned forward, tying it around Mycroft’s neck and tucking the tails into the front of his coat. His fingers brushed against the warm skin at the side of Mycroft’s neck, his cold fingers making Mycroft flinch.

“Sorry,” Greg murmured, realising how close they were now, their breath occupying the same space, creating one large cloud of condensation between two sets of parted lips. Greg’s hands finished their work, coming to rest on Mycroft’s chest. There were too many layers for him to detect Mycroft’s heartbeat or feel his body heat, but Greg felt the connection all the same.
“Not at all.” Mycroft replied. His eyes were wide as he looked at Greg, breath coming in little puffs.

Greg smiled. “Thanks for a great evening, Mycroft. Tomorrow should be fun. I’ll see you at the wedding.” He held Mycroft’s gaze for another beat before allowing his hands to slide down the slim chest and break their connection. Turning to walk away was more difficult than he thought it would be, but Greg made himself go without looking back. He fumbled for his key, letting himself in and closing the door behind him. Knowing Mycroft couldn’t see him in the darkened house, Greg turned to look out of the small window.

Mycroft slowly stood up, tucking the tails of the borrowed scarf more securely before he continued along the road towards his own accommodation. Had he lifted the scarf to his nose? Greg couldn’t tell. The scarf would certainly have borne his scent, though that was not in his mind when he draped it around Mycroft’s neck. He wondered if it would smell like Mycroft when it was returned? Or, his mind offered, perhaps it would be a combination, aftershaves mixing together to form their unique perfume…

Shaking his head against the images forming in his mind, Greg climbed the stairs to his bedroom. He threw himself down on the bed fully clothed, thinking about the hours since he had arrived in Kinsale.

What a turn of events. There was no way he could have ever predicted that at the end of the evening he would be thinking about Mycroft Holmes at all, let alone considering how their aftershaves would smell together on the scarf he’d lent the other man. The small indications that Mycroft was interested were clear to Greg, both as a trained detective and a man who had dated plenty in his younger years.

His mood was lifted, that was for sure, compared to how he felt earlier, giving himself pep talks against his own self-doubt. If nothing else, Greg knew the evidence of his own senses. A slideshow of moments slid past his closed eyes. Mycroft’s deep green jumper, hugging his torso so temptingly; his scowl at the admission about his umbrella; the change in his face when he smiled; the theatrical little sigh when making his first deduction for Greg’s amusement; the secret smiles they’d shared as they made up ridiculous stories about the other guests; his wide eyes when Greg stepped close and fixed the scarf at his throat.

Greg’s eyes opened and he groaned. There was no way he was going to sleep tonight.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

After the evening he's just had, Mycroft can't sleep.

Chapter Notes

All together now, "Thanks, Kara!"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mycroft sat, his brain feeling sluggish. He had not even turned on the lights as he entered his room, dropping in a daze onto the bed. He held the borrowed scarf, absently stroking the soft fabric.

Every time he tried to analyse the past few hours, his mind would be flooded with a memory – the timbre of a certain laugh, a precise shade of silver, fingers brushing against the thudding pulse of his neck. He breathed deeply, trying to dispel the barrage of memories. As Gregory's woody scent filled his nose, he cursed himself, flinging the scarf back onto his bed.

Perhaps the enjoyable afternoon stroll had made him more receptive to seeing Gregory, but Mycroft was still surprised that they had connected so solidly. He rarely saw anybody with desire, but the inherent lack of formality here had made him reassess his view. And what a view, a voice in his head reminded him. He was taken on a tour of the details he had noticed – the different shades of his hair, chocolate eyes, strong hands; the fit of his suit, which had been a surprise in itself. For all the complaining about paperwork, the Detective Inspector clearly still made time to keep himself fit, Mycroft could see.

It had been a long time since he had felt himself attracted to anyone, but the walk home from the dinner had been filled with the kind of tension that only ever happened when unspoken thoughts hung in the air. Even if he’d been blind enough not to notice, there was the moment that Gregory – Greg? – stepped close and wrapped his scarf around Mycroft’s neck. His scent had enveloped Mycroft, who had frozen, unsure of what to do.

He could feel his eyes widen, knew his breath was erratic, and for one terrifying moment he wondered if Gregory – Greg – had been about to kiss him. The agony of the moment was broken when strong hands slipped down and away from his chest, and his companion stepped away.

And now here Mycroft sat, knowing sleep would not come tonight. Restlessly, he stood and looked out of his window, staring across the water at the few lights still burning. He wondered what he could do to fill the hours until dawn. Without his laptop or mobile phone, work was out of the question.

He sighed, but as he turned away, a movement caught his eye. A figure was walking slowly up the road. A newly familiar figure, huddled against the cold for want of a scarf. For a long moment Mycroft stared, then spun, rummaged clumsily through his drawers for a moment and bolted, snaring his heavy coat as he did so. At the bottom of the stairs he stopped, pulling on gloves, coat
and scarf, shaking fingers making his task almost impossible. Giving up on his buttons for fear of not catching his target, Mycroft wrenched open the door and stepped out, making it onto the road, clouds of vapour issuing from his mouth. He turned, hoping the street light would illuminate him enough not to startle the other man.

The moving figure stopped quite close, and Mycroft realised he had no idea what to say. Wordlessly, he held up the borrowed scarf, and an answering grin made his thudding heart want to slow in relief and speed up in excitement at the same time. As the figure joined him in the warm spill of the street light, the gait and outline Mycroft had recognised resolved into Greg. Without pause, Mycroft returned the scarf, wrapping it snugly and tucking the ends into Greg’s coat as Greg had done for him.

“Couldn’t sleep either?” Greg asked, and Mycroft nodded, self-consciously buttoning his coat.

“Where are you headed?” Mycroft asked.

“There’s a fort,” Greg replied, indicating with a nod of his head. “Thought it might be a good walk, if we wanted a look up that way.”

“We?” Mycroft echoed.

Greg chuckled. “You didn’t add all those,” he nodded at the gloves, scarf and heavy coat Mycroft was wearing, “just to return my scarf.”

Mycroft cleared his throat. “That is true.”

Greg extended one gloved hand, and after a second’s hesitation, Mycroft took it in his own. They started off again, and Mycroft was pleased to notice that the atmosphere between them lacked the heavy weight of expectation of earlier – instead it was relaxed and easy.

“So you know much about the fort?” he asked, and Greg shook his head. Mycroft hesitated. “I did a little reading this afternoon. It’s quite fascinating.”

Greg waited, then squeezed Mycroft’s hand. “Go on, then, tell me about it.”

Mycroft started slowly, uncertain if Greg was humouring him or not. He was acutely aware of how enthusiastic he could get about things that other people found tedious.

After a few moments, Greg asked a question, then another, and Mycroft was pleasantly surprised to discover that not only was Greg interested in what he had to say, his interest in military history meant their conversation was a give and take on both sides. It actually wandered from Charles Fort specifically to the history of military campaigns across England and Ireland. Greg was a well informed and good natured conversationalist, and Mycroft found himself fascinated by his enthusiasm for the subject.

“I mean, it’s never going to work, is it, telling people they have to believe what you believe,” Greg finished, and Mycroft nodded in agreement. They fell into a comfortable silence, following the sign to the Fort as their path turned away from the river. Greg produced a torch, lighting their way now that the streetlights were no longer there. It was not long until they reached the entranceway to the fort.

“What now?” Mycroft couldn’t help but ask, as they stood on the short bridge across to the fort. A pair of stout doors blocked their way. He found himself fervently hoping that this was not the end of their adventure.
As this thought was crossing his mind, Mycroft felt Greg squeeze his hand, and he looked at him, face thrown into shadow by the edges of the torchlight. Greg leaned in, his breath warm on Mycroft’s ear. “Do you believe in magic?”

Mycroft pulled away and gave Greg a look of disbelief which was largely lost in the darkness. Despite this he heard an answering chuckle. Greg didn’t speak but pulled off one glove, stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled sharply. Immediately the double gates opened, and he turned to grin at Mycroft, who had jumped at the sudden sound. Mycroft stared at Greg in shock.

“Shall we?” Greg asked, offering his de-gloved hand to Mycroft. Slightly dazed, Mycroft grasped it, allowing himself to be pulled through the gates.

“How…” Mycroft asked, then stopped. Greg had pulled away, leaving him standing alone as he spoke in a low voice to a shadowy figure by the gates. Greg chuckled then turned back to Mycroft, a smug grin visible. He shrugged nonchalantly.

“My landlady heard me come in, and we talked. Her brother is the night guard here and she suggested I could come up here to clear my head. She called ahead, and so here I am. Well,” Greg reached again for Mycroft’s hand, “here we are.”

Mycroft shook his head. “This must be how people feel when I arrange things,” he murmured, and was rewarded with another of those delicious chuckles from Greg.

“Indeed,” Greg replied. After a beat, he added, “Tom said to call him some time before 5 and he’ll let us back out.” He paused again. “He also said, ‘you break it, you bought it’, which I think is his way of saying ‘be careful’.”

Mycroft found himself chuckling at that. He’d thought the earlier part of the night had been surreal, yet here he was, standing inside a fort in the middle of the night with Gregory Lestrade. He really would need to revisit his personal definition of reality after this.

“You don’t happen to have a map of this place in your head, do you?” Greg asked, turning his torch towards the gravel path ahead.

“As it happens, I did glance at the map earlier,” Mycroft replied, grateful for his eidetic memory. Calling up the image, he accepted the torch from Gregory, pointing it to their right. “That’s the reception building now, but it was a guard house.” He swung the torch ahead, where the beam disappeared into the darkness. “There’s a grassed field that way, then the magazine. It’s accessible from the road that winds around to the right, past the barrack stores and soldiers quarters.”

This time the answering chuckle was surprising, Mycroft not sure what he had done to elicit such a response.

“Was that…was something amusing?” He asked falteringly. Maybe he shouldn’t have been so sure of the layout. People didn’t like it when he was too knowledgeable, showed up thei-“oh!”

As his mind was winding up to berate him for whatever he’d done, Greg had moved closer, placed one hand against Mycroft’s scarf, and kissed him. His lips settling over Mycroft’s had instantly stilled the recriminations in his mind, the sensation of having Greg so close shutting down all higher thought processes. Soft lips, the slight roughness of stubble at the edges; that scent again, underlined with a note of something tantalizingly new. Just as Mycroft’s motor cortex came back on-line and he reached out to grab-touch-cling-hold, Greg drew away.

“I could feel you panicking from here, Mycroft,” Greg murmured, still standing close. He lifted
their joint hands and gently removed Mycroft’s glove before relacing their fingers.

The shock of cold air was nothing compared to the jolt of bare skin, and Mycroft felt the contact zing through his body. He tuned in as Greg started to speak again.

“You sound like you’ve live here all your life. It’s…good.” Greg reassured him, pressing his lips to the back of Mycroft’s knuckles. He pointed into the darkness to their right. “The soldiers’ quarters are that way, did you say?”

Mycroft relaxed as they walked carefully down the gravel slope. The moon was bright but the torch was quite useful as they stopped to read plaques and signs along the way. His lips were still tingling from Greg’s impromptu kiss, and his heart raced as he wondered if he was permitted to do the same. The small voice started up again, pointing out that Greg might only have been trying to stop him freaking out, but Mycroft squashed it firmly. He drew his attention back to the present. He was going to enjoy this evening, whatever else it brought. And if he was bold enough to…well, all the better.

They had stopped outside the magazine to read the plaque, the gravel shifting slightly underfoot. Mycroft could feel Greg concentrating on the text in front of them, his lips moving slightly as he read. Mycroft’s lips turned up in amusement. No, not amusement. He searched for the right term, before settling on affection. It was not a term he’d used very often, but the rush of warm feeling when he looked at Greg – who had somehow become Greg and not Gregory – made him sure that this was the case.

“What?” Greg asked now. Mycroft blinked. Greg was still facing the plaque, but his attention had shifted now, and he was sliding a sideways look at Mycroft.

“You move your lips when you read.” Mycroft blurted. He felt his face flush, warm against the cold air, then before he could talk himself out of it, he stepped forward and pressed his mouth to Greg’s. No other part of them was touching, save their hands, but Mycroft felt the sensation course into every part of him.

A hand clutched at his coat, tugging; simultaneously, he felt the lips under his move. The skid of slick lips made him groan – how did he not know how much he wanted this?

Greg’s fingers shook themselves loose from his, and Mycroft made to pull away from the kiss. The confusion only lasted a second, as the free hand now gripped the back of his head, holding him in the kiss, encouraging him to sink further into it. Mycroft obliged, his own free hand tentatively slipping under Greg’s scarf.

“Bloody hell!” The curse rent the air, making Mycroft jerk backwards, gasping. Wide eyes looked at Greg, who was still as a statue, his own eyes wide and locked on Mycroft.

“You hand is…really cold,” Greg offered weakly, and began to laugh. Mycroft, brain scrambled from the mess of input over the last minute, blinked once before relaxing into laughter alongside him.

Several moments passed before Mycroft pointed out, “You took my glove off, Greg,” then grinned at the faux scowl Greg gave him in response.

In accord once more, they continued walking out to the old parade ground. Greg now had the torch, and he took Mycroft’s hand again, sharing a smile and a squeeze as they renewed the contact which had so quickly become a habit.
Chapter End Notes

Now that I can do html links, here's what the Fort looks like: Fort
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The rest of their fort exploration.

Chapter Notes

Two chapters in two days! Gasp! Really, though, I wrote this as one long scene. It was never going to fit into one chapter, but I didn't want to lose the flow so here you are, the rest of their date.

Thank you to all who comment, kudos and follow. Like all authors, I thrive on your attention! <3

“Tell me about this area.” Greg asked. The moonlight showed them the open space, flat and clear like a football pitch.

“This was the parade ground.” Mycroft began. “Close to everyone’s quarters,” he pointed out the various accommodations, “and flat enough to practice marching on.”

He turned towards the outer fortifications, blocking their view of the sea. “We can walk up there and look out at the sea, if you like.”

The tugging on his hand was enough of a yes, and they found the grassed ramp that lead upwards until they were able to look out over the blackness. The stars sparkled and moonlight flashed off the water as it moved. There were a few lights scattered in the distance, but most of the panorama was dark.

“I guess there’s one advantage to coming up here in the daytime,” Greg said, the disappointment clear in his voice. “Can’t see a bloody thing.”

*I could tell him what we could see. I’d have to be close, to show him which direction to look... Do I dare? Mycroft thought, heart pounding.*

He carefully released Greg’s hand and shifted, standing behind Greg, his body close without touching. Leaning his chin over Greg’s shoulder, Mycroft took off his other glove, his warm hand now taking Greg’s cold one and pointing directly out in front of them.

Greg had tensed and then settled back, his shoulders leaning into Mycroft, closing the gap between them.

Feeling his heart rate accelerate, Mycroft murmured against Greg’s ear, “The river continues for approximately one kilometre in this direction before it meets the ocean. We could see it from here, between the heads, if any enemy ships were coming to attack. The other side of the river is mainly farmland, a patchwork of fields.” He paused, then slid his hand onto Greg’s hip, rotating him to the
Over the sound of the water below them Mycroft could hear Greg’s breathing change, becoming shallower and more erratic.

He swallowed hard before continuing, “James Fort was completed some years before Charles Fort, and became known as the ‘old fort’. It was abandoned after an explosion and its subsequent capture in 1690. We’d be able to see it from here in the daytime. It’s much smaller and more ruinous than Charles Fort.”

Greg nodded, and Mycroft heard the hitch in his breathing when the action brushed his ear against Mycroft’s cheek.

Emboldened, Mycroft turned his head, closing his lips around the earlobe so temptingly close. He sucked lightly on it, flicking his tongue across its edge.

At this, Greg let out a moan and turned, both his hands capturing Mycroft’s face as he kissed him hard.

The torch had fallen to the ground and Mycroft grabbed at Greg, as much to have something to centre him as to ensure he didn’t fall over from the sensations assailing him. Earlier their kisses had been gentle, but this was need and want and desire, the physicality to go with the heavy atmosphere from their earlier walk.

Greg’s mouth was insistent, opening against Mycroft’s and demanding entry, and Mycroft submitted willingly, inviting and relishing the sensation of Greg’s tongue against his own. The sounds they were making were magnified in the still air, and Mycroft could not tell who was making them. Not that it mattered, they were equally enthusiastic, bodies pressing together until they swayed as one, mouths locked together.

Mycroft could not have told if it was a minute or an hour later when by mutual agreement they broke apart, breathing heavily, hands still holding each other close. Their breath was visible, and Mycroft concentrated on stabilising his breathing, hoping not to hyperventilate.

“I have no idea what’s out there. I didn’t hear a thing you said,” Greg admitted.

“I have no idea what I said,” Mycroft countered honestly. They both stared for a second before breaking into giggles, clutching at each other’s coats for balance.

Greg bent over and collected the torch. “Good thing this didn’t disappear,” Greg commented, grasping it in one hand, the other reaching out to Mycroft. Their fingers slid together easily now, feeling more at home in the others’ than not. He looked out at the blackness again. “Do you want to tell me about what’s out there again?”

Mycroft snorted. “I’m fairly sure we don’t need that excuse again, do we?” He smiled a light smile at Greg, the last few moments leaving him floating. He leaned in and pressed a chaste kiss on Greg’s mouth, feeling his mouth tighten into a smile under the pressure. Drawing away, Mycroft said, “Do we have time to have a look around the rest of the fort?”

Greg checked his watch. “We should probably head back towards the entrance, but we’re not in a hurry.”

They shifted their weight towards each other, pulled together as though by an unseen force, lips exploring again, less frantic this time. Using Mycroft’s knowledge of the layout of the fort, they made their way back, stopping periodically to kiss lips and necks, each sighing under the
exploration of the other.

Mycroft’s fingers were itching to tug away the scarf covering the extension of Greg’s neck, not to mention the rest of his clothes; the restriction was frustrating and tantalising in equal measure. He was forced to detail every inch he could reach, running his lips over Greg’s face, fascinated to think that it would feel different freshly shaved, or indeed with another 12 hours of growth; he was impatient to experience him in all conditions.

As they passed the hospital, Greg suddenly pressed him into the hard stone of the wall, their hips slotting together. Mycroft groaned, Greg’s arousal evident even through so many layers.

“Another reason to be glad of the darkness,” Greg whispered in his ear, licking at the soft skin behind his ear.

Mycroft grabbed at his hips, rolling forward and shifting his body against Greg’s.

The harsh “Fuck!” Greg blurted made Mycroft laugh quietly.

“Indeed,” he replied, and Greg buried his face in Mycroft’s neck.

They stood like that, in each other’s arms in the darkness for a long moment until Greg finally levered himself away.

“I’ll let Tom know we’re on our way, will I?” He sent a quick message, and looked at Mycroft, finding his hand and tugging him onwards. They stumbled a little, giggling like schoolboys as they bumped each other.

Tom asked no questions, Mycroft was grateful to note, though he was sure the man was not born yesterday. The heavy gates swung closed behind them, and they started down the road back towards Kinsale.

Greg tugged Mycroft closer, winding his arm around his waist. Mycroft did the same, and they bumped and giggled along the path. Not like schoolboys, Mycroft amended, more like the drunken teenagers he’d seen carousing down London streets late at night.

The walk back seemed to take no time at all, and it wasn’t long before they stood at the gate in front of Mycroft’s B & B. His heart was thudding steadily for a number of reasons. He had no idea what happened next.

Should he invite Greg in? While the idea of getting under those clothes was interesting, Mycroft had no intention of sleeping with Greg right now.

Should he make that clear? Would it offend Greg if Mycroft didn’t want to sleep with him now? The fairytale up at the fort was one thing; the fantasy up there lending Mycroft courage and bravado.

This was reality, though, confronting and laden with social hazards he had little experience navigating.

Before he knew it, Mycroft was working on a decent sized anxiety attack, his breath coming shallow and fast.

“Hey,” Greg said softly, and Mycroft looked at him, standing under the same streetlight they’d met under hours earlier. He knew he must look as panicky as he felt – he’d seen himself like this before and it was impossible to hide.
“Breathe with me, okay?” Greg instructed, eyes looking into Mycroft’s. He was breathing deeply and slowly, one hand holding Mycroft’s against his own chest.

Mycroft concentrated on matching his rhythm and felt himself calming, the rushing blood subsiding as his heart slowed to a more normal speed.

“We should get some sleep before the wedding.” Greg said in the same quiet voice, and Mycroft nodded in agreement. Greg went on, “There seem to be three options: we both stay at your place, we both stay at my place, or we each stay at our own place.”

Mycroft nodded again, feeling his heart start up again. He swallowed hard, knowing he had to speak. Greg was watching him closely, so Mycroft closed his eyes before saying, “I’d like to stay where you are. To sleep. Not to…” Mortified at the unfinished sentence, Mycroft kept his eyes closed, wishing for a freak sinkhole to pull him under.

Instead he felt Greg’s hand tighten on his, still resting on that warm chest. “Sleep is definitely the only thing on my agenda, too.”

Mycroft’s eyes flew open, relieved.

Greg was leaning in, his eyes dancing. “For now. We have a wedding in” he checked his watch and groaned, “not enough hours. Let’s go back to my place, the bed is huge and quite comfortable, plus I have to charge my phone.”

Again Mycroft found himself nodding mutely in agreement. They continued walking the few hundred metres to Greg’s accommodation, sneaking and giggling in equal measures as they crept into his room.

“Nice décor,” Mycroft whispered, giggling again when Greg showed him the pile of rose patterned fabric he had already stripped from the room. The giggles covered his nervousness, especially now that they were here, in Greg’s hotel room, for goodness sake.

“Spare toothbrush here, why don’t you go first while I change?” Greg offered, and Mycroft gratefully accepted the gentle suggestion. He brushed his teeth, relieved himself, and stepped back into the room. Greg was wearing a t shirt and pyjama pants, frowning as he did something on his phone.

“Just setting the alarm, Fiona would kill me if we’re late.” He motioned to a pile of clothes at the end of the bed. “There’s some spares if you want to get changed.” He dropped a quick kiss on Mycroft’s cheek as he passed, saying softly, “Just get comfortable, Mycroft, in whatever you like.”

Once he’d closed the en-suite door, Mycroft examined the pile – a set of pyjamas, a t shirt and a pair of track pants. He smiled to himself – Greg had given him as many options as he could muster at short notice. How considerate. Mycroft settled on the pyjama pants and t shirt as Greg had, finishing hanging his chinos just as Greg opened the door. He felt awkward again, given the new intimacy – he was wearing pyjama pants in front of Greg Lestrade, of all people.

As he wondered how they’d work out the sleeping arrangements, Greg gently pulled him into a hug. He didn’t kiss Mycroft, or slide his hands down to grab his arse, it was just a hug. It took a long moment for Mycroft to react, bringing his arms around Greg’s back, relaxing into the press of Greg’s body. It was different now, far closer without so many layers of heavy clothing between them, yet simple and comforting.

Mycroft closed his eyes, the warmth and smell surrounding him. Greg smelled like his cologne,
now familiar, and the sweat of a body walking in a heavy coat; his toothpaste was minty and there was something unique, something *Greg*, that appealed to Mycroft in a new, unfamiliar way. He squeezed his arms tighter, grateful for this moment of quiet togetherness. The distance they’d travelled together in this one day was a little overwhelming – from polite but distant professional acquaintances to this profoundly intimate moment. Mycroft had no idea what ‘this’ was, but it was bigger and deeper than he’d ever experienced, and taking a moment to hang on and just breathe was invaluable.

Though Mycroft could have stayed there forever, he felt his eyelids growing heavy with contentment and fatigue.

*Greg* slipped his arms away and Mycroft followed without thinking, the two of them climbing into bed and rearranging themselves into the horizontal version of the same hug, sleepy arms and legs tangling together.

The last thought that Mycroft was aware of before sleep dragged him under was, “*Greg.*”
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Greg and Mycroft wake after their night wanderings and prepare for the wedding.

Chapter Notes

Hello, patient people! I've been dealing with plot bunnies and almost-finished series, and now, finally, I can focus most of my attention here. I am not going to tell you I'll be updating once a week, cause that's pressure for me and potential disappointment for you (see how optimistic I can be?). But it will be regular, and I have planned quite a bit further, so this will certainly not be relegated to the 'endless WIP' pile. Thanks as usual to everyone who leaves me comments and kudos, and a special wave to Kara. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Incredibly, Greg woke before his alarm, blinking heavy eyes against the sunlight. Why on earth was he awake when he was still so tired, his brain wondered, before reminding him of last night’s events, images of the fort and Mycroft all tumbling over each other.

Mycroft. Greg smiled to himself, realising at last what it was that had wakened him – one arm was trapped under a body, preventing him from rolling over. Mycroft was obviously a cuddler; he’d managed to snuggle his way against Greg, one arm and one leg flung over the detective, breathing warm puffs into his neck as he slept. The smile widened as Greg remembered the adorable image he’d made right at the end of the night.

Mycroft had turned from the wardrobe, awkward in Greg’s pyjamas and t shirt, looking terrified at what the rest of the night might bring. Greg’s impulse, to hold him with no agenda, had been the right one. Mycroft had been stiff initially, but eventually he melted into Greg, sliding his arms around and hanging on for dear life.

Greg had closed his eyes, breathing in the delicious combination of his own laundry powder with Mycroft’s aftershave and his own scent. Getting to bed had been a simple affair after that, and they’d both drifted off quickly.

Greg checked his watch – another ten minutes before the alarm went off, so he could enjoy this moment a little longer. Mycroft was soft and pliant in his arms, nothing like the uptight Government official Greg had first imagined. Since arriving in Kinsale, Greg had seen such a different side of Mycroft, or rather he’d chosen to show it to Greg.

The effort he’d been making to take down his barriers was evident in the occasional tightness around his mouth, or the shaking of his extended hand. Greg was learning to read him, slowly making connections between things said and unsaid, the tells that even Mycroft Holmes could not hide when he was being open and genuine. Greg yearned to learn more, to find out all he could about this fascinating man.
He wanted to find out what made Mycroft tick, and a little voice told him that it could possibly be a long term undertaking.

The alarm beeped, and Mycroft stirred, even as Greg shut it down. He allowed his hand to run slowly up and down Mycroft’s arm as he’d wanted to since he first woke. Now that they did have to get up, he wasn’t worried about disturbing Mycroft’s sleep. He felt Mycroft shift again, feeling tension slip into his muscles as he woke and registered his surroundings.

“Good morning,” Greg’s voice was rough with a late night and too little sleep, but he filled it with affection.

Mycroft spun his head around then leaned up on one elbow, blinking sleepily and looking adorable, Greg thought. “Good morning,” he replied. He met Greg’s gaze, and Greg leaned in, settling their lips together, as soft and warm as their morning embrace. Mycroft hummed in pleasure, and Greg’s arms tightened in response.

After a moment, Greg drew regretfully away. “We don’t have a lot of time,” he told Mycroft, hand running up and down his arm again, “I set the alarm late so we’d get as much sleep as possible.”

“I am used to functioning on little sleep, as I suspect you are,” Mycroft said, sitting up, followed by Greg.

“Definitely, though never after a night like last night,” Greg admitted, and the pink colour he’d seen earlier blushed against the back of Mycroft’s neck as he turned away, flustered. Greg kneeled behind Mycroft and pressed his lips to the nape of Mycroft’s neck, unable to resist the combination of flushed skin and freckles. He felt Mycroft gasp and slipped both arms around him, shifting closer, knees parting so he could press his chest to Mycroft’s back.

“Freckles,” Greg murmured, delighted to see the flush strengthen at his words. He chuckled darkly. “I am suddenly very grateful that we have a wedding to attend, Mycroft.” He pressed one last kiss to Mycroft’s neck then moved away, not wanting to spook Mycroft with the swiftness of his sudden erection.

Mycroft half turned back towards Greg. “Why….oh.” He caught sight of Greg’s trousers as he scooted over to the edge of the bed. After a considered silence, he added, “In that case, I am also grateful.”

Greg turned, surprised at the admission, and Mycroft smiled self-consciously.

A rush of affection filled Greg. “If you’d like to stay here tonight, I’d love to have you,” he said, almost immediately regretting the choice of words. “NO! No, wait, shit, let me say that again…”

Mycroft, whose face had filled with trepidation at the suggestion, eyes locking on Greg’s face, was suddenly chuckling. “Based on the speed of your retraction, Greg, I can see it was a slip of the tongue. I know what you meant to say, and I would very much like to sleep in your arms again this evening.”

Greg was relieved, and he smiled at Mycroft. “Well if that’s sorted, we should get ourselves ready. We have,” he checked, “about ninety minutes until we should leave. I’ll order a cab, yeah?”

“Anthea will certainly have arranged a car,” Mycroft said, knowing the efficiency of his PA, “and you would be welcome to join us.”

Greg smiled. “Great, I’ll come over when I’m ready, then?”
Mycroft nodded. He dressed quickly in the bathroom, before returning Greg’s clothes in a neatly folded pile.

“I’ll leave them here, you’ll need them again tonight,” Greg said, tucking them under Mycroft’s pillow. He straightened, looking at Mycroft dressed in yesterday’s chinos and jumper. Unlike yesterday, when he’d met Mycroft in the street and itched to touch that jumper, now he was allowed to, and he ran his hands down the soft green fabric covering Mycroft’s chest and stomach.

“Greg,” Mycroft whispered, and he drew his eyes upward, startled. Mycroft’s eyes were dark, and Greg realised stupidly that Mycroft’s body was under that jumper – and his hands.

“Christ, I’m sorry.” He blurted, feeling like a complete idiot. His own face burned, and it occurred to him that Mycroft would certainly see the same colour on his face as he’d seen earlier on Mycroft’s neck.

“I’ll see you soon,” Mycroft said with a small smile, reaching out to grasp Greg’s hand before pressing a shy kiss on his cheek.

Greg felt his mouth spread in a silly grin as Mycroft picked up his coat and left. The door clicked, and Greg rubbed at his cheek, where the tingle from Mycroft’s lips still lingered.

“Shave, you,” he said to himself, grinning as he remembered the suit he’d packed. Mycroft was gonna love it, Greg thought. He felt buoyant, despite his tiredness; this wedding was now a date, and he couldn’t be more pleased.

+++ With ten minutes to spare on his ninety minute deadline, Greg stepped into the street. He’d spent longer than usual checking that his shave was clean and messing with his hair, teasing the silver locks until they sat just right. The new suit was worth every penny, there was no doubt. It clung where it should, emphasising his waist and the breadth of his shoulders, while making quite a statement about his arse, if he was to be honest. Teamed with a blindingly white shirt with mother of pearl buttons and a crisp black tie, Greg had to admit he looked better than he had in a long time. No need for his usual Anti-Black Dog speech today. The surprise of finding something worth exploring with Mycroft as well as the splendour of his new suit had buoyed his spirits, and he walked with confidence along the road to meet Mycroft.

“Good morning, Detective Inspector.” The voice was unexpected, and Greg whipped around to see Anthea waiting beside a black limousine he had someone managed not to notice in his hurry to see Mycroft.

“Er, good morning,” he replied. “You look lovely.”

She smoothed down her dress, a deep red formal gown. She smirked at his discomfiture, before putting him out of his misery, “Mycroft will be down momentarily.”

He nodded, and she returned to her Blackberry, which Greg was actually happy to see – it meant Mycroft could be comfortable relaxing, knowing that she was keeping track of things. Which meant Sherlock, really.

That train of thought was slowed, then pushed completely off course when Mycroft appeared beside Greg. Their eyes met and Greg felt the tug low in his belly signifying his definite attraction, and the beginnings of an erection making itself known.

Now is not the time to start anything, he told his body as they stood silently for a moment, taking
each other in after their brief absence.

“You look stunning,” Mycroft had leaned in and spoken in a low voice, his comment for Greg alone.

The tone of his voice, and the deeper pitch, sent another tug to Greg’s groin, and he swallowed.

“Thank you. New suit,” Greg managed to explain.

Mycroft chuckled. “I can tell.”

Greg stepped back to get a good look at Mycroft, and his eyes widened. “You’re wearing a kilt!” he exclaimed, knowing it was obvious but unable to stop himself.

“Anthea assures me that, despite his Anglo surname, the groom identifies as a Scotsman and will be wearing the tartan of his ancestral family, the Tennants,” Mycroft smoothed the fabric of his Prince Charlie jacket, adding somewhat defensively, “As such, it is appropriate for me to display my family tartan, though we are not in Scotland.”

Greg couldn’t stop the grin that had formed as he took in the sight of Mycroft, from hose to kilt to formal jacket.

He stepped forward, stopping the anxious look that was already forming on Mycroft’s face. “I love it,” he said in the same low voice Mycroft had employed against him. “You look incredible.” He had slid one hand onto Mycroft’s waist as he stepped in, feeling the deep breath as Mycroft inhaled, then raised his eyes, meeting Greg’s once again.

“Thank you.”

Before Mycroft could speak again, Anthea cleared her throat, nodding towards the car. Mycroft opened the door for Greg, who allowed Anthea to step in before sliding in after her. The car was totally luxury, Greg noted before Mycroft followed him in, settling across from him as the car moved smoothly off.

None of them spoke on the short trip across to the church; the close quarters of the car meant Mycroft and Greg’s legs were pressed together, a situation neither made any effort to rectify. Greg felt giddily, like a boy heading to his school formal; the wedding would be lovely, of course, but it was the precious time with Mycroft he looked most forward to. The car slid to a stop in front of the church, and they exited the car, Anthea with the aid of Mycroft, ever the gentleman.

“I trust you’ll have a good time without me,” she said with a pointed smile at them both.

Greg saw the flush stain Mycroft’s cheeks as he felt the same bloom on his own, and Anthea chuckled to herself as she left them to greet one of the groomsmen. She’d found her own date, Greg surmised.

“Shall we?” Greg asked, and Mycroft nodded. The church was as imposing as it had been yesterday when he had first seen it, and Greg wondered why anyone would choose such a grim place to marry.

“I understand Miss. Clarke’s family originates from this area. She and her family were baptised here,” Mycroft’s habit of knowing what people were thinking was sometimes useful.

“That’s not what people usually say,” Mycroft explained, trying to sound unconcerned and failing miserably.

“What do people usually say?” Greg asked, curious.

“Piss off,” Mycroft admitted.

The unexpectedness of this response made Greg break into laughter, and they moved out of the flow of people.

“Not me, Mycroft.” Greg said sincerely once he had control of himself again.

“Yes, I am realising how different you are, Greg,” Mycroft replied.

With a sideways glance and lopsided grin, Greg turned towards the church, whose bells had begun to toll, signifying the imminent start of the service.

“Shall we?” he asked.

Mycroft nodded, and they made their way into the church, side by side.

Chapter End Notes

This is what Mycroft's kilt ensemble looks like: Mycroft

This is what Greg's ensemble looks like: Greg

Oh, and now that I can do html links, here's what the Fort looks like: Fort

Thanks to scarletmanuka for helping me FINALLY be able to do html linking! It's like I'm a grown up or something!
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Apologies to everyone who was all excited for chapter 8 last week, only to see it was a repeat of chapter 7 - this time it's the real deal, I promise!

Mycroft watched the wedding ceremony with a detached gaze. Although he knew only three people at this wedding, it had turned out to be far less tedious than he would have thought. The unexpected connection with Greg had been amazing in and of itself, but it also provided him plenty of data to study as they sat (and knelt and stood…) through the endless Catholic wedding ceremony.

Apart from the fact that Greg was next to him, closer than strictly necessary and smelling *divine*, he had hours and hours worth of recent memories to sort through. Though the whole of last evening had been remarkable, his favourite moments had been the quiet ones. Greg recognising his panic attack and helping stop it in its tracks was the highlight. The empathy he’d shown all evening, in fact, was a highly attractive trait.

Mycroft was used to dealing with people so busy with pushing their own agendas they didn’t notice things right in front of their noses. Meeting someone who not only noticed, but cared enough to accommodate his emotional state, was incredible.

And yet he couldn’t quite bring himself to trust his recollections. Had Greg really been so solicitous? Surely a glint of impatience or scorn were detectable in his eyes?

However often he scoured his memories, though, Mycroft could detect only compassion and the occasional hint of fond amusement. Amazing that he could have missed all this, had he not approached Greg in the street only yesterday.

“Mycroft?”

Greg’s voice cut into his thoughts, and Mycroft brought himself back to the present.

The wedding was over and the guests had spilled out onto the front steps of the church for a group photo, carrying Mycroft with them. He shook himself and smiled at Greg, still looking stunning in that suit. The sun glanced off the satin lapels, and Mycroft swallowed, grateful that all eyes were directed to the photographer who was shouting instructions from the other side of the street, hoping to get everyone close enough for one photograph.

Mycroft stood close to Greg, slipping their hands together, and he was sure that at the exact moment the flash went off, Greg was smiling an affectionate surprised smile in his direction. He’d have to see if Anthea could get a hold of the proofs, Mycroft made a mental note, returning Greg’s smile.

“Hamlet’s, then?” Greg asked, and they turned as one, joining the long straggling group heading in that general direction. They walked in silence, listening to the buoyant chatter swirl around them.

Mycroft wasn’t sure if he should be talking; the rest of the group was doing so, but they seemed to
be gushing about the ceremony and the dress and other insignificant details of the wedding. Whatever he and Greg talked about, it would not be something as superficial as the wedding gown. Their conversation last night had been intimate, especially up at the Fort; Mycroft had not had to worry about what he said or how he phrased his thoughts.

As a child the fear of ridicule had driven him to perfect his speech, and he was still conscious today of his pronunciation and word selection. His dialogue with Greg had flowed easily, and even when he had faltered, Greg had either not noticed, or had the grace to overlook it. Now, though, with so many people around, Mycroft was hesitant to be so free again, hence the dilemma – somewhere between wedding gowns and intimate confessions there had to be something to talk about.

He felt himself withdrawing as their silence drew on, anxiety expanding again in his chest.

“Hey, look at that,” Greg said suddenly, grabbing Mycroft’s hand to show him a shop window.

Mycroft stared blankly at it – why was Greg showing him a display of vintage kitchenware? Confused and a little disoriented by the sudden change of direction, he turned to look at Greg.

A patient smile awaited him. “We need a codeword or something,” Greg teased him gently, “so I know right away when you’re freaking out about something.”

Mycroft blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“Come on, Mycroft. I could practically feel you retreating into your head.” He leaned his back against the window and gave Mycroft a knowing smile. “I know you weren’t paying attention to the wedding, but you were happier and more relaxed then. This,” he indicated Mycroft with one hand, “this is silent freaking out.” He stopped and folded his arms, one eyebrow cocked and daring Mycroft to object to his deduction.

“You’re right,” Mycroft admitted. Just the admission made him feel better. He thought for a moment, then added, “Denmark.” Watching Greg’s face cycle though emotions was fascinating, and he waited a moment before clarifying, “Considering our destination, I thought we could paraphrase, ‘There’s something rotten in the state of Denmark.’”

“Hamlet.” Greg nodded cautiously, though he still looked confused.

“That’s the codeword,” Mycroft said, watching the understanding dawn as Greg’s chocolate eyes cleared. “Denmark.”

“Okay,” Greg grinned at him.

Mycroft felt warmth bloom in his chest at the easy acceptance, and he tugged on Greg’s hand. “We should keep moving or the happy couple will beat us to the reception.” The street was now almost empty and they started walking again, hand in hand, towards the reception.

“So do you want to tell me what Denmark was about?” Greg asked as they walked.

Mycroft glanced at him, debating possible replies, before answering, “I was wondering what we should talk about,” He deliberately kept his tone casual, but he’d forgotten that one of the things he liked about Greg was his sharp perception.

“I know what you mean,” Greg replied, and Mycroft caught him stealing a glance of his own. “Everyone else is talking about the wedding, which was nice but long and so very Catholic. On the other hand, I’m not sure my, um, preferred topics of conversation would be appropriate for a group
Mycroft nodded, fascinated once again with Greg’s ability to read his motivations - was he that transparent?

His surprise must have been evident, because Greg leaned closer and stage-whispered, “Same here.” His eyes sparkled as they scanned Mycroft’s face for his reaction. He gave Mycroft’s hand one last squeeze before letting it go and indicating the building ahead. “Once more unto the breach?” He tried, and laughed at Mycroft’s rolled eyes.

“That would be Henry V…” Mycroft murmured dryly, and he was rewarded with a soft chuckle.

“Central College Nottingham wasn’t big on Shakespeare,” Greg retorted good naturedly.

They were not the last to arrive at the reception venue; plenty of people were still milling around in the foyer, checking coats and chattering. Several of the men wore kilts, Mycroft was pleased to note, until he saw that Greg was noticing rather too closely.

Before he could decide whether voicing an objection would be too forward, Greg stepped in closer, his breath warm in Mycroft’s ear as he breathed, “You’ve the best knees here, Mycroft Holmes.”

Mycroft barked a laugh at the unexpected declaration, pulling his head back to look into Greg’s twinkling eyes. As they looked at each other, the connection that had been forged last night flared once again, and Mycroft felt its warmth course through his body. The anxiety about how they would communicate through this evening melted away, and he knew that they would create magic this evening.

“May I offer you a drink, sirs?” A black-tie clad waiter had appeared, a tray of champagne flutes borne on his arm. Both men accepted one, and followed the waiter’s murmured suggestion that they find their seats as the first of several courses would be served soon. The seating chart had been moved from the restaurant last night and Greg and Mycroft confirmed that they had indeed been placed at the table in the corner. With an amused glance at each other they made their way into the ballroom, weaving amongst the other guests to find their table.

“You two must be Holmes and Lestrade!” A booming voice greeted them as they approached.

Mycroft laid a steadying hand on Greg’s lower back, moving to stand beside him as the large man who had spoken rose from the table.

“Thomas Langley!” He introduced himself, shaking their hands with exuberance.

Mycroft slipped his diplomatic face on as he returned the greeting, introducing himself to Mr. Langley as well as the other seven people seated at their table, all of whom had turned their faces interestedly towards them.

“Gregory Lestrade,” Greg offered, and added, “Err, you’ve been waiting on us then?”

Thomas’ booming laugh was sure to get on his nerves, Mycroft thought behind his polite smile.

“You’re the last two, and your seats have been reserved – we’re under strict instructions not to sit in them!” He indicated the only two seats remaining at the table – in the corner, the same two seats they had occupied last night.

Mycroft glanced at Greg, who was looking at him with the same amused-yet-shy expression.
“What’s all that about, then?” Thomas asked.

Mycroft allowed Greg to give a non-committal answer as they sat down, greeting the rest of the table. It consisted of Thomas and his wife Cindy, seated on Greg’s left, Andrew and his date Yasmin, on Mycroft’s right, and four other people whose names Mycroft did not intend to retain. It was reckless, by his standards, not to deduce all he could from new acquaintances, especially in a forced social situation; it made directing small talk so much easier if he had a basis from which to work. Tonight, though, he saw all these people as obstacles, inconveniences to be endured so that he might spend more time with Greg. Having said that, he could not bring himself to be rude; Greg’s hand gave his knee a quick consolatory squeeze under the tablecloth as they turned away from each other to speak to their tablemates.

“You two are such a cute couple!” Yasmin told Mycroft, her voice climbing several octaves.

He frowned a little. “Are you referring to Greg and myself?” He asked.

“Oh, Mikey,” (he ground his teeth at this) “of course I am!” she replied, swatting at his hand in a manner intended to be affectionate.

“My name is Mycroft, if you wouldn’t mind,” He told her firmly.

“Oh, of course!” she all but squealed. “Honestly, you’re smitten, anyone can see that.” She turned to Andrew and patted his hand, gushing, “Just like Andy and I, we’re just still in that all over each other phase, ya know?” A giggle escaped as she looked coyly at Andrew, who appeared not to notice her at all. “You and Gary are so restrained, but it’s totally there, you’re just hanging to rip each other’s clothes off!”

“It’s Greg, actually,” Mycroft corrected her, alarmed at what graphic image she might conjure next. He cleared his throat and added reluctantly, “And how are you acquainted with the bride and groom?”

As Yasmin started breathlessly recounting the tale of how Andrew had played football with the groom, and they’d stayed friends ever since, Mycroft’s mind began to wander. Andrew appeared to be content to let Yasmin talk; despite himself, Mycroft could see that they had not been dating long, and that his money and her large breasts would be a good, if superficial, match.

Yasmin finished her story, and Mycroft, who had not been paying attention (another faux pas, honestly) watched as she turned her attention to Andrew. His hand was sliding inappropriately high on her bare thigh, drawing her attention. He finally spoke, something low in her ear that made her giggle again and turn her body towards him.

Mouth set in distaste, Mycroft’s attention drifted across the rest of the room. Most people were seated now, save the bridal table; the families of the bride and groom had arrived, so it would not be long before they entered together. A lazily waved hand caught Mycroft’s attention. Anthea.

“Happy with your seats?” she asked him, speaking normally though she was across the room. He could read lips as well as she.

He raised one eyebrow. “Delighted, thank you.”

“But don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” She said, and a fierce blush spread across his cheeks before he could stop it. Even from across the room, Anthea spotted it, her own eyebrows rising at the spontaneous response, “Unless you already have,” she continued, the smirk adding layers of meaning.
Mycroft frowned at her, but before he could reply, she winked and turned away, effectively ending their conversation. It was a good thing she excelled at her job, he thought a little crossly, or she would be in search of employment. Not that this was her worst idea, assigning them these seats. Andrew and Yasmin would almost certainly leave early to have sex in either the guests-only hot tub or the formal gardens. It was clear that Thomas and Cindy were friends with the other couples on the table, who were happy to continue their usual social rhythm without Greg or Mycroft. Once they’d gotten past the polite small talk, he and Greg would once again be effectively alone.

Excellent.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

And we can settle into a fairly regular update journey now, folks. Enjoy! <3

The bubbles tingled on his tongue, and Greg savoured them before he swallowed the champagne. The formalities of the reception were more or less over; meals served, speeches endured, cake cut. The happy couple had shuffled around the dance floor and now the lights had dimmed, allowing others to join them.

Greg sat back, draining the last of the champagne from his glass. He’d been mildly irritated most of the evening after Thomas and Cindy had proved to be jovial and inclusive dinner companions – precisely the opposite of what he was hoping for. When he and Mycroft had sat down in their reserved seats, Greg had turned to speak to Thomas. Despite his desire to immerse himself in Mycroft, he could not be so rude as to ignore the others. He could see from the way that Cindy bounced from their conversation (mainly football, some politics) to that of the other couples on the table that they must all know each other; with any luck, after a polite half hour or so, they’d go back to their friends, Mycroft could extricate himself and they could happily ignore everyone for the remainder of the night.

Unfortunately, it seemed that the others were far more Cindy’s friends than Thomas’; he was quite happy to get into a detailed analysis of why Newcastle United had been relegated at the end of last season. Greg was enjoying the conversation, but a part of him was excruciatingly conscious of Mycroft sitting uncomfortably beside him. A glance over showed the couple next to Mycroft were basically groping each other, leaving Mycroft in the awkward position of being stuck between that couple and Greg and Thomas’ football conversation.

“So, Thomas, we were talking about the Prime Minister before? Yeah, Mycroft actually works for the Government,” Greg offered. He knew his segue was clumsy but what the hell, he couldn’t leave Mycroft hanging all night. He didn’t even want to be a part of this conversation, really, so if Thomas got offended, at least he’d be free to talk to Mycroft.

“Really, mate?” Thomas was generous enough to turn his focus to Mycroft. Their conversation was short, as Cindy (finally, thought Greg) politely interrupted to steal Thomas away. As Thomas was drawn into a lively debate about something, Greg turned in his seat, looking at Mycroft with relief.

“Thank God,” he said quietly, “I thought I’d have to talk to him all night.”

Mycroft shot him a look, adding in a playfully severe tone, “About football, Greg, I’m not entirely convinced you hated it.”

“Look it wasn’t the worst conversation,” Greg admitted. He smiled at Mycroft, who returned it. The both glanced around – everyone at their table was now occupied, leaving them to their own devices at last. As Greg went to open his mouth, a hand landed on his shoulder. As he turned in that direction, he saw Fiona standing beside him, flushed and radiant.

“Hi!” Greg blurted, standing up to greet her.
“Hi!” she replied, kissing his cheek, then leaning across him to kiss Mycroft too.

“Congratulations,” Greg told her, Mycroft echoing the sentiment.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” she replied, though her answering smile told him she was loving every second of the attention. Shamelessly, she wiggled one finger between Greg and Mycroft. “Looks like Anthea and I picked a good’un, you two seem mighty cozy over here in your private corner.” She seemed very pleased with herself.

Greg rolled his eyes. “Of course this was you,” he muttered good naturedly. “I figured Anthea was in, but…”

“What, you didn’t think I’d stoop to fixing you up at my own wedding? Greg Lestrade, we practically raised each other’s children, a fact for which I am thankful every day.” She waved the same finger in his face. “Don’t think there’s a thing I wouldn’t do to make you as happy as I am today, mate.” Greg blinked for a moment, then enveloped her in a huge hug.

“So you’re happy, then?” he asked her, still holding the hug.

“Completely,” she replied. “You?”

He pulled away a little, looking her in the face. “I’m working on it, but yes.”

She grinned at him, shot a “Nice to meet you” back at Mycroft and flitted off, delving into conversation with Thomas and the rest of the table.

Greg noted absently that the handsy ones Mycroft had been talking to had left. Probably shagging in a cupboard somewhere, he thought wryly, turning back to Mycroft once again.

“Dinner’s over, speeches are done, so there’s nothing to interrupt us now,” Greg murmured, leaning into Mycroft. He felt rather than saw the shiver than ran through him, their bodies were so close. Greg could catch the scent of Mycroft’s cologne over the mix surrounding them, and he breathed deeply. It was odd how grounding it was, having a familiar scent in such a distracting and unfamiliar environment.

Memories of last night rose in Greg’s mind, brought forward by the same enticing smell he’d identified last night as Mycroft’s. They sat without speaking, enjoying the companionship. Mycroft had turned towards him now, and their stance was similar to last night; turned toward one another, heads almost touching, the rest of the world excluded from their private moment. It stretched on, a similar magic surrounding them tonight, though it was more robust; the fragility had been bolstered by last night’s assurance that each was interested beyond an evening’s fun.

Again, Greg watched the dancers as they moved around the floor. The DJ was still playing slow, bridal waltz inspired music; later he would probably turn up a mix of 80s and 90s hits, but for now it was still quiet and dreamy. Greg felt like the prince at the ball, swept up in the magic of the evening, never knowing if disaster or happily ever after was his fate. He could feel Mycroft’s hand on his knee where it had settled a few moments ago, the warmth and weight both comforting and evocative.

“A dance, Gregory?” Mycroft asked. His voice was quiet, in a way that Greg was learning meant he was nervous or uncertain.

Greg smiled softly and placed his hand over Mycroft’s. They moved together to one corner of the crowded dancefloor, winding between tables and people. For a moment they both hesitated before Greg slid his free hand onto Mycroft’s shoulder, drawing them together.
Mycroft’s hand settled on Greg’s waist, and they smiled shyly at the intimacy inherent in the closeness of their bodies and the careful contact of their hands. As the music flowed, they started moving in time, tiny steps of a nothing-in-particular-style, simply learning each other’s rhythm. Slowly the beating of their hearts and rush of blood in their bodies synchronised, their eyes locked in another point of contact as concrete as their hands. The rest of the dancefloor faded, the world of sensation focussed only on each other and the faint rhythm of the music guiding them. Greg’s fingers gripped more tightly, determined to cling to this moment.

Now the music shifted, a string orchestra winding soft melodies to wrap around Greg and Mycroft. The sounds gave them both gentle encouragement, and Greg’s hand wound further around Mycroft’s neck; Mycroft’s had slid from Greg’s waist to the middle of his back.

Their joined hands were now clasped to their adjoining chests, two beating hearts vibrating through the intertwined fingers, amplifying their connection. Greg’s eyes closed as he lost himself to the sensation. He felt content down to his very soul, a romantic notion but an accurate one. The warmth in his chest was pulsing steadily through his whole body like golden waves, lighting and calming every inch of him. He exhaled deeply, satisfaction in his sigh.

Mycroft’s hands tightened around him, and Greg smiled. He knew it was Mycroft conveying the same emotions in his own subtle way.

They seemed to sway like that forever, yet it was over quickly; without warning, the voice of the DJ cut into their moment, calling, “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaand let’s hear it for the bride and groom, off for the honeymoon!”

Greg blinked dazedly as the house lights came on, he and Mycroft slowly slipping away from each other as more people crowded onto the dance floor and they were jostled across to join the sending-off circle. It took an age for Fiona and Mark to farewell everybody, and Greg scored only a wink as Fiona tried to see everyone before they finally departed for their honeymoon.

“I should go and see Fiona’s boys,” Greg said to Mycroft.

They were not difficult to find, given their propensity to attract a crowd of girls; Greg just followed the shrieks of laughter. He waved from the back of the group, catching Damian’s attention, gratified when they both immediately broke up the impromptu gathering to come and greet him. It was a little odd seeing young men when he’d still pictured the boys as they had last seen each other, seven years ago. Reminiscences, girlfriends (and boyfriends, it turned out), Greg’s girls and jobs filled their conversation, before Greg needed to visit the men’s. The boys (well, young men) drifted back to their admirers, and he was still shaking his head as he exited the men’s room. Without warning, a burgundy blur accosted him, grabbing his arm and propelling him into a deserted corridor.

“What the…Anthea?” Greg sputtered, annoyed at himself that he’d been blindsided.

“I can see you’re having a good night. I’ll spare you the ‘hurt him and no one will find your body’ speech, I’m sure that’s a given,” she said calmly, before hitching up her skirt above the knee. Greg had no idea what she was doing until she took something out of the small pocket strapped to her thigh.

“How lucky do you think we’re gonna get, exactly?” Greg managed, staring at the supplies in his hand. Another thought occurred to him. “How lucky did you think you were gonna get?”
Anthea just smirked, throwing her last remark over her shoulder. “There’s a lot of hours until morning, Greg. Use them wisely.”

After she’d left, Greg stared at the small packets and the lube, finally slipping them into his pocket. He hadn’t thought about the exact details of what would happen tonight. Mycroft had been quite clear that he wanted to sleep – just sleep – with Greg tonight, and Greg had been quick to affirm that. He wasn’t sure himself how he felt about jumping into bed with someone like Mycroft. Not because of his ‘minor’ position in Government, or his outwardly conservative appearance, or even his unknown sexual history. Greg had slept with a number of people who fulfilled at least one of those criteria, never to be seen again; this time was different. This time, there was something real brewing.

Alongside the steadily growing sexual tension was an emotional intimacy that Greg had rarely experienced. The last thing he wanted to do was rush anything. If they could be patient enough with each other, they might have a shot at something remarkable.

The idea overwhelmed and excited and scared Greg all at once, and he leaned against the wall, closing his eyes as he dealt with the sudden storm of emotion in his head.

He knew that worth was a big thing for him – believing that he was worthwhile, deserving of love and happiness was not a state of mind that came naturally to him. The fears and doubts that had brought him down in the past dragged against the buoyancy he felt being close to Mycroft, to seeing the effect he had on Mycroft, too. Greg breathed deeply, fighting against the negativity in his head. He and Mycroft would be a Good Thing, and he would keep fighting for it, he told the traitorous thoughts rebelliously.

“Greg?” Mycroft’s voice was beside him, quiet and tentative.

Greg opened his eyes and looked for a long moment at Mycroft. He reached out and took Mycroft’s hand, their eyes never straying from one another.

“Let’s get out of here.” Greg said.

Mycroft swallowed hard then nodded.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

After the wedding Greg and Mycroft head back to Greg’s B & B.

They’d made a quick and discreet exit in the end.

“I assume Anthea will make her own way back,” Greg had murmured once they’d settled into the cab for the short ride. Mycroft hadn’t replied, which Greg had expected; it had been largely rhetorical, more to try and break the tension that had crept into the atmosphere since they’d agreed to leave. Greg was agonisingly aware of Anthea’s gift in his pocket – he didn’t want Mycroft to think that he was planning something when they’d had a specific conversation about it that morning. With any luck he could stash it in his toiletries before Mycroft noticed it.

Mycroft had given the driver their destination, and as they alighted at Greg’s accommodation, his eyes settled on the rosebushes, still bearing blooms.

“Mmmm.” Mycroft made a small sound – the satisfaction of an itch finally scratched.

“What?” Greg asked, sending the cabbie on her way and joining Mycroft. All he could see was a rosebush. Most of his senses were attuned to Mycroft, but Mycroft appeared to be focused on this rosebush.

“Silverston roses,” Mycroft replied. “Hence the name.”

“You recognised the type of rose? Aren’t there hundreds of types of rose?” Greg asked. He was pretty surprised that Mycroft would recognise it – and in the almost dark, the flowers themselves were barely visible.

“There’s a plaque,” Mycroft said, and Greg stepped in closer, the small bronze plate coming into view, lit by the streetlight.

“Oh,” Greg said, feeling foolish.

Mycroft turned to him, mouth twitching. “You sound disappointed, Greg.” The twitch turned into a smile. “Did you think I’d recognised the type of rose in the dark and made the connection with the name of this establishment?”

Greg shrugged, embarrassed that he’d made such a silly assumption. He watched Mycroft’s amusement grow, and thought that he could probably handle being silly a little more often if it brought Mycroft such pleasure. “It’s freezing out here, shall we go in?” he said, and was relieved that Mycroft was gracious enough to let it go and precede him inside. “You must be freezing in that thing,” he added, indicating the kilt that Mycroft still wore.

It was Mycroft’s turn to shrug. “I have a lot of layers up here,” he indicated his torso, “and the hose are rather warm, actually.”

“Fair enough,” Greg grinned. The tension had slipped away somewhere around the Silverston conversation, and he felt more relaxed, now. “You’ll still be happy to change…bugger!”
Mycroft started at his curse. Greg explained, “I’m guessing you’ll need to go back to your place to pack some...” they’d continued climbing the stairs, and he trailed off as he saw a suit bag hung over his doorhandle, an overnight bag sitting neatly underneath.

“Anthea?” he asked, and Mycroft nodded.

“She’s very good,” Mycroft said modestly.

Greg snorted. “She’s very nosy.”

He decided on impulse to share with Mycroft his encounter that evening. Pulling the lube and condoms out of his pocket, Greg held them up, registering the shock on Mycroft’s face. “She gave me these and told me to use the hours until morning wisely.” He made sure to use a light tone, not wanting to frighten Mycroft away.

“I suspect we have several options,” Mycroft said, having swallowed hard at Greg’s words. His eyes looked a little wild, but his voice was steady. “I could have her killed, of course.”

His face was so grave that Greg thought he was serious for a split second; then a twinkle came into his eyes and he continued, “Or we come up with a convincing story as to exactly how we used them and make sure she hears it.”

Greg grinned, relieved that Mycroft could see the humour and horror in the story.

Mycroft picked up his bags as they entered Greg’s room.

“I suppose that explains the décor, then,” Greg commented, making the connection between the rose covered room and the name.

Mycroft hung up his suit bag and nodded in agreement. Greg moved to unbutton his suit jacket, but a pale slim hand covered his own, and he stilled. Mycroft was standing close, his eyes locked on their joined hands.

“My previous intentions for this evening still stand,” Mycroft chose his words carefully, “however I have thought about slipping this jacket from your shoulders several times tonight.” He swallowed nervously, an action echoed by Greg, both still looking at their hands.

“May I?” Mycroft whispered, and Greg managed to unfreeze his neck enough to nod.

He dropped his own hand from the single button, allowing Mycroft’s long fingers to flick it open. Greg resisted the impulse to suck in his stomach, knowing that Mycroft would notice him doing so. He made himself stand still as gentle fingers skimmed twin paths of fire up his chest under his jacket; when they reached his shoulders they paused, and Greg realised he’d been holding his breath. He breathed, the scent of Mycroft filling his lungs and his mind.

Warm palms flattened against his shoulders and shucked the jacket from them, sliding down his arms, allowing the silk lining of his jacket to slip along the expensive cotton shirt until it was free of him entirely. Mycroft’s eyes had followed his hands up Greg’s torso and it felt like another caress, the twin trails becoming a riot of sparks under his skin.

“Thank you,” Greg murmured as Mycroft turned away with visible reluctance. Greg shuddered, a delayed reaction to the sensations he’d just felt, and watched Mycroft hang his jacket carefully in the wardrobe. When he turned back, their eyes locked, and Greg felt a twist of desire in his gut. If Mycroft hadn’t just said...but he had, and Greg had to respect his decision.
“Drink?” Greg blurted. He’d only had a couple of glasses of champagne, and something a little stronger would be more than welcome, especially if he would be dealing with this atmosphere all night.

At Mycroft’s nod, Greg said, “One unexpected bonus of staying at this place is the well-stocked mini bar.” He opened a tiny cupboard to reveal a bar fridge and small array of mini-liquor bottles. He hesitated, then picked them all up in one hand, snared two glasses in the other, and turned back to Mycroft. “None of this is going to rock our worlds. Should I grab some ice?”

“Certainly, if you’d prefer,” Mycroft replied, and Greg took that as a yes. They poured their selections into the glasses, the pops of the ice discordant in the otherwise silent room. Two tiny empty bottles clattered into the bin.

“Cheers,” Greg offered, clinking glasses before sliding down to sit on the floor, the bed at his back. Mycroft hesitated before snaring a pillow to sit on, offering Greg one too. Settled on their pillows, Greg faced Mycroft, whose back was braced against the wall opposite Greg, outstretched legs brushing as they shifted to best position.

An almost comfortable silence fell. There was an edge to it, not the weight of expectation, but an unresolved tension that Greg felt powerless to address without breaching Mycroft’s ‘sleep, just sleep’ request. He swirled the cheap vodka in his glass, watching the oily liquid shift as he wondered what they might talk about.

Mycroft had wondered the same thing as they left the church, though they’d been somewhat restricted by social niceties; here it was the overwhelming breadth of ‘anything and everything’ that made beginning so difficult.

“I took you the long way to Dalton’s, you know,” Mycroft’s voice was not loud, but Greg started, taking a moment to process the statement.

“What?” he said blankly.

Mycroft was looking directly at him; his eyes were clear and calm, and he spoke evenly again. “When we first greeted each other, outside the church, I took us the longer way through the town so our conversation would be extended.” As Greg watched, a faint blush crept up Mycroft’s cheeks.

“You wanted to talk to me that much?” Greg asked, and Mycroft nodded, content to leave his answer there.

Greg considered this as he sipped his appallingly bad vodka. So it was drinking and confessions. Good combination, he thought dryly.

“Cindy told me we made a cute couple,” Greg offered. It wasn’t quite in the same league, but it was true.

Mycroft nodded slowly. “So did Yasmin.”

The silence fell again, a shade heavier than it had a moment ago. Greg’s eyes wandered down the length of Mycroft’s body, taking in the formality of his prince Charlie jacket, the forest green and deep blue of his kilt, the tempting exposed skin of his knees between the kilt and hose; he could see the exact shape of Mycroft’s calves and couldn’t work out why that had never been sexy until now.

“As a small child I had a terrible stutter.”
Mycroft broke the silence again. Greg’s eye flew upwards, but this time Mycroft’s gaze was on his own glass, the scotch he’d chosen gone. “I spent hours in speech therapy, and the formality of my speech today is still influenced by those lessons.” A wry, sad smile crossed his face as he regarded the melting ice. “Imagine a seven year old speaking like a stuffy old orator. That’s what you get when you hire a former member of the Shakespeare Theatre Company to teach your son diction, I suppose.”

Greg did not comment, studying Mycroft as he appeared to study his ice. Greg could see the little boy, red hair and freckles, pushing back tears as he struggled to copy the fierce old man’s perfect pronunciation.

Mycroft’s shoulders had rounded, his posture changing as he recalled his childhood. He had closed in on himself, protecting his heart from the hurt, even after all these years.

Without thinking, Greg placed one hand on Mycroft’s ankle. He left it there, a hopefully comforting weight as he assimilated this information into his understanding of Mycroft. Absently his thumb brushed circles across the anklebone.

“You must have worked very hard at it,” Greg said after a few moments. “I can’t imagine the determination you must have found to master it so fully.” He frowned. “Sherlock’s never alluded to it, and he’s not shy about that kind of thing.”

Mycroft finally raised his gaze to Greg’s, and the rawness in them made Greg’s breath catch. “Sherlock doesn’t know. When he was born I locked myself away. I wanted my speech to be perfect before I played with him. By the time he was old enough to be forming memories, there was no sign of it.”

Years of practice and a good intuition told Greg there was more to the story, but he didn’t push. Mycroft would tell him when he was ready. As it was, Greg was shocked that Mycroft had a secret Sherlock had not deduced. Furthermore, he’d shared it with Greg. The trust he must have already placed in Greg was incredible.

Before he could get sucked back into his head, Mycroft spoke again, his eyes still locked on Greg’s, the wildness now returned with a vengeance. “You asked me what I thought I needed.” His voice was low and intense.

Greg nodded, heart pounding.

“I think it might be you, Greg.”
Chapter 11

This moment was a tenuous as a single strand of spiderweb, Greg knew. Mycroft was asking him to change their understanding, but Greg wanted to be sure.

He leaned forward, taking the glass from Mycroft’s hands before standing and pulling Mycroft with him. They were standing close now, eyes on the same level, both breathing faster than strictly necessary. Moving slowly, Greg allowed the fingers of one hand to grace the curve of Mycroft’s cheekbone, before dropping to the bowtie at his throat. He pulled, releasing the knot, before sliding it out from under Mycroft’s collar, the hiss of the fabric somehow powerfully erotic in the air.

Slowly, reverently, Greg unfastened buttons, working down the layers of jacket and waistcoat. He lay each on the bed, turning to meet Mycroft’s eyes before beginning on the next piece, a silent request for continued permission. Cufflinks joined the fabrics, leaving Mycroft’s shirt as the last item covering his torso. Greg consciously copied Mycroft’s actions of earlier, teasing his fingertips up the slim torso, feeling the rapid heart rate and tiny shivers at his touch. His palms finally slid onto Mycroft’s shoulders, then down his arms, the shirt falling onto the floor.

They looked at each other then, Greg checking to see if Mycroft was still okay. The last thing he wanted was for Mycroft to regret his change of heart and feel trapped.

“How I mentioned, the shower here is huge,” Greg said. Mycroft swallowed at the suggestion, and Greg waited patiently while he thought about it. Greg figured that he’d either say yes or he’d bolt.

“May I?” Mycroft asked, raising one hand to Greg’s tie. Yes, then.

Greg smiled. “Of course.”

He stood still again as Mycroft undressed him, fingers shaking slightly on the buttons, careful not to brush his fingers against Greg’s skin until his shirt was ready. This time, Mycroft leaned forward, his uneven breath puffing across Greg’s chest as he stuttered a line of kisses across one collarbone and the other.

Greg stifled a groan, the moving air cool where it hit the wetness left by Mycroft’s mouth.

“I think I’ll leave the kilt to you,” Greg told Mycroft, his voice lower than usual.

Simultaneously, they reached for their own clothes, stripping out of everything but pants, the carefully laid out kilt the exception to the piles of clothes now rumpled on the bed. Greg took Mycroft’s hand in his, squeezing as they laced fingers, and lead him to the bathroom. The instant hot water filled the room with steam, which Greg had been counting on, hoping the reduced visibility would make Mycroft more comfortable.

He unlaced his fingers, using both hands to strip off his pants, sensing that Mycroft was doing the same, before both stepped into the hot water. Greg tilted his head back, allowing the hot rivulets to run down his body. It felt bloody brilliant. His assessment of what constituted ‘bloody brilliant’
changed dramatically when Mycroft’s tentative hands settled on his chest.

Blinking the water out of his eyes, Greg watched Mycroft step closer, the wide spray of water now hitting his pale shoulders as he appeared out of the steam. Greg wanted to pull on Mycroft’s slim hips, pressing their bodies together, but he resisted the urge.

“I thought pants weren’t generally done under a kilt,” Greg asked, hoping to keep the atmosphere from getting too heavy.

Mycroft’s face relaxed a little, and he replied, “What a man wears under his kilt is his own business.”

In response to Greg’s grin, his own face finally broke into a smile, and Greg’s heart stuttered at the sight. His hands came up outside of Mycroft’s arms, fingers swirling across the slick skin.

“Freckles again, Mr. Holmes.”

They were spread across the tops of the pale shoulders like red dust, and Greg let his fingers find patterns and pictures as Mycroft stood still, his eyes closed. The contact was gentle but Greg could feel his body stirring in response as it realised there was a very naked, very sexy man standing in front of him.

“Mycroft.” Greg’s voice was still quiet, but he could hear the roughness in it and was sure Mycroft had picked it up too.

The delicate eyebrows rose in response, though his eyes remained closed, hands still resting on Greg’s chest. His fingertips were now caressing tiny circles against Greg’s warm skin, yet the water removed most of the friction so it was the barest of touches.

Greg cleared his throat. “May I?”

When Mycroft opened puzzled eyes, Greg was holding up the loofah and body wash.

Mycroft nodded, closing his eyes again as Greg started at his shoulders, carefully lathering him up, watching the bubbles cascade down along the planes of his body. Greg allowed his eyes to wander now, as he squeezed the soapy water along Mycroft’s torso – pale, sprinkled with red hairs, slim and soft looking. Based on the last couple of days, not a lot of people had appreciated Mycroft’s body, but Greg found it worked for him – his half-hard cock had twitched itself fully into life as his eyes roamed. They slipped along Mycroft’s stomach and lower, unable to stop tracking their progress until his gaze settled between Mycroft’s legs.

More precisely, his gaze settled on the cock standing out from Mycroft’s body, water sluicing down its length. He swallowed hard, the loofah pausing over ribs as Greg realised that Mycroft was just as aroused as he was. Probably why he’s got his eyes closed, Greg thought, clever bastard. The evidence did allow Greg’s uncertainly to slip away with the last of the bubbles, as he replaced the loofah with his hands.

“Greg!”

Mycroft gasped his name, eyes opening as gentle fingers settled over his hips, holding him steady while Greg shifted his body forward, their cocks sliding along each other.

Greg stifled a groan, though badly, and his eyes fluttered closed at the contact. Christ, none of his recent shags had provoked this response from him, and they’d actually been trying. The idea of Mycroft putting some thought and planning into how best get him off made Greg groan again and
flex his glutes, hips canting again and repeating the sensation.

He felt Mycroft’s hands land on his own upper arms, and he forced himself to open his eyes. If he looked half as wrecked as Mycroft, he must be a sight. The soap had rinsed away at this point, and Mycroft’s mouth hung open, his breath coming in shallow gasps, eyes wide, pupils blown wide.

“This okay?” Greg managed, holding himself still as he waited for Mycroft’s answer.

The pause seemed to be less about thinking time and more about his inability to speak, as he finally closed his mouth and nodded fervently.

Greg grinned, thrusting his hips and gathering Mycroft closer, sucking his mouth to that delectable neck. He’d been expecting Mycroft’s knees to buckle, and was ready to catch his weight when it did. He pressed backwards, Mycroft now leaning against the tiled wall as they thrust their hips together. Greg dragged his mouth upwards, groaning loudly when Mycroft finally pulled himself together enough to grab Greg’s arse, his thrusts becoming more savage as the sensation appeared to overtake his thinking.

Greg kissed Mycroft hard, pushing his head back against the wall, plundering the hot wet space, Mycroft giving as good as he got. Both their bodies were wet and hot all over, matching the feel of their mouths, but Greg needed more. He could almost come just from listening to the huffs and moans Mycroft was making, but he still wriggled one fist between their bodies, his mouth on Mycroft’s as he grasped their cocks in his hand, tight and hard.

“Uh!” Mycroft grunted at the new sensation.

Greg grinned, resting his forehead on Mycroft’s, concentrating on the rhythm. He could see his cock and Mycroft’s joined in his fist, could feel the soft skin of their cocks sliding together, a direct contrast to the calloused roughness of his own hand.

Just as he thought he could hold out no longer, Mycroft grabbed at his arse, burying his face in Greg’s neck as his hips stuttered and cock pulsed against Greg’s hand. With all the hot liquid around, Greg couldn’t feel the usual wetness on his stomach but that was the last thing on his mind – the sight and sound of Mycroft coming had tipped him over himself, grabbing at Mycroft’s arse with one hand as he gripped their cocks with the other, grunting into Mycroft’s shoulder as the blinding white overcame him.

They stood together, bodies slowly relaxing until the hot water came to an abrupt and unpleasant finish. The change in temperature had them both jumping, Greg swearing, “Fuck!” as he reached for the taps.

Both men ended up standing outside the shower, towelling cold water off their bodies, staring at each other in silence until Mycroft said, “I hope you aren’t upset that I changed the plan.” His slightly arch smile told Greg that he was attempting to lighten the mood.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Greg replied with a little smile of his own, “though it ended far more suddenly than I planned.” He scowled at the shower and was amazed to hear Mycroft giggle. Greg stared at him in semi-mock surprise. “Did you just giggle at me, Mycroft?”

Mycroff shrugged, another giggle escaping.

Greg stepped closer, his towel anchored around his waist, the post-orgasm glow still flowing, bringing the familiar feeling of bliss, with the extra delicious edge of something new developing. He brought one hand to the back of Mycroft’s head, fingers tangling in the damp red curls. Greg’s
kiss was soft and chaste, and he tried to convey his affection and the feeling that something precious was blooming, something he wanted to nurture and protect. He was fairly sure he succeeded, based on the gasp from Mycroft, his wide eyes and parted lips.

“I’ll dress while you have the bathroom, if that’s alright?” Mycroft asked, the blush on his cheeks marking his fluster.

Greg nodded, doing everything he needed to do before changing places with Mycroft, sliding past the familiar print of his t-shirt and pyjamas draped over Mycroft’s frame. Both dropped their gaze, the informality of these personal rituals somehow more intimate than their shared experience in the shower.

Once Greg was dressed, he climbed into bed, a wave of exhaustion coming over him. They’d really not had enough sleep between the fort and the wedding, and he’d been on edge at some level for most of the day – worrying about Mycroft’s worrying, annoyance at Thomas Langley at the wedding, the tense atmosphere on the way back to Greg’s B&B, then uncertainty in the shower before it became plain that they were both hoping for the same outcome.

Mycroft returned, self-consciously returning his toiletry bag to his overnight bag before ducking under the covers with Greg. They slid down together, the lamp on Greg’s side the last remaining illumination. Mycroft had turned to face Greg, one arm folded under his pillow. It allowed Greg to see his expression, and though he was getting better, he couldn’t read it.

“Not planning a trip to Denmark, I hope?” he murmured.

Mycroft shook his head. “Quite the opposite, in fact.” Greg raised one eyebrow, and he explained, “I feel calm.”

It was such a simple statement, yet Greg felt its magnitude in the quiet pride in Mycroft’s voice. He wondered how long it had been since Mycroft had examined his emotions and settled on calm; moreover, how long since he’d had someone to share it with?

“Excellent,” Greg replied, their shared smile rekindling the bliss he’d been feeling. It flowed like honey through his body, warming and heavy, dragging him back towards rest. Turning, he flicked off the light before returning to envelope Mycroft in his arms and plunge almost immediately into sleep.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

The morning after the night before.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Mycroft woke slowly, which was unusual in itself. His body felt loose and heavy, and as his eyes opened, squinting into the light, he wondered why his body was behaving so oddly. He waited, gathering data about his surroundings until his mind made the leap.

Greg…Without moving, he tried to sense where Greg lay, not wanting to wake him. When a gentle snore sounded behind him, Mycroft risked carefully rolling away from Greg, sliding his legs over the edge of the bed and sitting up. He twisted backwards, looking for a long moment at the ruffled silver hair and mouth hanging adorably open.

The pang of uncertainty that had been swirling in his stomach coalesced into a sharp stab of fear. Silently, Mycroft undressed, leaving Greg’s nightclothes on the floor before dressing in the chinos and jumper he’d worn the first night, packed by Anthea. With an anxious glance at Greg, Mycroft collected his belongings and eased open the door, slipping out into the corridor.

As he hurried down the stairs and outside, Mycroft made a sharp exhalation, half gasp, half sob. He hesitated, not knowing where to go, needing space to clear his mind before he spoke to anyone, especially Greg.

A thought came to him, and he turned to stride quickly up the road. Dropping his belongings on the covered porch of the Shuttle Inn, Mycroft found his scarf – the wind was already sneaking cold fingers down his neck – and continued up the road, following the path he and Greg had explored on that first night together. As Mycroft thought about it, he was amazed it had been only two days since that time.

The panic that had driven him to flee from Greg’s bed had subsided somewhat; his stomach was still in knots, his breathing a little erratic. Mycroft’s mind was quick but right now it was racing, trying to think a thousand thoughts at once. He spotted a bench recessed into the wall and sat himself on it, staring across to the other Fort on the far side of the water. The surface was choppy, little waves dancing across his view as he tried to think.

What had caused him to react that way? Certainly, he wanted to be with Greg. It had been the moment that he’d remembered yesterday.

No, not yesterday, last night. After Greg had turned off the light, Mycroft had sunk into sleep, needing none of his usual mindfulness tricks to relax. He’d slept deeply, not waking periodically as he sometimes did; so what was it?

Mycroft took a deep breath, beginning at the start of yesterday and running through his memories of the day, searching for the recollection that had driven his reaction this morning.
“Look it wasn’t the worst conversation,” Greg had enjoyed his conversation with Thomas Langley, that much had been clear; the insidious voice in his head reminded Mycroft how little interest football held for him.

Greg would miss talking about the football if he was with you. As Mycroft’s face warmed with the flush he knew was spreading across it, other examples rose to flood his memory - moments Greg would have surely found Mycroft more effort than he was worth.

“She’s very good.”

“She’s very nosy.”

“She gave me these and told me to use the hours until morning wisely.”

He ground his teeth together in frustration. Anthea! This was all down to her, of course. If she hadn’t interfered, influencing Fiona to shift their seats together, he and Greg might had simply gone their separate ways from the rehearsal dinner, destined only to nod at each other at the wedding. Greg would not have had to endure her meddling, bringing Mycroft’s bags to Greg’s door, passing him prophylactics, for God’s sake!

For all the righteous anger Mycroft was trying hard to muster, he knew that Anthea was not to blame. Her ability to anticipate his needs was part of her job, after all. The condoms were probably beyond her job description, but Mycroft could see how the action fit into her previous pattern of behaviour and if he had not anticipated it what right did he have to be angry? There was nobody to blame but himself – a man like Greg would not want to spend his life being so patient with someone like Mycroft.

Bending forward, Mycroft ran his hands over his head, resting them on the back of his neck for a moment before sitting up and breathing deeply. He never second guessed his behaviour like this; he made a considered assessment of the situation and chose his actions accordingly.

This was not one of those times, though; from the moment he’d directed Greg down the longer path from the church to the rehearsal dinner, very few of his actions had borne his usual level of deliberation. He’d acted on impulse, from a desire to see Greg smile, to catch his scent, to hear his laugh; rationality and consideration had been distant and ignored. The hedonistic approach, he berated himself. And now here he sat, cold from the seat seeping through his trousers, fingertips tingling with the cold wind.

Mycroft stared unseeingly across the water, his rational brain now looking at the last two days, weighing up the likelihood that this relationship would transfer successfully back to London, where both he and Greg were inevitably bound. He steeled himself, allowing the expression in Greg’s eyes, the desire and affection to cross his mind’s eye as he probed for meaning – lust or something more?

His lack of experience was a handicap, but nevertheless, Mycroft saw enough evidence to uphold the hypothesis his mind had proposed: that this was a holiday romance, nothing more. Greg’s emotional attachment was tenuous; there was almost no chance that it would survive the rigours of their respective lives in London. Best to leave it here, before its inevitable corruption lead to resentment and bitterness, tainting the memories forever.

Mycroft allowed himself three minutes of sorrow, the grief almost overpowering him as he shook before he straightened, quashing the emotions he’d so foolishly allowed to creep out. Restrained once again, they pushed against his consciousness. He ignored them, knowing that they would eventually quieten, if never completely leave him in peace. An image of Greg’s face, confused and
worried at his absence, rose but Mycroft pushed it down.

*Why would he want you?* his inner voice taunted, and he shoved at it too, even as his heart of hearts bent under the weight of that truth.

+++ 

Greg stretched, the rumpled blankets shifting easily under his outstretched fingers. He frowned, eyes still closed against the light as he searched for Mycroft. When he realised the bed was empty, and cold at that, his eyes opened, blinking rapidly as his brain switched on.

“Whe…Mycroft?” he croaked. Greg cleared his throat as he struggled to sit up, trying to clear his head and throat at the same time as looking around the room, searching for Mycroft. The room was quiet and still. Greg knew before his bare feet hit the floor that Mycroft was not there, but he rounded the bed to check the bathroom anyway. His heart, which had started thumping, dropped when he saw the puddle of discarded pyjamas on Mycroft’s side of the bed.

“Oh, Mycroft.” Greg whispered, sitting hard on the mattress, his eyes unable to move from the nightclothes on the floor. He didn’t need to be a Holmes to deduce what this meant – if Mycroft had risen without waking him, had left his pyjamas on the floor and had taken his things – the kilt and overnight bag were gone – it only meant one thing.

Mycroft had fled.

Greg felt blank. When the shock started to wear off a little, he stood suddenly, searching for his phone, finally finding it in his jacket pocket.

As he went to call Mycroft, he remembered – Anthea had stolen his phone in London. Greg had no way to reach Mycroft, not here in Ireland, anyway. It was too long to wait until they were back in London – Greg’s flight was tonight, but Mycroft had another day or so. Unacceptable. He changed mental direction, calling up Anthea’s number instead.

“Greg?” Anthea sounded groggy, he thought, the first time he’d ever caught her off guard.

“Where is he?” Greg asked. He had no patience for niceties, not this morning. A low level of anxiety was coursing through his body, like on the way to a tricky scene – his brain and body were gearing up to be *on*.

“Mycroft?” Anthea must have been deeply asleep if she was taking this long to join the conversation, Greg thought crossly.

“Of course Mycroft. Who the hell else would I be asking about?” Greg snapped at her.

There was a silence as she clearly pulled herself together, because the voice that now answered Greg was far more like the Anthea he’d known before this wedding weekend. “You don’t know where he is.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Would I be calling you if I did?” Greg snapped again.

He waited impatiently as she thought, then said abruptly, “I’ll take care of this.” The line went dead and Greg blinked at his phone as it told him she’d hung up.

“Shit!” he swore to himself. The anxiety was now ramping up, the energy his body was sending to deal with the crisis overflowing and making him jittery. He grabbed the first clothes he could find in his bag, a pair of old jeans, long sleeved t-shirt and a jumper – not really going out clothes, but
needs must.

He fought against the panic rising in his throat as his brain unhelpfully provided both possibilities for Mycroft’s absence drowned, car accident, abducted and reasons for his stealthy departure regret, panic, disgust. He grabbed his phone and keys and raced out of the building. Stopping in the street, he hesitated. Which way would Mycroft have gone?

He closed his eyes for a moment, thinking about what Mycroft had said the previous night. I spent a lot of time alone, became very comfortable with my own thoughts.

“The Fort.” Greg breathed. Mycroft would never head into town if he wanted to think. Greg was only beginning to understand Mycroft, but he knew the quiet man would seek solitude if he was upset or wanted to think. The path to the Fort was far less busy than town. Greg turned and jogged up the hill, pausing in front of the Shuttle Inn. He’d check the Fort first, then come back to the Inn, he decided.

+++ 

Mycroft continued walking all the way to the Fort, which was open, happy tourists streaming through the heavy doors. He watched them cross the bridge into the historic structure, remembering the feel of Greg’s skin on his as he’d been pulled through those doors.

Do you believe in magic? Greg had whispered in his ear. Mycroft shivered at the memory of Greg’s breath skittering across his skin. There had been something there, he thought, something that had bound them as they explored the Fort together. His mood rose slowly as he remembered their conversations, the touches, the flirting. And why shouldn’t it work in London? Surely it was worth a try, at least. Mycroft had resigned himself a long time ago to the idea that he was not an attractive man. Greg Lestrade had shown him a tantalising alternative over the last two days, but Mycroft’s first instinct was to reject it as inconsistent with the other available data.

Every relationship you are in will fail. Until one doesn’t.

Where had he heard that before? Mycroft couldn’t remember, but it seemed apt for this delicately balanced moment. It only takes one person, and what if that one person was Greg? Perhaps the logical decision making that had defined his life, and which he had abandoned during this trip, was not the answer. The alternative had certainly provided him with an experience he had never dreamed possible. This kind of emotion-based decision making was not something Mycroft wrestled with often, but finally he came to a conclusion. It left him exhausted, breathing hard and filled with uncertainty and determination in equal measures.

He turned, walking briskly along the road, a shorter route back to the Silverston.

He’s worth the risk.

+++ 

“Fuck!” Greg’s expletive was quiet but vehement. He’d jogged all the way to the Fort and back, with no sign of Mycroft. Walking into Mycroft’s accommodation was easy, but his room was locked and the landlady was under strict instructions not to admit anyone.

“Anyone!” She’d almost-shrieked at Greg, who raised his hands and backed down the stairs. He turned back in frustration to see her eying him suspiciously. Running one hand over his sweaty head, Greg stood in the street, wondering if he could scale the outside of the building to climb in Mycroft’s window. Ten years ago, maybe.
Greg walked back to the Silverston, planning a quick shower before he went back to meet Anthea at Mycroft’s. His detective brain had kicked in, noting that if Anthea had taken Mycroft’s phone and laptop, she had probably taken his passport, too; it was unlikely he had left the immediate area, let alone the country. He’d have to come back eventually, and Greg would be waiting.

Checking his phone once again on the chance Anthea had called him back, Greg stared at the time, then checked the bus time he’d circled.

“Fuck!” he felt it was worthy of another outburst – he had ten minutes to pack or he’d miss the bus to the airport. There was no way he could afford another flight, and he was pretty sure the next one wouldn’t be until tomorrow, so it would be another night’s accommodation on top, plus he’d miss work. His DCI would not be happy with that. Thoughts of Mycroft on the back burner, Greg whirled around his room, packing everything he could get his hands on before racing down the stairs and checking out at lightning speed.

+++  
“Checked out?” Mycroft repeated dumbly. He blinked at the woman behind the desk. “Are you sure?”

She bristled at the implication. “Of course I am! He was in a hurry, I’ll tell you, but he paid in full, even made sure I knew what he’d drunk out of the minibar."

Mycroft’s shoulders drooped. “Thank you for your assistance.” He nodded and attempted a smile, then walked in a daze back to the Shuttle Inn, dropping like a stone on the bed.

Greg had left without him.

Mycroft’s brain unhelpfully filled in the blanks – Greg must have realised Mycroft had fled and felt so upset (Hurt? Shocked? Humiliated? Disgusted?) he’d packed and left immediately for the airport. A flush of embarrassment heated Mycroft’s neck. How could he face Greg now, having been so rude and ungrateful? After Greg had been so understanding and considerate in all their dealings, listening to Mycroft drone on about the Fort and the roses and the stupid deduction game...his behaviour had been disgraceful, there was no excuse, Greg would certainly never forgive him for it…

+++  
Greg made the bus with two minutes to spare. Just enough time to text Mycroft. He’d get the message once he got to London, which was better than nothing.

_Had to run or I’d miss my flight. Hope you’re okay. Call me when you get this. Greg_

Checking that the driver was still working on his pre-drive cigarette, Greg tried Anthea one last time.

“Any luck?” he asked as soon as she answered.

“No,” she admitted, and he thought he heard some worry in her voice. “I’ve called the landlady and she said he hasn’t been back all night.”

“He stayed with me,” Greg told her, too worried to be embarrassed.

“I figured,” she replied, and it was a sign of her own worry that she didn’t make a dig, Greg thought.
“I have to catch my flight back to London, I can’t afford to be late back at work tomorrow,” Greg told her, ignoring the gnawing sensation that marked a bad decision being made.

“Well I’m in town, but I’m going to head back to the Inn right now. I’ve got the local police on the lookout for him too.”

“I’d have thought he’d have a locator beacon wired into his arm or something.” Greg tried a lame joke.

“He only activates it on special occasions,” Anthea replied, her own joke equally feeble. At least we’re both pathetic, Greg thought wryly.

“Let me know if you find him,” Greg asked her, nodding at the driver who was indicating the time.

“I will let you know he’s safe,” Anthea said, and Greg noted the carefully wording. She was still loyal to Mycroft, then. Good.

Greg boarded the bus and settled in his seat, his mind still racing between drowned, car accident, abducted and regret, panic, disgust.

+++ Mycroft felt his breathing becoming shallow, his head starting to swim. He stood to answer the knock at the door, his eyes looking blankly at Anthea.

“Shit,” He heard her say from a very long way away. Hands help him down to the floor, his head between his knees, a hand firmly on his back to keep him there.

“Breath, Mycroft.”

She only calls me that when it’s important, his brain told him, so he did as he was told, breathing deeply as she guided him. When he finally felt more stable, Mycroft sat up, eyes still on the floor. He could see Anthea’s gown, puddled across the floor where she’d hitched it up before kneeling down to him.

“Greg?” she asked, and he nodded.

She sighed. “Did you fuck it up, or did he?”

Mycroft pointed a single finger at himself, then let his hand drop back into his lap.

“Alright,” she said. “We’ll leave in fifteen minutes.”

He nodded without looking up, blood still rushing in his ears. He wasn’t sure if he imagined her voice saying softly, “I’m sorry, Mycroft.”

Chapter End Notes

Every relationship you are in will fail. Until one doesn’t. - Dan Savage, relationship guy.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Mycroft returns to London.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The dip in his stomach was the only indication that their plane had taken off. Mycroft stared out the window without seeing the view, his mind oddly blank. Of all the reactions he’d experienced over the hours since he’d realised Greg – Detective Inspector Lestrade – had left Kinsale without so much as a note, this was the most disconcerting. He had never had such an experience. His brain was so often running ahead of his consciousness that this curious nothingness was highly disturbing. With effort, Mycroft could focus his attention, provided the matter was small and simple, but without this effort his train of thought would slide away, replaced by the smothering blanket of fog that dulled his whole being.

“Sir?” Anthea subtly gained Mycroft’s attention.

He dragged his eyes back to the inside of the small but luxurious aircraft.

“Yes?” He replied, waiting for her to speak. It was odd to have to wait on people to express their needs without having automatically deduced them.

“Your laptop, sir.” Anthea was being particularly formal, which was not surprising. She had been more flustered than he had seen her when she had arrived back at his accommodation earlier that morning. While she’d helped him recover from his hyperventilation, her speech had been uneven and he had had to ask twice before she’d registered his desire to leave immediately for London. Her recovery had been swift, of course, and she was already back to peak efficiency.

Mycroft turned on his laptop, grateful for the certain stream of emails and messages that would await his attention. With any luck, they could drive directly to the office and he could submerge himself in the world events he had missed over this disastrous weekend.

“Sir?” Anthea’s voice broke again into his reverie, sounding more hesitant than earlier. Mycroft knew that should mean something but the slowness of his brain made deduction impossible. Instead, he raised one eyebrow in query.

“I told Greg I would let him know that you are safe. He was…worried about you before he left.” She opened her mouth to go on, but Mycroft cut her off, unable to listen to testimony of Greg’s disappointment in him.

“Fine.”

He returned his attention to his laptop, blinking rapidly as an image of Greg’s face rose in front of him. Something rose in his throat, too, and he swallowed hard, pushing it resolutely down.

“Shall I…is there any other message?” Anthea asked delicately.
Mycroft sighed. “N-none. Perhaps we can focus on our w-work now?” The stutter was slight, and Mycroft was mortified that his emotions were overriding so many years of careful work.

Anthea looked at him for a long moment, then nodded, taking out his work phone, murmuring something about screening his messages.

Mycroft took a deep breath, clicking on the first email in his inbox, willing the work to drag him into its complexities.

The flight was short and it was not yet dark when they landed at Heathrow. At Mycroft’s request, they drove straight to the Diogenes Club, where his privacy would be assured and he could work undisturbed. His colleagues would assume his absence until tomorrow, and he did not wish to alert them to his presence in London – assuming they did not already know.

Once Anthea had departed and he was seated in his usual chair in the reading room, Mycroft tried to work. The stab of disappointment was sharp when he finally took out his phones to find several messages – but none from Greg. Frustratingly, his concentration was shattered time and again by flashes of the past two days. His brain was still processing much of the data, and without warning he would feel the warmth of Greg’s – *Detective Inspector Lestrade’s* – hand, or taste the terrible Scotch he’d been drinking last night. Finally he gave it up as a lost cause, closing his laptop and sighing as loudly as he dared in the silent room. The question he faced was new to him – what was he to do?

He reviewed the events of this morning, searching for a detail that might point him in the right direction. The events of the previous night had been unexpected and if he was being honest with himself, had frightened him. He had frightened himself – not a soul in this world except his parents and his tutor had known about his stutter – not even Sherlock.

And yet he had told Gre – Lestrade – without a moment’s hesitation.

While it was true that he was a generally trustworthy person with no reason to hold something over Mycroft, he was still astounded at himself for revealing such an intimate moment.

*And what was that shower if not intimate?* His subconscious pointed out.

Because it wasn’t only the sex, it was the closeness that had brought on such an overwhelming wave of emotions that morning as he’d looked at Greg. The sex was not entirely new, but that honesty, to be seen by someone without judgement or rejection, was new and frightening. Some part of him must have recognised the danger, then, of such exposure and prompted him to flee and find some space this morning.

But why did Lestrade leave? Perhaps his admissions had been too much; his inexperience in such matters making him pushy. He had, after all, been excruciatingly honest about his hesitance for physical intimacy, then changed his mind later.

What if Greg had felt pushed into their actions on Saturday night when Mycroft had changed his mind? He would have been relieved to find Mycroft gone, to be able to slip away without awkward conversation.

No doubt he was either going to avoid Mycroft now, or go out of his way to want to talk, to make it clear that he wasn’t comfortable with someone so inexperienced, so volatile and unpredictable…

A small sob escaped Mycroft, and one had flew up to cover his mouth – even that small sound was forbidden in this public space. He snatched up his laptop and fled to his private office, slamming
the door behind him. He leaned against the dark wood, head thudding as it dropped back too.

Mycroft hugged the laptop to his chest, eyes closed as he fought back the emotion. There was no escaping it, he’d ruined whatever it was that had started with Lestra – with Greg. Greg, who had been such a wonderful surprise, and now surely resented him, wanting nothing more than to forget the whole experience.

Mycroft’s knees gave way and he sank to the floor, the wool of his suit sliding against the door. The dam of his resolve broke and his suppressed emotion poured free, knuckles white as they clutched the laptop still pressed to his chest. Hot tears rolled sideways across his face, and the soft carpet caressed his face as he lay sideways, shaking with grief and relief and anxiety and sadness.

Mycroft had no awareness of the time that had passed as he lay on the floor. His thighs were burning from drawing his knees to his chest; shoulders cramped from hunching over, face tight and hot from the tears that had fallen relentlessly as he wept. Swallowing against his dry mouth, Mycroft wondered if he had been calling out; his throat was sore, and he supposed it was possible. There was nobody here to hear him, to respond; he was as alone here as anywhere.

Slowly, the panic subsided and his body relaxed, leaving him feeling drained and weak. It took another long few moments before he felt well enough to sit up, bracing against the expected rush of blood to his head.

He scrubbed the back of his hand across his face in a rough gesture, wetness and the crust of dried tears pulling on the hot skin of his face. Sighing, Mycroft set his laptop aside and stood up, using the side table as a crutch until he was sure his legs would carry him. The bathroom was close, and he walked slowly, breathing carefully as he shuffled like an old man.

Cold water on his face made him feel momentarily better, at least until he saw his reflection in the mirror.

His whole face was puffy, with a marked redness on the right side where the carpet had irritated his skin. The bloodshot eyes that stared back contrasted sharply with the blue of his irises, the only cool colour on his whole face. He tried to flatten out the ruffled hair on the right, failing miserably. The muscles of his hand were cramped from the grip they had maintained throughout his episode, and his efforts were still clumsy.

The heels of both hands dug hard into his eyes, before resting on the cool marble as he leaned in and looked at himself, eyes unblinking. His freckles were visible even under the evidence of his crying, and he recalled the despair he’d felt, staring at himself that first morning in Kinsale. He’d wondered if he really had anything to offer, and that feeling had returned twofold. This weekend was further proof to the argument for the negative, he thought morosely.

Turning, Mycroft walked slowly across the tiled floor, no longer interested in examining the disappointing image reflected back at him.

*Pas de pleurs sur le lait répandu*, his mother would say.

He collected his things and pulled out his phone, ordering a car to take him home. He’d get an early night and start fresh tomorrow.

Avoiding the driver’s gaze was not even necessary, given the discretion with which his drivers did their jobs; a dishevelled Mycroft was hardly the most scandalous thing most would have encountered, but he was grateful to reach the sanctuary of his home anyway.
It was not as ostentatious as most people imagined, though it was still nicer than most could afford. He let himself in, the biometric alarms resetting as the door closed behind him. Without sparing a glance either side, Mycroft headed for bed, feeling a thousand years old, broken and weary. He changed into pyjamas, finished in the bathroom and collapsed into bed, sleep immediately and mercifully claiming him.

“God, I know, how could I have even thought about it?” Greg’s voice was scornful, dripping with disdain. Mycroft was in the offices of NSY, waiting to speak to Greg for something, an unimportant detail. The conversation was loud and crude, and Mycroft’s face burned as Greg regaled the most intimate of details from their weekend to his team. Their faces were exaggerated, laughing mouths overly large, eyes bright with malice and scorn.

Gasping, Mycroft went to turn, but tripped, landing somehow at Greg’s feet, surrounded by the faces of NSY – the forensics tech, that nasty Sergeant, the mousy little pathologist, even Sherlock and John. They continued laughing, pointing now at him, their bodies stretching impossibly over him. Despite all this, Mycroft desperately sought Greg in the chaos. His face was twisted with a sneer of contempt and as Mycroft reached for him he turned away…

Heart pounding Mycroft woke, gasping air into his starved lungs. A dream, it must have been a dream.

He brought one shaking hand to his forehead, fighting to breathe calmly, knowing the hysterical gasps would only prolong the experience. With closed eyes he brought himself back to a steady inhale-pause-exhale-pause, feeling his pulse slow and the shaking subside as he did.

“Greg…” Mycroft whispered into the darkness, rolling over in his bed. It had always been his alone, yet it was only now that it felt empty. He took in a deep stuttering breath. There was nothing to be done now, the damage had been done. Better he put the whole disaster behind him and focus on what he was good at – protecting Britain and her subjects – even those that weren’t interested in Mycroft Holmes.

Chapter End Notes

Pas de pleurs sur le lait répandu - It’s no good crying over spilled milk.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Greg is also back in London.

Greg groaned as he rolled over, or tried to. The edge of the sofa was too close for a full roll – he had to do a kind of scootch and shift thing, hips bumping across so he could turn away from the bright light. The scratchy fabric tickled the end of his nose but he didn’t care. Too tired to get up, too wired to sleep; this was his life now, apparently.

A key scraped in the lock of the door but he didn’t move – it was either someone he knew or not, and neither option made a difference. He didn’t want to see anyone.

“Greg?” John’s voice float down the hall to the living room, and Greg closed his eyes against the intrusion. He was practically buried under the blankets, but the extra layer between himself and the world made him feel better anyway.

He heard John’s footsteps getting closer, until they stopped in the doorway as John took stock. Greg’s mind supplied the image of what John would see; empty beer bottles and take away containers, prescription and over the counter medication packets strewn across the table; a sticky puddle where a beer had spilled and Greg hadn’t bothered to clean it up. A lump on the sofa, that was him; the blankets covering the shirt and trousers he’d been wearing when he arrived home four days ago and rolled himself onto the sofa, unable to keep up the pretence of having a life any longer.

“Greg.” Doctor Watson was evidently making house calls, from the professional tone Greg could make out; he wished the good Doctor would just fuck off and leave him to his misery.

“Greg, I’m not leaving until I know you’re alright.”

Christ, he was pushy, Greg griped to himself. He sighed, rolling over, squinting against the light and ignoring John’s reaction.

“What did you get these?” John asked bluntly, holding up the half empty sleeping tablets and antibiotics.

Greg shrugged, too tired to argue. He was so tired, just bone weary of all this… “Doctor.” He answered expressionlessly.

John examined the sleeping pills. “When…Jeez, this was only issued this week.” He checked the box, figuring out how many were missing. “Right, I’m taking these with me, your liver will thank you. Especially with the booze, Greg.”

John shifted a pizza box and some beer bottles, sitting down on the coffee table. Greg had no option but to look at him, bleary eyes struggling to focus as he sat up.

“Have you been taking these properly?” John asked, shaking the antibiotics.

“Last dose was before…” Greg waved a hand around, vaguely indicating the state of the flat.
“Symptoms gone, then?” Doctor Watson issued a severe look, and Greg managed a weak grin.

“Yes, Doctor.”

The look on John’s face softened. “Good. Now, Doctor’s orders. You get yourself into the shower and I’ll knock us up something decent to eat.”

Greg wanted to protest, but opening his mouth he felt a lump in his throat. Protest or cry, he realised, shutting his mouth and nodding instead. He stood up slowly, feeling the blood rushing to his head before making his way unsteadily to the bathroom. As he stripped the filthy clothes off, he could hear John moving about; clinking bottles told Greg that he was probably cleaning up. A wave of mortification came over him, and he closed his eyes against it. How pathetic am I, he thought.

+++ 

The shower had made Greg feel more awake but not necessarily better. He’d not bothered shaving, trusting neither his still blurry vision or shaking hands, and the growth was itchy against his fingers. Maybe he’d grow a beard, he thought with no enthusiasm.

“Thanks,” Greg said quietly as he sat at his table. The flat was tiny but John had tidied the kitchen and sitting room and it looked much better for its clean, clear surfaces. The bedding was gone, presumably back on the bed, and there was something cooking on the stove. He sat, feeling small and frail as John moved quietly and efficiently, serving pasta and a big glass of water to each of them.

“There’s more if you want it.” John told him, as the meal loomed in front of Greg. Despite the mess that had been strewn across his sitting room, he’d barely eaten over the past four days. Ordering food because he knew he should eat and actually forcing it down were two separate actions, and the first came far more easily than the second.

“Thanks,” Greg repeated, forking a small mouthful, chewing mechanically and swallowing. He glanced up at John, who seemed completely at ease in this awkward situation.

“You’re wondering if I’ve done this before,” John asked, catching Greg off guard.

“Yes.” It was a very Sherlock thing to say, Greg thought.

“You know my sister’s a drinker.” Greg nodded. “Every couple of months she’d disappear off the radar and I’d do this. Come and find her, clean her up, feed her, make her talk to me about whatever the hell’s the matter.” John explained in a matter of fact way, no doubt glossing over the emotional toll such a responsibility held. “I learned to bring garbage bags, air freshener and a pasta dinner.” Greg blushed, realising that John would have used all those things in his efforts today. The silence fell again, feeling awkward to Greg once more.

“Why are you here?” he blurted finally.

It was Captain Watson, this time who looked across the table. “You’re a friend, Greg, and nobody – not even work – has seen or heard from you in four days.” The shrug was nonchalant, but Greg saw the anger and tension in John’s shoulders. “If you were dead or sick or injured, I was the logical one to deal with it. Plus I was worried, you massive wanker.”

John sipped at his water then sat back, arms folded. “So go on, then, tell me what the hell’s happened. I assume it was something in Ireland.”
Greg nodded, the pasta like cardboard in his mouth. He swallowed, chasing it with water and hoping it would stay down. Taking a deep breath, he opened his mouth.

“Mycroft was there.”

Whatever John was expecting, it wasn’t that, based on his reaction. “Right.” John replied cautiously.

“He was…different. Open. Charming. Attractive.” Greg’s mind reeled with all the adjectives to describe Mycroft, but he clamped down against the rhapsody bursting forth. His hands hurt, and he realised he was twisting his fingers together.

“We…talked at the rehearsal dinner. Walked home together, then up to this old Fort. Went to the wedding together. He stayed over after.” Greg could see John struggling to contain his astonishment. The bare facts were hard enough to recount without the vivid memories that came with each statement.

We talked at the rehearsal dinner…

Walked home together…

…up to this old Fort.

Went to the wedding together…

He stayed over…

John spoke hesitantly. “So, you’re seeing him, then?”

Greg wanted to raise his head to look at John, but the prickle of tears flooded him with shame. He shook his head, the tiniest of actions to encompass the collapse of his world. The return of the Black Dog.

“What happened?” John asked quietly. They sat in the silence for a long time, Greg thought, though he really had no awareness of that kind of thing lately. He took a deep breath, steeling himself to tell John the whole sorry tale.

“When I woke up on Sunday he was gone. I went looking, I called Anthea, she hadn’t seen him. He didn’t have his mobile,” John’s eyebrows flew up at this but he remained silent, “so I couldn’t call him. I had to go meet my flight but I texted him, and Anthea knew I was looking for him.”

Greg swallowed, the rest of the story newer and still so raw it burned. “I haven’t heard from him since. No reply to my message, or the messages since then. I’ve called Anthea who never picks up.” He ran one hand over his silver hair, still damp from the shower, and gave a half-chuckle, half-sob.

“I’ve been around to Baker Street to see Sherlock, plus there’s the cameras there,” John nodded, Mycroft’s bugging of his home was old news, “and the CCTV on the street, and the bugs in my office and on my phone. Nothing. He doesn’t want to see me. Whatever I’ve done, I have no idea what it could be.”

His voice had become progressively thicker as he spoke, the last few words choking past the lump in his throat. A splash of liquid on his jeans, then another as his eyes overflowed. He hadn’t detailed how often he’d stood at a corner, staring up into a CCTV camera, wishing he could crawl inside to talk to Mycroft. Or picked up his phone and started talking without dialling, knowing they
were recording everything, desperate to hear Mycroft’s voice.

The sleeping pills had seemed like a good idea – better than the dreams, surely – but they left him feeling worse, like sections of his life had been erased, and most of the missing pills had been thrown down the sink in a fit of rage and grief one night.

After a moment he pulled himself together and finished the story. “That was a week ago, that I gave up. Five days of nonstop trying, and all I got was a sinus infection. My DCI sent me on sick leave, doc gave me the sleeping pills, and….yeah,” he finished lamely, not wanting or needing to detail the last four days of self-imposed isolation.

“Fuck,” John muttered.

“Yeah,” Greg agreed, and oddly enough, the simply statement from John (his friend, apparently) comforted him somewhat.

“Not that I see Mycroft, but if I do, should I…” John asked, and Greg shook his head violently.

“No, no, no…” he whispered frantically, feeling his eyes go wide and heart pound.

John nodded, though he now bit his lip, chewing a little anxiously.

“Look, Greg,” he hesitated, Doctor Watson taking over once again, “I’m worried about how you’re dealing with this. I really think you should talk to someone about what’s going on.”

Greg nodded, feeling the tears coming again, powerless to stop them. “I know,” he said in a shaking voice. “I’ve had…I mean, I’ve dealt with this before, but never…” he swallowed, unable to articulate the depth of his emotion and how much it frightened him. After such a short time, why was he so invested in this fledgling relationship? Taking a deep breath, Greg looked at John. “It’s never been like this.”

He was grateful that John understood what he was trying to say. “I can give you the number of a couple of people if you want.”

Greg nodded – he seemed to be doing that a lot today. Easier than talking.

John pushed himself back from the table, taking the plates to the sink. “Why don’t you go to bed? I’ll clean this lot up, then let myself out.”

Greg started to protest, but John just raised an eyebrow and pointed to the bedroom.

Recognising defeat, Greg paused before saying quietly, “Thanks, John.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow.” John replied.

Greg took himself to the bathroom, the quiet domesticity of someone doing the dishes soothing the anxious vibes somewhat. He crawled into bed, where the full belly and comfort of company helped lull him to sleep.

“Sir?” Anthea approached Mycroft, who was seated at a huge desk in a plush office Greg did not recognise.

“Mmm?” Mycroft answered, not looking away from the papers in front of him.
“A report on the Highstone case.”

“Right. And the Inspector...what was his name?” Mycroft asked, accepting the file Anthea offered. He flicked through it, a businesslike interest on his face, nothing more.

“Lestrade, sir.”

“Yes, that’s right. God, I dodged a bullet there, didn’t I?” Mycroft laughed, the colloquialism falling naturally from his lips; it jarred Greg, though he didn’t know why.

“Indeed, sir.” Anthea agreed.

“Bit of fun, but really...that hair, and the scars...and really, a blue collar worker?” Disgust dripped from Mycroft’s words. They literally hung in the air, clunky words drawn above his head like a cartoon, slimy ooze running down each, though the drops never touched any of the expensive décor below, simply disappearing into the air.

Mycroft and Anthea laughed, sharing their disdain at the idea of Mycroft with someone so far beneath him. Their faces were exaggerated, laughing mouths overly large, eyes bright with malice and scorn...

Greg woke to a thumping heart and a pain in his head – in his thrashing to avoid the nightmare, he’d knocked himself out of bed, bashing the side of his face on the bedside table. His breath was coming in sobs, and though the details faded, the emotion of the dream stayed with him. He and Mycroft were never going to work. Why on earth had he allowed himself to think they might?
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

I've been rather remiss lately, so once again, "Thanks, Kara, for your beta work/encouragement!"
*applauds wildly

John let himself into Baker Street and up the stairs, preoccupied by his conversation with Greg. Sherlock didn’t notice his entrance, which allowed him to continue his musings as he sat in his chair, gazing into the middle distance. He was a little worried about Greg – depression was written all over him, and John considered himself professionally bound to oversee the health of his less-than-careful friends. He was glad he’d taken the pills away from Greg, who had been sleeping peacefully when he’d checked in before leaving. The booze was a concern, and he’d have to see if Greg could go back to work on light duties or something – anything was better than sitting around stewing about Mycroft.

Mycroft. John shook his head and chuckled. “Never would have picked that one,” he said quietly.

“Which one?” Sherlock asked, his deep voice startling John.

“Um.” John said blankly, wondering how much he should disclose to Sherlock. He thought back over his conversation with Greg. “Greg’s come to see you since he went to Ireland, right?”

The immediate change in Sherlock was all the answer John needed. Sherlock sat up, abandoning his mind palace pose, stretching his back out as he did so. “Several times. Several boring times,” he amended himself.

“And he asked you about what?” John prompted. He needed Sherlock to bring it up first so he could talk about it without feeling like he was violating the friend code or something. He felt that withering gaze from where Sherlock had been pacing, adding, “Come on, Sherlock…”

“Fine, he and Mycroft…urgh…they…spent some time together in Ireland,” Sherlock finally managed, looking physically sick at the idea.

John grinned a little – seeing Sherlock so discomforted was always a little amusing. “Yeah, that’s the one I’d not have picked.”

Sherlock’s eyes did a quick pass, and he nodded understanding. “You’ve been to see Lestrade. Cleaned up, took his extra meds away, made dinner…a lot like a visit to Harry, then?” he smirked at John, who scowled at the mention of his relationship with his sister.

“Yeah, actually, though heavier on the depression and less of the blackout drinking,” John shot back flatly.

“Depression, after a holiday romance went badly? How mundane,” Sherlock remarked. He’d picked up his violin and sat plucking idly at the strings.

“What did he say when he came here?” John asked over the pizzicato notes. He resolved to suggest lunch or something tomorrow with Greg to get a better idea of what actually happened between the
two of them.

Sherlock shrugged. “Asked about Mycroft, if I had seen him, could I pass on a message, a stammering explanation of their relationship…I had to delete a lot of that, John, there is no part of my mind palace that would not be contaminated by such details. I refused, of course.”

John raised his eyebrows at this last statement. “Why?” he asked, partly dreading the answer.

“My loyalty is to Mycroft,” he replied.

For a beat, John stared, before he chuckled, then started laughing. The sound was flat, oddly mirthless despite its intensity.

“Your loyalty is to Mycroft?” John choked out. Sherlock frowned, so John went on. “You’ve spent half your life irritating, inconveniencing, bothering and being rude to your brother, Sherlock. How on earth can you claim any loyalty to him?”

Sherlock looked as shocked as John felt, though his back had stiffened, lips pressing together instead of the moderately hysterical laughter. “He’s my brother, John.”

The short answer sobered John, who sat up, the lines around his eyes disappearing as his smile faded. “Of course.” John replied.

They sat in silence for a few moments. He’d forgotten that despite their outward animosity, Sherlock and Mycroft deeply valued each other. Their constant sparring was reassurance of their bond; *you’re worth the effort of insulting, brother.*

Of course he’d choose Mycroft over Greg, whose name he could barely remember. Not that there were really sides to take, he told himself. It was just about supporting both Mycroft and Greg.

Having said that, John had no idea how Mycroft was dealing with what had happened in Ireland. Whatever that was.

“So, have you spoken to Mycroft, then?” John asked. “Has he told you what happened? Greg outlined things, but…” he shook his head.

Sherlock replied slowly, “No.” After a moment, he added, “I haven’t had any contact with my brother since his return from Ireland.”

That sounded odd to John – Mycroft was in constant contact, usually nagging and chiding Sherlock at least once a day. “And what exactly did Greg say when he came here to see you? About what happened, I mean.” John felt like he was being really nosy, asking all this, but he had only the most basic outline of the events in Kinsale.

Sherlock sighed dramatically then started in a sarcastic voice, “Look Sherlock your brother and I had a…a thing in Kinsale this weekend, but now he won’t talk to me, I can’t get in touch with him. Can you pass him a message, maybe?” He struck an exaggerated thinking pose, and John wanted to smack him, except that he’d miss out on the message Greg had been trying to get to Mycroft. John was sure Mycroft would have received it – it was an open secret that their rooms were bugged, and there was a good chance Greg knew that too.

He tuned back into Sherlock as he resumed his parody of Greg. “Tell him…tell him I want to see him, to talk. I don’t know what’s going on and I’m worried about him.” Sherlock sighed dramatically then added, “Tell him…Denmark.” His voice broke as he said the last word and he swooned like a damsel in distress, sobbing into his hands. Retelling clearly over, John swatted at
Sherlock, who finally sat up. “I may have exaggerated some parts, of course,” he said sarcastically, “but the dialogue was verbatim.”

John didn’t doubt that. “What does Denmark mean?” he asked.

Sherlock shot him an irritated glance which John interpreted as “I don’t know but I won’t admit that”.

“Right, I’m going out then,” John said abruptly, pushing up from the arms of his chair.

“Where?” Sherlock asked indignantly. “It’s almost midnight.”

John grinned a little, though it didn’t reach his eyes.

“Gonna have a drink with a pretty girl.” Leaving Sherlock speechless was one of John’s favourite things, and the smile it generated was far more genuine.

Standing on the street, John looked into the nearest CCTV and dialled a number on his mobile – for use only in we’re-out-of-contact-Sherlock-is-dying-emergency situations. Like this one. He grinned at the camera and spoke two words. “Five minutes.”

It was a cold five minutes, waiting outside without the jacket he’d forgotten to pick up but refused to go and collect. He knew Sherlock would have spied him standing on the street but was too proud to come and ask him what was going on. When the black car slowed and John got in, he couldn’t resist sending a wink up to Sherlock.

“Hello,” John said calmly, and for the first time in his life, he met the chocolate eyes of Anthea. Her Blackberry wasn’t evident - a first - and he allowed the astonishment to show on his face.

“Things must be dire,” John said. His voice said ‘amused’, his expression said ‘not’.

Anthea inclined her head. “My loyalty is to Mycroft,” she said without preamble or smile. John nodded. She paused, and when he made no attempt to speak, she added, “He’s not coping well with the current personal situation.”

“Neither is Greg,” John replied. Again he waited, knowing that Anthea needed to lead this conversation, giving only the information she felt necessary.

“Mycroft believes it was his mistake that caused their misunderstanding,” she said carefully.

“Greg has no idea what happened,” John supplied. “He assumes he did something. He’s tried to contact Mycroft but can’t get through.” John shot a pointed look at Anthea – much of that was probably her doing, whether at Mycroft’s direct order or her own discretion.

“I deleted the text Greg sent from Kinsale, the day we all left,” Anthea admitted, looking uncomfortable for the first time. “I believed it would protect Mycroft – he could forget the liaison and move on.”

“And it hasn’t worked,” John stated, starting to see how the misunderstanding had played out. “So Mycroft left, Greg doesn’t know why so he sends a text…hang on, if Mycroft left, why is he so upset?”

“He changed his mind, but DI Lestrade had already left to catch his flight.”

“And Mycroft never got his text, or any of his messages, so he thinks that Greg is angry at him.
And Greg doesn’t understand why Mycroft won’t communicate with him,” John summarised. They looked at each other for a long moment. Much as John wanted to judge, he could see how Anthea thought she was protecting Mycroft.

“Shit,” she swore, sounding more surprised than anything else.

John nodded, not wanting to overstep any boundaries.

“So he hasn’t heard the message Greg tried to get through at Baker Street,” John realised. “What does ‘Denmark’ mean, anyway?”

Anthea raised a shoulder and an eyebrow, indicating her own ignorance.

“Well, I’m going to see Greg tomorrow,” John offered, “I could ask him then.”

Anthea nodded. “I suspect Mycroft will take significant coercion to come around.”

John couldn’t resist a parting shot. “I’ll leave him in your capable hands, will I?”

Anthea didn’t reply, her gaze steady, met by John’s own eyes. There was a battle of wills, almost, before John gave a short sharp nod and climbed out of the car.

“Do stay in touch,” he said, closing the door before she could reply.

They hadn’t gone anywhere, but he needed to walk a bit before returning to Baker Street. Setting a brisk pace, he opted for a turn around the block, feeling a little guilty at how he’d spoken to Anthea. If not for her meddling (and meddling it certainly was), things would have been fine, or at least would have run their course. As it stood, though, neither Greg nor Mycroft seemed in any position to mount a campaign in defence of their budding relationship.

In that case, John thought to himself, it’ll be up to us. Anthea and her considerable resources would work on Mycroft; hopefully she would at least stop the interception of Greg’s messages to Mycroft. Should Greg decide to try and contact the minor government official, his high level security team won’t get in the way, John thought wryly.

Sherlock would presumably be recruited for Team Mycroft; John hoped that once he’d spoken to his brother he might also be amenable to helping out Team Greg, which at this moment consisted of himself.

Ping.

A new contact had been sent to his phone.

Fiona Edwards.

He frowned. His brow cleared as he read the accompanying message.

Bride from the wedding. Old friend of Greg’s. Useful ally. A Welcome to Team Greg, Fiona, John thought in his Captain Watson voice. Much as he wanted to call her immediately he restrained himself – it was close to 1am by now and she was on her honeymoon, presumably. Tomorrow would be fine.
Chapter 16

Greg slumped down at his desk, staring at the paperwork teetering in piles all over it. While much of his load had been redistributed while he was on light duties, these were all files from active cases that he’d led – there was nobody but Donovan and himself that could finish them. Looked like a long night for both of them, then. Jesus, and it was only 3pm.

He ran his hand lightly over the side of his face, a new habit to see how the swelling was going after his nightmare. Almost gone now, he thought. Not that it mattered.

As Greg contemplated ringing for a late lunch, there was a tap at his door – Dimmock.

“Alright?” Greg asked. The young DI was good, but the chip on his shoulder was the size of a bloody mountain. Greg tried to be patient with him, but sometimes it was tempting to tell him to get his head out of his arse and just do the job.

Right now, he stared at his colleague, waiting for the fidgeting to stop and the speaking to begin.

“What is it, Dimmock?” he asked finally, hoping he didn’t sound as impatient as he felt.

“Oh, er…” Dimmock trailed off and for a moment Greg thought he’d have to prompt him again. “Um, the Boss asked me to, er, bring him some files.” He indicated Greg’s desk with one hand. “Pretty sure some of them are here.”

“What?” Greg asked. “These are my files, why are you getting them?”

Dimmock looked like he wished he was anywhere but here. “Sherlock Holmes needed some things, I think.”

The realisation was a slap in the face to Greg, who felt the blood drain from his face. Sherlock had gone over his head rather than deal with him. Five years, five years of working with that man, and he doesn’t even have the decency to - Greg cut his own internal rant short, aware that his heart was pounding, breathing shallow.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then another; aware of Dimmock but not caring.

“Leave me a list, I’ll find them for you.” Greg bit out.

“He’s in the conference room.” Dimmock told him quickly. The relief was clear on his face as he handed Greg the list, then bolted, the door slamming behind.

Greg stared at the list in front of him. The names swam in front of his eyes and he blinked hard. The hurt-rage-humiliation-hurt-pain-confusion-hurt roiled inside him, waves crashing against his ribs. Whatever had happened, Sherlock must have some idea or he would have pulled one of his usual stunts, swanning in demanding paperwork. And now he was here, in this building, doing his best to avoid Greg.

Screw that.

Greg left the folders on his desk and strode over to the conference room, letting himself in and closing the door.

“Ah, Dimm-” Sherlock started, breaking off as he saw Greg instead of Dimmock.
Any anger at Sherlock dissipated as soon as Greg saw him. He looked supremely uncomfortable, more like a small child caught with their hand in the cookie jar than the smug arsehole Greg was expecting.

“Hello, Sherlock,” Greg offered, sitting in the nearest chair. He was careful to avoid the papers strewn across the table. From past experience he knew there would be a pattern invisible to all but Sherlock, and to disrupt it would be disastrous.

“Greg,” Sherlock said cautiously.

Greg snorted gently at the use of his actual first name. He folded his hands in his lap and waited. Hundreds of hours of interviews had taught him that guilty people generally like to talk, and the guiltier they felt, the sooner and more freely they would talk. Sure enough…

“I wasn’t sure you’d help me,” Sherlock blurted, pacing furiously and throwing a sideways glance at Greg. When his only response was a level stare, Sherlock went on, “I haven’t spoken to Mycroft recently but John tells me you’re finding the situation…difficult.” He cleared his throat. “I didn’t want to add to your pain by reminding you of my brother.”

This time the snort was derisive and accompanied by a hearty, “Bollocks!”

Sherlock looked startled. “What?”

“Bollocks, Sherlock,” Greg repeated, shifting in his seat. “There’s no way you would have considered ‘my pain’ when you worked around me. The first bit I’d believe. You thought I wouldn’t help you.” Sherlock’s demeanor made it clear that Greg was right on the money with his deductions. Considering, Greg then asked, “How did you go over my head, by the way? The DCI isn’t your biggest…” he trailed off, realisation coming hand in hand with a hearty dose of embarrassment.

“Mycroft.”

Sherlock nodded.

Greg breathed deeply again. “Did you ask or did he offer?” This seemed very important. Did he want to emasculate me or was it a favour to you? was Greg’s real question but there was no way he was asking that.

“I was telling him about the possible links in this case and he offered to smooth the way,” Sherlock admitted. Greg’s mouth hung open a little. It was Mycroft who had deliberately gone over his head, pulling rank to exclude Greg from a loop that encompassed several of his own cases.

If he’d been called in to deal with Sherlock, or smooth the way while Sherlock worked, he wouldn’t have had to deal with me, Greg realised. All the effort of talking to the DCI, convincing Sherlock to work with Dimmock – and vice versa, Greg suspected – just so he wouldn’t have to work with Greg again.

Emotion rose in him, fast and deep, almost overwhelming. He needed to go – but he needed to send Mycroft a message, and Sherlock was by far his best chance. Taking a deep breath, Greg pushed it down, out of the way while he dealt with the situation in front of him.

“Did you give him my message?” Greg asked in a level voice.

“No need, he’ll have listened to the conversation,” Sherlock replied carefully. A politician’s response, Greg saw - neither confirming nor denying.
“Well bloody well make sure he gets this one!” Greg snarled. “Tell your brother…tell him,” Greg pulled out his phone and searched for something, then glanced up to be sure Sherlock was listening. Sherlock’s gaze was locked on his, and Greg said in a dangerously quiet voice, “tell him, ‘Act 1, scene 2, line 186.’”

He didn’t stay to witness Sherlock’s confusion, or answer his questions; instead, Greg stood and walked out. Past his own office door, past the confused face of Dimmock and the worried eyes of Donovan; he stepped out onto the street and headed for the nearest pub, texting John on the way. Nothing would fix this, but a pint or five would go a long way to making him forget about it.

_Bronze Arms. I’m going to need a lift home. Greg._

John arrived half an hour later, still with his stethoscope around his neck. Greg was onto his third pint by then, drinking grimly as though it were a job of work.

“Greg?” John asked, sliding onto the stool next to him.

Greg looked up and grunted, returning his gaze to a puddle of beer that looked a bit like Denmark. Actually he had no idea what Denmark looked like.

“D’you know what Denmark looksh like, Jawn?” Greg asked.

John blinked. “Ah, no.”

“Oh. Okay.” Greg traced his finger through the puddle, changing its shape. He sighed and drained off the last of his beer, signalling for another and one for John.

“Is Denmark important?” John asked. “Sherlock said you mentioned it as part of your message for Mycroft.”

An odd expression, something like wobbly-soppy-sad came over Greg’s face.

“Codeword,” he mumbled into his pint. All of a sudden he was tired. He’d been back at work almost a week, and things were normal, really, except that he had a lighter load at work. Still dealt with idiots, both on and off the force; still caught up with John (every day this week, he was definitely keeping tabs on Greg); still went home to a cold, empty flat. Only now, he’d had a glimpse of what could have been; the kind of connection he’d thought was for fairy tales and romance books aimed at gullible women.

“He knows what it means,” Greg sighed, his eyelid heavy as he struggled to focus on his pint. Pints? How many should there be? “I needa go ‘ome.” Greg muttered, slipping off his stood and almost falling.

John caught him, arm under the shoulder, stumbling out the door. The world was spinning pretty fast, Greg thought, and his stomach was not that enthusiastic about it. He collapsed into the back seat of a car alongside John and closed his eyes for a moment.

“Greg, come on. Greg,” John’s voice was insistent. Greg fought to open his eyes and stumbled out of the car, concrete cold on his palms as he steadied himself against the ground. He wobbled as he stood, testing his balance against the undulating ground. With some help from John he made it inside his flat, now feeling quite sick. As he emptied his stomach into the toilet, John pottered
around, though he had no idea what John was doing.

He was dozing off again, the porcelain cold against his cheek, when John shook him hard. “Come on.”

He rose, obediently having a go at brushing his teeth and downing a pint of water.

“Trousers off.” John told him and he complied without braining himself, but only just. Crawling into bed in shirt and pants, the cool sheets felt magnificent.

“Water and paracetamol beside the bed, phone on the charger,” John said, and deep in his mind Greg was embarrassed both at his own pathetic behaviour and John’s obvious experience in dealing with this. His sister, Greg’s brain helpfully provided, though Greg couldn’t actually remember his own surname.

“You’re a good mate, John,” Greg muttered as he drifted into sleep.

+++When he woke, Greg knew three things to be true: a) he was going to get reamed for leaving work like that, b) he was very, very hungover, and c) he was very fortunate to have John Watson in his life.

This last thought was prompted by the water and pills by his bed, along with a scrawled note. The note, read with screwed up eyes and significant effort, had a name and a phone number, and the comment, “3pm today. I will check you’ve been.”

Greg groaned. He knew that talking to someone, someone professional, was the best course of action; the Black Dog had settled its shadow firmly over his life once again. On the other hand, staying in bed for the foreseeable future had considerable merits.

Rolling over (slowly, mate, slowly), Greg swallowed the pills and the water, thinking back over what he could remember of yesterday afternoon. He’d talked to Sherlock, and given a message, he thought. Something for Sherlock to tell Mycroft…What was it? Something for Mycroft, in a code…Glancing at his phone, Greg unplugged it and checked his browser history. When he saw the page he’d last looked at, his heart sank. As if things couldn’t get any worse.

“Fuck, Greg,” he swore, angry at himself, frustrated at the whole situation. If he could only have spoken to Mycroft, he could have resolved things, one way or another. A wave of heaviness washed through his bones. The idea of getting up and getting dressed was too much, especially combined with the headache and nausea of the hangover he’d brought on himself.

As Greg struggled with himself, staring blankly at the lock-screen of his phone, the screen changed – incoming call. John Watson. It took all his effort to press the green button, connecting the call. He brought the phone to his ear.

“Greg?” John’s voice was calm, but there was an edge to it.

“Yeah.” Greg winced, hearing how shit he sounded. John would definitely hear it.

“I’ll be there in two minutes.”

John disconnected before Greg could even process the comment. He brought the phone down again and resumed staring at the screen. It had been a safe thing to do before the call, probably okay to keep doing it, then. Blinking seemed quite difficult, and he was tempted to sleep again,
burying himself under the blankets, away from all this, from the hurt and difficulty and the shocks that kept battering him. He didn’t have the strength for this…

“Greg.”

John’s voice was close. Greg turned his head to see John standing in his doorway. Surprise must have registered, because John said perfunctorily, “I made an impression of your key. I’d say I’m sorry, but I’m actually not.”

Greg nodded. He understood and part of him was actually grateful that John thought enough of him to go to such a length, but the words were too hard to find.

John spoke again. “I’ve called Sandy, the therapist. He’ll come here this afternoon.”

Greg swallowed. “Really?”

John’s eyes narrowed, and Captain Watson cleared his throat. “If you mean, ‘Do you think that’s necessary?’, then yes. Two weeks ago, I had to pick your lock – good thing Sherlock insisted on teaching me – because you’d disappeared. You’ve been like a zombie the last two weeks, and yesterday you blew off work for the afternoon and managed to work yourself up to blind drunk before I could even get there. It’s not like you, Greg, and as I said last time, I’m worried about you.” His expression softened, and he leaned against the doorjamb. “Have I ever told you about what happened when I first returned from Afghanistan?”

Greg shook his head.

“I was living in a kind of halfway house they have for soldiers returning, while you get yourself together, you know. I figured Harry would’ve been the same while I was away, but with someone else to pick up the pieces.” He huffed out a breath, like a humourless laugh at the memory. “It was worse than I’d thought. The first time I saw her after I got back, I had to break a window to get inside. She’d passed out, hit her head on the way down. I thought she was dead. Nobody had noticed that she’d been on a three day bender; none of her so-called friends, not a single co-worker. Clara was gone by then.” John looked down, his face grim. “I made her give me a phone so she could call me.” John looked up at Greg, the tightness around his eyes mute evidence of his ongoing pain. “She’s never called me, not once. I check in with her, but there’s always that ‘what if’ while I wait for her to pick up my call.” He was quiet for a long time, and the silence pressed in around Greg.

Finally, John spoke again. “I can’t help Harry, Greg, she won’t let me. But I’m damned if I’m going to let you go the same way. If I have to break into your flat, or leave work to pour you into bed in the middle of the day, or pay a therapist to come to you, I will. I don’t want to find you lying on the floor because nobody cared enough to check that you were okay.”

There was fierceness to his voice, and Greg realised just how much all this was affecting his friend – yet his reaction was to offer more rather than back away. The tightness in his throat made speech impossible, and Greg bowed his head, embarrassed at the tears welling in his eyes.

“Sandy’ll be here in an hour. I’ll do a fry up, you have a shower if you’re up to it.” John was pretending not to notice his tears, to Greg’s eternal gratitude. He must have seen the look of revulsion on Greg’s face at the idea of food, because he added, “I’ll bring you some water, then. Stay here if you like. I’ll be in the living room.”

John pushed himself off the wall and collected the empty glass, momentarily gripping Greg’s shoulder as he passed. Slowly, Greg dropped his phone and lay down, waiting for Sandy.
“Thank you, Anthea.”

Mycroft’s voice was cold and dismissive, as it so often was these days. It had been over a month since his return from Ireland. More than enough time for him to forget the unfortunate events and resume the rituals of his everyday life. Picking up his usual routine again had been a blessing, losing himself in the details of keeping the country from imploding. Mycroft knew he was good at his job, and usually the satisfaction of negotiating a treaty or finding information necessary to smooth a diplomat’s ruffled feathers was its own reward.

Now though, he felt like the edge had been taken off his enjoyment. He was still aware of his success, but it was a flash in the pan, flaring quickly and fading, leaving him empty again. Downtime was a bad idea, obviously; he’d filled his days and nights equally, ensuring he was exhausted enough to drop into deep sleep for the few hours he allowed himself to rest each day. There was always more to do, if one knew where to look.

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The first morning they had been in London, Mycroft had briefed Anthea. He’d been exhausted still; the panic attack of the previous day coupled with his nightmare had robbed him of most of the night’s resting hours. Anthea had appeared nervous, he thought. Ignoring it, he gave strict instructions about the surveillance surrounding Sherlock and those he worked with – including Lestrade. It was all to be handled by his team, with reports sent to Anthea; she would ensure he had any vital information.

“All those things I need to know for security purposes or the safety of my brother, am I clear?” Mycroft said, the subtext as clear as if he’d scribbled it on the coffee table. Nothing about Greg.

“And what if he was to contact you, sir?” Anthea asked, the apprehension clear in her usually detached voice.

“I would be surprised indeed to hear from Detective Inspector Lestrade,” Mycroft replied tightly. An unlikely possibility, given the circumstances of his departure. Anthea nodded her understanding. “I would appreciate it if you would ensure our schedules do not overlap,” Mycroft added, wanting to be sure they would not end up at the same crime scene or anything so ridiculously mundane. “The events of the last three days are confidential and I do not wish to converse on the topic, are we clear?”

He wanted to be absolutely sure that Anthea would not try to persuade him to do something ridiculous like accost Lestrade with a bunch of red roses, begging for another chance. He would not – could not – leave himself open to such agony again.

Once they had covered all the points for their briefing and Anthea had left, Mycroft slumped back in his chair. How would he continue like this?

Feeling his breathing grow shallow, Mycroft closed his eyes and breathed deeply until the rising tension in his body slowly bled away. He straightened his posture and opened his eyes, staring ahead. He would continue. He must.
Completing his task, Mycroft turned to his brother. Sherlock was scrolling through his phone as he waited for Mycroft to direct his attention across the desk. It was odd to see him so polite, Mycroft thought apprehensively.

“Oh, I’m not going to bite, Mycroft, relax,” Sherlock said, smirking without looking up.

Mycroft huffed and leaned back in his chair. “What is it you want, brother?”

“I came to see how you are. It’s been over a month since you returned from Ireland and you haven’t spoiled a single morning at Baker Street.” Sherlock’s tone was mocking, but Mycroft read the underlying message – I’m worried about you.

“I’m busy,” Mycroft answered shortly. “Hence the absence. I would be happy to schedule an unwelcome intrusion to your life, should you feel it necessary.” He made a show of looking in his calendar. “How’s next Tuesday at 9 for you? Shall we say the usual insults, my weight, your drug use, John’s usefulness, or not –”

“Stop, Mycroft,” Sherlock’s voice was quiet and deep, and such a surprise that Mycroft did exactly as he was told. “I saw Greg last week.”

Mycroft managed not to react other than a carefully raised eyebrow. He knew Sherlock would have noticed his increased pulse and respiration, however. “Yes?” he said, attempting to sound disinterested.

“He found me at the Yard when I was working on the cartel. Some of the cases were his.”

Mycroft nodded. He’d assured the DCI Sherlock would be manageable, banking on his brother’s focus to distract him from irritating anyone. The probability that he and Lestrade would cross paths was moderate, but not certain. A risk Mycroft had been willing to take, given the circumstances.

“He gave me a message for you,” Sherlock said, adding, “I assume it has something to do with Denmark.”

Mycroft was floored. His breath caught in his throat for long enough to make him gasp when his lungs finally resumed. “How do you know about Denmark?” he whispered, all effort to hide his reaction abandoned.

“Oh, brother mine, you’ve really cut yourself off, haven’t you?” Sherlock was amused. “I assumed you’d listened to everything from Baker Street, or I would have mentioned it.”

“What did he say, Sherlock?”

“Oh, there was a lot of whining and moaning. The actual message was just, ‘Tell him Denmark.'” Sherlock watched his brother carefully.

Mycroft knew his face would be an open book but he didn’t care.

“When was this?” he asked, voice hoarse with desperation. Why was Greg using their codeword?
“September 20th,” Sherlock replied carelessly.

“September 20th?” Mycroft repeated. That was over three weeks ago. Right after they’d returned from Kinsale…

“And the message from last week?” Mycroft asked quietly, not sure if he wanted to hear the answer.

“Act 1, scene 2, line 186,” Sherlock recited.

Mycroft frowned for a moment, then stood and selected a volume from his bookshelf. The leather creaked as he opened the volume, turning pages until he found it.

“’He was a man, take him for all in all/I shall not look upon his like again,’” he murmured, the shock flowing through his body.

Sherlock stood behind him, peering over his shoulder. “Of course,” he mused, “Denmark. Oh don’t worry, I have no idea what it means, brother,” Sherlock assured Mycroft, picking up his coat and sweeping towards the door. He paused, hand on the door handle.

“Mycroft.”

Book still in hand, Mycroft looked up, eyes not entirely focussed on his brother. “Far be it for me to give dating advice,” he almost spat this last phrase, “but John assures me Greg is finding the lack of resolution to your little romance difficult. I can see that you are in a similar position. Might I suggest you make some sort of overture, in the interests of self-preservation?”

Before Mycroft could reply, he was gone.

“What…” Mycroft found himself saying to the empty room. He walked blindly over to the settee, sinking down onto the leather as his mind whirled.

*Greg had been to Baker Street. He’d been to Baker Street and mentioned Denmark.*

Mycroft scrambled to remember exactly what their codeword signified. “A codeword so I know right away when you’re freaking out about something.”

Freaking out. Greg had been freaking out about something when he’d visited Baker Street, knowing (as everyone seemed to) that his conversation would probably make its way to Mycroft. He’d used their codeword, and Mycroft hadn’t heard about it.

He frowned. Why *had* Greg been freaking out? He was the one that had left Kinsale without a word; surely he’d returned to his life with a sense of relief that Mycroft was no longer intruding. And yet Sherlock had said that he was not – probably a gross understatement, knowing his brother. The frown deepened, and Mycroft closed his eyes as he tried to put his finger on what it was that wasn’t sitting right.

That line from Hamlet – it was about regret, loss, mourning something that could not be reclaimed. Why had Greg used that line in his message to Sherlock? Surely, his decision to leave Kinsale without a word had made his intentions clear – and yet the two messages from Sherlock made that interpretation unlikely at best.

*Denmark – I’m freaking out.*

*The quote from Hamlet, via Sherlock – I won’t see you again, and the loss pains me.*
Why such a clumsy method of communication? Mycroft thought, his heart beating faster as his
instinct told him he was close to something important. Why would he not hav-oh.

OH.

A series of snapshots flashed across Mycroft’s mind, accompanied by an echo of the dialogue.

*Greg’s smile as Mycroft admitted his lack of mobile phone. “Anthea confiscated it.”*

*Greg’s smile as they walked back from the wedding. “My flight home is the day after the
wedding…I couldn’t get any more time off.”*

*Anthea checking his phone before returning it on the flight, murmuring about screening his
messages.*

*I would appreciate it if you would ensure our schedules do not overlap.*

Screening his messages. A new truth came to Mycroft, breathtaking in its simplicity and the way it
accounted for so many details that had not quite fit. What if Greg had woken late that morning and
found Mycroft gone, seen the time and had no choice but to leave, lest he miss his flight? He would
have no way to contact Mycroft other than through…

“Anthea.” Mycroft whispered.

She had spoken to Greg that morning in Kinsale, had admitted as much; had screened his messages
before returning his phone; had prevented any correspondence from Greg reaching Mycroft, vastly
overstepping the parameters of his instructions. The audacity of it took Mycroft’s breath away.
While he trusted her professional judgement, this broke across the boundary he had worked hard to
maintain. She had stepped perilously close to unemployment with his kidnapping, and it was only
the unexpected relaxation and companionship Mycroft had found in Kinsale that had saved her job.

A small part of his mind wondered if he was angry. There was a smouldering sensation low in his
gut; a clenching of his fists without conscious effort; a desire to grab and shake and smash things.
Fairly sure that’s rage, his logical brain informed him. He felt hot tears coming to him, and forced
them down; that level of emotion would not help with this next step.

Taking a deep breath, Mycroft flexed his fingers, forcing the fists to relax before buzzing for
Anthea. He leaned on the edge of the desk as he waited the few seconds before she entered the
room.

Turning from closing the door, she met his gaze, her stride faltering as the burning fury behind his
eyes met hers.

“Sit down, please,” Mycroft said tightly.

Anthea was no fool. She sat, shaking hands folded in her lap, and she waited. He’d never seen her
with such a submissive air, and reflected that without it, she would certainly be bearing the brunt of
his wrath right now.

Mycroft folded his arms, taking a savage enjoyment in the higher ground he possessed, both moral
and literal. It took all his considerable self-control not to scream and rave right now,
professionalism be damned.

“Explain,” he bit out.
Anthea needed no further encouragement. As Mycroft listened, she told of her surprise at seeing Lestrade at the rehearsal dinner, at the way he and Mycroft had appeared so close, even then. Fiona, her school friend, had suggested they shift the seating arrangements. It had seemed like a good idea, playing matchmaker a little while on holiday.

The wedding itself had been a blur, she admitted, given how much she’d had to drink and the attractive groomsman who’d propositioned her, but she was certain that Mycroft and Greg had left together. It had started falling apart when she’d been woken by Greg’s call – her usual methods of finding Mycroft were moot here, in another country without his phone or umbrella to track him.

By the time Anthea had found Mycroft in his B & B, he was mid-panic attack, convinced that he had done something to screw things up with Greg. In the heat of the moment she’d been too worried about getting him home without another panic attack to consider Greg, and when Greg’s text came up on Mycroft’s phone on the plane, it had seemed best to delete it altogether.

“I was trying to protect you, sir.” Anthea’s voice was uncharacteristically subdued. “I understood from our conversation the next morning that you had no interest in any contact with Gr– with him. I thought that it would be best left alone, that you would both forget it soon enough.” She was looking at her hands now, unable to meet Mycroft’s eyes. “Forgive me, but I can see that hasn’t happened. This is not the outcome I had predicted, sir. I’ve made a significant error in judgement, and I’m sorry.”

Mycroft’s head swirled with Anthea’s admission. Greg had tried to get in touch, only to be blocked at every turn. “Greg tried to contact me?” he asked.

She nodded. “Quite imaginative in his efforts, I must admit. Even went to Baker Street.”

“And now?” Mycroft forced the words out past the lump in his throat.

The silence stretched on until she said quietly, “He’s not dealing that well with it, actually.”

“So this is the outcome of your efforts.” Mycroft said, his toneless words nevertheless hitting hard in the dead silence. “Your good intentions have paved the way to this, this hell in which I reside. I could accept this, just, were it not for the fact that Greg is also paying the price of your interference.”

Mycroft’s burning hot rage had condensed, like a star collapsing in on itself. A white hot point in his chest now helped him focus his energy. He closed his eyes, bringing up every moment from Kinsale in which he had believed Greg liked him, admired him, wanted him. Every kiss, every second heavy with anticipation; they fuelled his fierce determination to fix this. He would do everything in his considerable power to coax life back into that fragile understanding.

“It is your good fortune, Anthea, that your track record is exemplary and your security clearance so high as to make dismissal…problematic.” His words must have confused her, because she looked at him now, brows furrowed.

Mycroft sighed as the collapsing star inside his chest finally caved in, sucking all the anger and rage from his body. He felt tired and overwhelmed. It didn’t matter what he did to Anthea (and there were many unpleasant options available); Greg would still believe what he believed unless Mycroft could convince him otherwise. Given his diplomatic experience, this should be a straightforward task; given his romantic experience, it would certainly be a disaster. The very idea made his heart start beating in an alarming pre-panic attack kind of way. There was only one choice if he was to have any chance to reconcile with Greg.
He crossed his arms once again, drawing around him the sense of power that made Prime Ministers gulp in trepidation, and looked hard at Anthea.

“Show me how to fix it.”

Chapter End Notes

Obvious though it might be, I feel obliged to credit William Shakespeare for *Hamlet*, the play Greg uses to send the coded message to Mycroft.
John never had to wait for Anthea – even when she told him five minutes – and he made his way downstairs immediately. She was there, the car appearing as silently as ever. He’d long given up figuring out how she did it and just accepted the convenience of knowing that he wouldn’t need a scarf for the seven steps from his door to the car.

“Hi.” he said, sliding into the backseat. Another Blackberry free meeting, he noted. This must be a serious business.

“Mycroft has decided to contact Greg,” she began without preamble.

John raised one eyebrow. He wondered what had triggered that change of heart. “Right.”

“Would Greg be well enough to accept such a gesture?” Anthea asked. “Mycroft is concerned about the reports he’s received regarding Greg’s mental health.”

John considered. “He’s been doing better since last time we spoke,” he told her. “Taking his meds, seeing the psych every day or two. The meds have just started kicking in, and with the regular routine we’ve implemented, he’s certainly managing much better.”

He did not add that he no longer feared Greg would self-harm – or worse – or drink his way to the bottom of a bottle every night. “What exactly did Mycroft have in mind?”

Anthea stared for a moment, before saying carefully, “He has very specific instructions for me about what I’m to do.”

John looked at her. There was subtext here. “Right,” he replied, equally carefully.

“He knows what happened in Kinsale now, and I’m lucky I still have a job, so I can’t deviate from his directions. At all.”

“Ah.”

John understood now. If there was any deviating to be done, it would be up to him to do it. After a moment of silence John asked carefully, “What were his instructions to you, then?”

“I’m to arrange for Greg to be at Baker Street tomorrow at 10am.”

John nodded, pursing his lips. “Sounds reasonable to me,” he said. “Is he going to bring flowers or something?”

He wasn’t really serious but this all sounded a bit like, ‘tell your friend that my friend likes them and to meet me behind the bike sheds at lunchtime.’

“Mycroft thinks flowers are trite,” Anthea told him flatly.

John rolled his eyes. No sense of humour about this, then. “Does he have any idea what he’s going to say?”

“I’m sure he’s planned out every flicker of his eyebrow,” Anthea said, proving John wrong about the sense of humour. “Whether he can actually pull it off…” she shrugged. “He’s not that experienced with personal conversations.”
“Yeah,” John said. That was fairly obvious.

“How do you think Greg would react to seeing Mycroft?” Anthea asked. “Mycroft wanted me to ask.”

John shrugged, shifting in discomfort at revealing his friend’s struggles. “He’s just coming to accept that he’s probably going to run into Mycroft at some point,” John replied. “We’re working on strategies for him to deal with that. He’s been quite reluctant to go out, lately.” This was an understatement – John had been inventing errands, which he was sure Greg saw right through, just to get him out of his apartment on a regular basis.

It was Anthea’s turn to nod thoughtfully.

“And what about his relationship with Mycroft?” she asked.

John shook his head. “He hasn’t given me details – which is actually fine – but this whole thing has affected him quite a lot. His self-esteem is petty fragile, not that it was great before all of this. I think he really felt a connection, and it’s shaken him, this whole no contact thing. He doesn’t understand, and it’s made him question himself. A lot.” John didn’t voice his concern that Greg would find it hard to trust someone again after feeling this betrayal so deeply.

“So you think he’ll come if he knows Mycroft will be there?” Anthea asked with an intensity out of proportion to the question.

John stared for a moment, framing his response. “I’m not sure. I’ll play that conversation by ear, will I?”

Anthea nodded as she recited, “Mycroft would prefer that Greg was aware of his presence at Baker Street in advance.”

John nodded. “I understand.” He rubbed his hands together, belying his nervousness. It felt like betrayal, even though he knew that Greg needed him to do this. Team Greg, John reminded himself sternly. “I’ll talk to Greg about going to Baker Street tomorrow morning, then.” No commitment to follow or not follow Mycroft’s directions. Vague and allowing for deniability, if necessary.

Anthea nodded, satisfied.

“So I’m assuming you told Mycroft about the disappearing text message?” John asked. It was the only reason he could think of that might compel Mycroft to want to talk to Greg.

Anthea nodded, a look of embarrassment crossing her face briefly.

“How did he take it?” John asked, sympathetic and curious in equal parts.

“As you’d expect,” she replied.

“Iceman,” John said wryly.

“Exactly,” Anthea confirmed. They sat for a moment in silence, Anthea reliving the conversation, John imagining it.

“Do you think he’ll…what do you think he’ll say to Greg?” John asked tentatively. He didn’t know if Anthea would speculate, but if anyone would have an insight to Mycroft’s mind, it would be she.

“I would say I know Mycroft as well as anyone he works with,” Anthea told John, “and I have
absolutely no idea if he’ll stick to his script or forget that he even has one.”

John nodded at this. “You can’t tell me.”

She looked at him and gravely tapped the side of her nose.

Fair enough, he thought.

“I’ll talk to Greg, then,” John said, reaching for the door handle, “Let you know if it’s off, otherwise I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

Anthea raised one eyebrow in acknowledgement as John exited the car.

He blew out a breath. A meeting between Greg and Mycroft. Greg was certainly doing better – his own recognition of his depression, ‘The Black Dog’ as he called it, made his treatment easier – but John was wary of pushing him too much.

What would Mycroft say? If what he had to say wasn’t good, how would Greg cope?

John sighed. He’d have to approach it carefully. Checking his watch, he realised it wasn’t too early for him to start over to Greg’s. With any luck, he’d have the kettle boiled, John thought optimistically.

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John and Fiona arrived at Greg’s at the same time.

“Hi,” John said, “Nice to meet you.” It was odd, after they’d spent over an hour on the phone talking about Greg and with John filling her in on what was happening.

“You too,” Fiona said, pulling him into a hug. Okay, she’s a ‘hug when you first meet’ kind of person, John thought uncomfortably.

“So what’s the go?” Fiona asked as they walked up the stairs.

“Mycroft wants to see Greg tomorrow. I’m not sure he’ll go if he knows Mycroft is there, so I may tell him he needs to come to my place for something else,” John summarised.

Fiona raised her eyebrows at that. “He’s pretty good at telling when people are lying.” She grinned. “It’s kind of his job.”

“He knows I’ve been inventing reasons to get him out of the flat, this’ll fit right in,” John replied. At least his terrible acting skills would come in handy this time.

“Hey, it’s us,” John called as he let them into Greg’s flat. Greg emerged from the kitchen, showered and dressed, John was pleased to see, and they exchanged pleasantries before sitting down with the tea John had made.

“You’re quite at home here,” Fiona remarked as John settled himself in his usual chair.

“Well I am over a lot,” John replied.

“Things have clearly gone to shit in the last month with you and Mycroft. What’d you do?” Fiona asked pointedly, looking at Greg.

“She’s not one for small talk,” Greg explained to John, who had almost spit tea across the room at
the blunt question. He turned back to Fiona. “I have no idea.”

“And how are you doing?” The way she lifted one eyebrow told John she was well aware of Greg’s mental health history.

“Better than last week,” he replied.

“Right. On the scale, where does that rank?” She asked.

Greg considered. “Better than Celia leaving, worse than Rochester.”

John had no idea what they were talking about, but Greg was relaxed and that was all he cared about right now. He wondered if Fiona would be able to suss Greg out about Mycroft – it would be much more natural from her.

“If Mycroft walked in right now, would you talk to him?” She asked.

“Bloody hell, Fi,” Greg muttered, running one hand through his hair and looking at her with annoyance, affection and exasperation.

“What?” she asked flatly. “I want to know where you stand with this. John wouldn’t have called me if he didn’t think I could help, and you’re right, I don’t do small talk. You and I both know you need some resolution one way or another. You can’t live this ‘would it or wouldn’t it’ shit forever.”

John, clearly not prepared for this conversation, dropped his face into his hands. There was blunt and there was this ‘smack it with a hammer and see if it works’ approach. Greg would never…

“I don’t know if I would have much to say,” Greg answered Fiona, speaking slowly as though he was still working out what he meant. “But I would listen to what he has to say.” He frowned, swirling his tea. “There are things that don’t make sense, and I want to know if he can make them make sense. I don’t know if that would make me want to talk to him but it would at least answer some questions.”

They sat in silence for a few moments as Fiona and John considered Greg’s answer.

Fiona looked at John, raising her eyebrows in a ‘What do you think?’ question.

John rocked his hand back and forth in an ‘I don’t know’ kind of way.

Fiona nodded her agreement.

As John thought about how to slip the idea of Baker Street into the conversation, Greg spoke again. “I mean, I could be at Baker Street and just run into him, or at a scene or something. I have to be prepared for that, I guess.”

Perfect segue, John thought.

“Shit, that reminds me,” John said, trying hard to sound natural. “Sherlock asked me to ask you to come around tomorrow morning. He’s solved some of those cold cases, he reckons, and I made him promise to go through them properly with you this time.” He thought that was a pretty good story, actually. Sherlock often send Greg a short text with no context and it irritated Greg, and then John when Greg bitched about it.

Greg nodded, still looking at his cup. “No problem.”

“We’ll do breakfast first, hey?” Fiona asked, glancing at John. She could make sure Greg showed
up at the right time.

“There’s a caf near there that does French toast exactly like that place, remember?”

Greg’s face brightened at the memory, and they started reminiscing. The conversation excluded John, but he didn’t mind. He sent a quick text to Anthea.

We’re on.

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“Sherlock, I’m not asking you, I’m telling you,” John said flatly. They stood facing each other, arms crossed. Though John was a head shorter, his stance was equal to Sherlock’s in obstinacy. Neither was giving an inch.

“Mycroft would never instigate such a meeting,” Sherlock repeated. “You’re manipulating him so Graham feels better.”

John ground his teeth. “You know it’s Greg, don’t be a prat. Why don’t you call your brother then? I’m sure he’ll confirm the plan.”

Sherlock frowned, not pulling his eyes from John’s as he pulled out his phone. “Mycroft,” he said, voice dialling his brother.

“To what do I owe this pleasure?” Mycroft’s voice drawled, speakerphone broadcasting him through the flat.

“Tomorrow morning,” Sherlock said flatly.

“I will be imposing on you and John for a short meeting,” Mycroft confirmed.

Sherlock clenched his jaw, while John smirked openly at being proven right.

“And this meeting,” Sherlock began.

“Has nothing to do with you.” Mycroft finished his sentence for him.

“But it’s in my flat!” Sherlock protested.

“It’s in John’s flat,” Mycroft corrected him. “I needed somewhere secure and neutral, neither public nor entirely private. Baker Street seemed the obvious choice, and John was amenable to the idea.”

Sherlock sputtered, no real words forming despite the open-close of his mouth.

“If there is nothing else, brother?” Mycroft asked.

John took pity on Sherlock. “Thanks, Mycroft. See you tomorrow.”

He took the phone from Sherlock’s hand and ended the call.

“See?” he said lightly, moving into the kitchen. “I’ll make some tea, shall I?”
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Huge thanks (bigger than the usual ones) to KaraRenee for nursing me through these next few chapters in particular, where I lost touch with Greg a little before we reconnected. Without her help and endless patient reading of drafts this story would be sorely lacking. <3

Sherlock had scowled at Greg as soon as he walked into Baker Street. For the first time, John was glad that Sherlock was usually so rude to him – it meant Greg didn’t turn a hair at the greeting.

“Hi John,” Greg said, frowning slightly. John was perched on the arm of his chair, nervously tapping his fingers against his leg.

Sherlock, who had turned and slammed his bedroom door behind him as soon as Greg arrived, now burst back into the kitchen, looking at John before saying dramatically, “I’ll be downstairs, John. I have no desire to witness this circus.”

Greg watched him storm out with very little surprise. “Another day in paradise?” he joked to John. When John didn’t crack so much as a smile, Greg’s face fell, and he asked, “What?”

“Sherlock’s not finished with those cases, Greg,” John said, taking a deep breath. “Mycroft asked to meet you here today.”

Greg stared at John, his face frozen in disbelief. “He’s c-coming… here?” Greg whispered.

John nodded, stepping forward to fill Greg’s vision. “We’ve talked about this, Greg. At some point you were going to run into Mycroft. Greg.” John’s voice took on a military tone, demanding attention. It drew Greg out of his head, as it was intended to do, his eyes refocussing on John. “Mycroft has important information for you about what has happened since you got back from Ireland.”

John held Greg’s gaze, gauging his friend’s reaction. A bit panicky, but he was hearing and processing what John was saying. Good.

“Do you want me to stay?” John asked briskly. He’d support Greg however he needed, even if it meant sitting in on an excruciatingly personal conversation like some kind of Victorian chaperone.

“No.” Greg said quietly. He took a deep breath, held it, and released, as he and John had practiced. Looking at John, Greg attempted a smile, which failed spectacularly. “Thank you for telling me. I’m sure I’ll thank you for setting this up, but not quite yet.”

John nodded. “Completely understand. Remember what we talked about – listen for his meaning, not the words he uses, yeah?”

Greg nodded again, then froze as someone entered Baker Street below them. Mycroft’s distinctive footsteps moved up the stairs until he stood in the doorway to the sitting room.

John nodded a greeting to Mycroft, shot an encouraging smile at Greg, then slipped out, closing the
door but staying to eavesdrop. He knew Mycroft would notice, but did not care - this mission could easily go south, and he wanted to be around to pull it back together if necessary.

“Good morning, Gregory,” Mycroft’s voice was quiet and more tentative than John had ever heard. He strained to hear, wishing he had visual clues.

“Mycroft,” Greg replied stiffly.

*Come on, you two, John urged. Do not fuck this up.*

“Thank you for meeting me here,” Mycroft said, his tone professionally courteous.

“I didn’t know you were coming ‘til I arrived,” Greg told him, “But I have questions, and I understand you have an explanation for…” he trailed off.

Mycroft obviously understood, because he cleared his throat nervously. John heard soft footsteps as Mycroft evidently moved further into the sitting room.

“I should, I mean I’d l-l-like to start with an apology,” Mycroft was saying.

Had he stuttered?

“This whole experience has been one misunderstanding after another, all of which was ultimately my fault. Without my…” he paused, then changed tack. “Nothing has happened in a satisf-f-factory manner since we returned from Kinsale.” *Good, now explain what happened,* John coached him silently. After a long pause, Mycroft cleared his throat nervously and explained, “I understand now that you sent a text message before you boarded your plane. As uncomfortably close to an excuse as it sounds, I never received that message.”

There was silence, and John imagined Greg’s concentrating face – blank, arms crossed, brows furrowed together – reserved for when Greg was listening especially hard to someone speak.

*It would be a good sign,* John thought to himself.

“Really.” Greg sounded surprised and suspicious.

“Anthea took it upon herself to delete it before returning my phone.”

“What? Why?”

Mycroft sighed. *Melancholy.* “She felt she was protecting me. I was…d-distressed when I realised you’d left. I made some…decisions. Some bad decisions which I unwisely shared with Anthea. She took her direction from those words without consulting with me further. I will point out, she extrapolated far beyond the scope of her job.” The disapproval was clear in every syllable of Mycroft’s last sentence.

“So you had no idea I’d tried to contact you.”

“None at all,” Mycroft replied.

There was silence inside. *Darn the lack of video surveillance equipment in our sitting room,* John thought. Just as he wondered if they were snogging in there, Greg spoke.

“Have you fired her?”

“No,” Mycroft’s voice was quiet.
“So Anthea stays,” Greg said flatly. Before Mycroft could speak again, he asked, “What about the week after we returned? I tried everything to reach you. Every phone number, every CCTV camera, I even came here and left you a message.”

At this admission, his voice sounded broken, weary, but the words came anyway. There was no escaping this conversation, and he was obviously determined not to get sidetracked out of it.

Frustrated by the lack of visual cues, John shifted forward as though he might see through the solid door.

“He’s anxious.”

Sherlock’s voice sounded in John’s ear, just about making him levitate. John could feel his presence immediately behind him, stooped so his mouth was next to John’s ear.

He’d be useful, John reasoned, knowing Mycroft’s voice far better than John did.

“Of course he is,” John replied in a terse whisper.

They’d missed a bit of Mycroft’s next speech, picking it up from, “…including conversations from this room. I can assure you that none of your communications made it as far as me. I would never have ignored them. Especially…especially Denmark.” Mycroft finished almost on a whisper.

A slight creaking sound could be heard.

“Flexing his fingers on his umbrella, putting pressure on the frame. Telling the truth but highly anxious about how it will be received,” Sherlock whispered.

“So you’re telling me that from your perspective, I woke to find you gone, so I left without leaving you a message and then made no attempt to contact you for five weeks,” Greg said flatly. “And after everything that happened over there, you really thought that I’d do that?”

“It…it sounds unlikely when phrased so.”

Sherlock shook his head, curls brushing John’s face. “He’s obviously highly emotional. He only falls back on that archaic speech when he’s controlling that stutter – you heard it.”

John nodded, distracted by Sherlock’s proximity.

“Unlikely.” Greg’s tone was disbelieving. “Why would you think I’d bail like that, Mycroft?”

“From my perspective, you were relieved to find me gone, so took the opportunity to flee without leaving me a message then hoped I’d forget about you,” Mycroft corrected, though there was no malice in his tone.

The silence was deafening until Greg at last broke it, asking quietly, “When did Sherlock give you my message?”

“Yesterday. Both messages,” Mycroft replied immediately.

“Still worried about the stutter – short, factual answers,” Sherlock commentated in John’s ear.

“Yest…christ, Mycroft.”

Greg sounded shocked. John imagined him running one hand through his hair. “Look I just need a minute, alright?”
There were footsteps across the hard floor. The creak of Sherlock’s chair was distinctive enough; the bathroom door also slammed, water running soon after.

“Mycroft’s fat arse had better not stretch out my chair,” Sherlock grumbled. John elbowed him in the ribs without looking as they waited for Greg to return from the bathroom.

“Right,” Greg sounded more controlled, more focused, John noted with relief. They heard Mycroft stand, the conversation resuming in exactly the same place.

“So you understood the second message,” Greg confirmed. Mycroft did not speak.

He must have, or he wouldn’t be here, John thought. Surely Greg would have figured that out, but confirming facts was part of his job.

“Unable to speak, too emotional. It is very unlike Mycroft not to confirm information verbally,” Sherlock breathed in John’s ear.

The two men in their sitting room were silent. The toe of a shoe scraped against the floor; a joint popped as somebody stretched.

Neither wants to be the first to admit they’re scared, John realised. Go on, Captain Watson.

“Tell him why you said Denmark, Greg,” John said, exasperation projecting his voice into the sitting room. Without a visual, John had no way of knowing how his intrusion was received.

Come on, come on! John urged.

Finally, Greg drew breath. “Denmark was for freaking out, remember?” he said. Mycroft must have nodded, because Greg continued, “Well that was me. You…Kinsale was remarkable, Mycroft. It was only a couple of days but I hoped…it felt like a fairytale, and when I returned to London and you hadn’t contacted me, I thought maybe you didn’t agree…so, Denmark.”

Greg’s voice had dropped into that low, edgy timbre again, and he took another deep breath to stave it off. “After such a high in Kinsale, I found the radio silence back here in London…difficult.” The silence stretched out, a long, fragile moment before Greg whispered, “You said you thought you needed me. Well, I needed you too, Mycroft. I think I still do.”

Mycroft seemed to be mesmerised by Greg’s words, and his last admission hung in the air while John wondered what the hell was going through Mycroft Holmes’ mind.

Pretty sure the script is out the window at this point, John thought to himself.

“I don’t doubt your word, Gregory,” Mycroft started, then stopped.

“Not good,” Sherlock surmised, his breath tickling John’s ear again.

John blew out a breath. “What did the second quote mean to you, Mycroft?” he prompted again. John could imagine the irritated look Mycroft shot him through the solid door.

“That quote is from Hamlet, when Hamlet is mourning the loss of his father...”

John interrupted Mycroft, throwing caution to the wind.

These two need all the help they can get, he thought irritably.

He threw the door open, leaning against the doorframe and shooting a pointed look at Mycroft.
“What did it mean *to you*, Mycroft?”

He crossed his arms, annoyed to see the startled look on Mycroft’s face. “That message from Greg. To you. *Not* Hamlet. You.” John punctuated his sentence, stabbing emphatically at Mycroft with his forefinger before aggressively re-crossing his arms. He felt Sherlock move up to stand behind him, looking over his shoulder at the scene in their sitting room.

For a moment John wondered if Mycroft would pause his conversation to have a hit put out on him. The moment clearly won, because he turned back to Greg and spoke in a rush, “I thought you m-meaned you’d given up on me. On us. If we have an us…Hamlet’s driven mad by loss, I thought you were d-d-despairing of me.” He drew a shuddering breath, his shoulders stuttering along with the sound in his lungs. “I thought it was goodbye.”

Greg’s eyes, locked on Mycroft’s, showed only resigned sadness at this revelation. “No no,” he whispered. He reached out a hand, then hesitated, bringing it back again, confusion playing across his face. “I thought you’d received my messages, but you were ignoring me. I wanted you to know how much I…how much I’d thought about…how much it meant to me.”

If Mycroft’s face mirrored Greg’s, John thought, there were four wide eyes, two brains visibly ticking over as assumptions and ideas were rewritten. They remained at arm’s length, silence spinning from heavy with emotion to awkward as neither seemed to be able to put words to what would happen next.

“Mycroft is…” Sherlock whispered from behind John, and he elbowed Sherlock again to shut him up. No translator was needed just now.

*Team Greg merges with Team Mycroft,* John narrated to himself.

As the silence rolled on, John let out a puff of irritation with the pair in front of him. He caught Greg’s eye, and Greg looked at him pleadingly. John rolled his eyes with good-natured exasperation. He pointed at Greg. “Is he worth the effort of sorting this out?”

Greg nodded minutely, though he was looking at Mycroft.

“Is he worth the effort of sorting this out?” John asked Mycroft, separating himself from the ‘I can’t believe I’m doing this for Mycroft-bloody-Holmes’ part of his brain.

Mycroft echoed Greg, his attention flicking between Greg on one side of him and John on the other.

*Good.* “Good.” John said aloud, realising he didn’t need to internalise his reactions now.

He asked them both this time, “You both agree you’ve been rubbish at communicating?”

Two nods.

“You both agree there were some less than perfect decisions on both sides?”

Two nods.

John paused, before adding, “You two need to take some time alone to talk through all of this.” He pointed his finger severely at each of them in turn, pulling both Greg and Mycroft’s attention to himself.

“Ground rules: be honest but tactful. Try and understand where the other person’s coming from,”
he looked at Greg, “listen to their meaning, not the words.” He glanced at Mycroft to check he understood before moving on. “Don’t gloss over anything. If you don’t understand, say so. If something still annoys you, or still hurts, talk about it. It doesn’t have to be logical, but you’ve got to communicate or this,” he waved one finger between them, “is not going to work.”

John felt like a referee at the start of a boxing match. Both men looked on edge, neither meeting the other’s eye.

Mycroft spoke first. “Do you think a weekend would suffice? We do seem to have a number of things to discuss.”

He sounded tentative, John thought, as though just talking about talking was fraught with peril.

If Mycroft was tentative, Greg was positively terrified, John thought to himself.

“That sounds...fine,” Greg replied carefully.

His hesitance was different to Mycroft’s, John could see now. While Mycroft looked like a teenage boy, desperate to make contact but with no idea how to go about it, Greg’s fear was tangled up with his depression. He needed to understand before he could consider moving forward. John just hoped Mycroft was prepared to be open about himself.

“Perhaps somewhere out of the city would be best,” Mycroft suggested. “Less distraction, and we would be less likely to encounter people we know.”

“Kinsale,” Greg said immediately, though the look on his face said the impulse was not one he’d considered at all.

“I beg your pardon?” Mycroft replied.

“We could go back to Kinsale. I-I don’t know why,” Greg faltered as he looked at Mycroft’s expression, which was somewhere between puzzled and flummoxed.

“Certainly, if that’s what you want.” Eventually, Mycroft pulled himself together enough to answer Greg.

For his part, Greg looked like someone who’d signed up for some extreme adventure without checking exactly what it would entail.

“Er, okay.” John said. It sounded like a terrible idea to him – who flies to another country to have a conversation, for heavens’ sake – but it wasn’t his decision. Looking carefully at both Mycroft and Greg, he saw apprehension and determination in both stony faces.

_Bloody hell, they’re all or nothing, John thought. Bugger it, I’m not going to talk them out of it, after all this effort to talk them into it._ “Great,” he said aloud. “When do you leave?”

“Two days.” Greg said firmly. They’d clearly not discussed it – John had been there, after all – but Mycroft did not argue. It was decided, then.

_Gotcha, John thought to himself. Just please, don’t fuck it up._
Chapter 20

The trip home from Baker Street was somewhat of a blur for Greg. His head was spinning with all the new information and the questions it had generated.

Mycroft hadn’t really explained why he hadn’t tried to contact Greg once they’d returned to London, but Greg was fairly sure it was mixed up with the reason he left so abruptly after the wedding. There had been enough unexpected information to knock him for six; he’d have to ask eventually but his brain was full, anyway. Mycroft was a complex man, and a private one at that; Greg just hoped he was prepared to share some of himself while they talked.

In Kinsale.

Bloody hell, what on earth had inspired that suggestion, he asked himself. But Mycroft had agreed, and Greg didn’t know how to backtrack gracefully. It was perhaps a little extreme – from the look on John’s face, he’d been anticipating a couple of hours at the most – but he was committed now.

So he and Mycroft would be heading back to Kinsale in two days, then. Greg had wanted a little time to think, to try and order his thoughts before they travelled together back to the place it had all begun.

This morning, before their conversation, he’d felt closer to normal, but still fragile. He’d been working with Sandy the therapist on how he would cope if he ran into Mycroft, and the idea no longer filled him with panic. The medication was beginning to kick in, and while he didn’t love the slight edge it took off his emotional range, the ability to get out of bed each morning without an overwhelming sense of helplessness was certainly worth it. In fact, Greg had planned to take the information from his conversation with Sherlock into work and talk to his DCI about returning to light duties.

And then – Mycroft had been at Baker Street. Greg had been so focused on his presence he hadn’t noticed the details until after Mycroft had started speaking, and stuttering at that. Mycroft had looked terrible, which somehow did nothing for Greg’s immediate desire to reach out and touch him. It was clear he’d not been sleeping, and Greg would bet money he’d lost weight, despite the carefully tailored suit he wore. None of this had made sense until Greg had processed what he’d had to say. The slightly wild cast to his eyes made sense too, when he told Greg the ‘Denmark’ message and Hamlet quote had only reached him the day before.

Almost automatically, Greg’s detective mind had put the clues together in a roughly cohesive narrative.

_Mycroft had returned to the B & B in Kinsale to find me gone. As far as he knew, I didn’t leave a message and made no effort to contact him again. Greg scrubbed a hand across his face, muttering, “Jesus.” He must have been as confused and upset as I was, he thought to himself._

The narrative picked up again in his head. _He hasn’t been sleeping well or eating much – under ongoing pressure, more than usual. Possibly bad dreams or nightmares on top of insomnia. When he found out about Anthea’s actions, he was angry – he still is – and he acted immediately to set up the meeting. He was nervous - stuttering and stammering – during the meeting, and his eyes..._

Greg’s mind stumbled over the memory, something he often saw when interviewing suspects. The same sense of urgency, of wanting to explain and be understood immediately. He’d become quite good at telling those whole lied from those who didn’t. Mycroft had appeared to be on the up and
up – and why would he lie about this? Surely a vague, ‘I was out of the country but I can’t talk about it’ would be simpler and wouldn’t leave him answerable to any of his actions. Yet he’d disclosed his conscious decision not to call Greg; the tiny nod of confirmation matched with a flare of shame Greg saw all too often in honest people admitting a mistake.

Greg’s head was spinning with possibilities and ideas, explanations for behaviour and potential backstories for context. He lay on his bed and took several deep breaths, thinking about what Sandy would ask him to do, what he had been asked to do when the many possibilities in front of him had been overwhelming.

“Let’s not focus on the ‘what if’s right now,” Sandy had said, as Greg had sat shaking on his bed, “Let’s concentrate on the facts, and how you feel about them. We can address new information or events as they occur.”

His calm voice had been soothing, and the exercise had worked, making Greg feel more in control of himself, exactly what he needed now.

Greg closed his eyes and thought about the whole situation, breaking it down into short facts.

Mycroft had requested a conversation.

He had not known Greg tried to contact him (Greg felt certain Mycroft was telling the truth).

Anthea had taken steps to keep them apart (not useful right now, he’d come back to it).

Mycroft was willing to talk further.

They were going to Kinsale in two days.

Greg did not know how long they would be gone, or how the conversation would progress while they were there.

How did he feel about all this? The first emotion that hit him was anger. When Mycroft had told Greg it was Anthea who had conspired to keep them apart, Greg had not been able to process the information. Now, his rage rose hard and fast in his chest. How dare she? She had come so close to ruining this fledgling thing; they’d barely started when her blundering had crushed it badly.

He clenched his fists, desperate to lash out, but his rational brain overrode that impulse, and Greg closed his eyes, concentrating on his breathing until his pulse slowed. He’d need to conserve his emotional energy for his trip to Kinsale.

And what about the rest of it? Greg acknowledged the anger he felt towards Anthea, and did his best to push it aside, as Sandy had suggested. It was not part of how he felt about Mycroft now.

How did he feel about Mycroft? An image of the tall man standing in Baker Street, impeccable as always in a dark grey suit, came to mind. At first, Greg had been distracted by the suit, remembering those times in Kinsale Mycroft had not been wearing a suit; he’d been filled with sadness and anger before Mycroft had even spoken. Once he’d begun to process what Mycroft was saying, Greg actually looked at his face, registering the agonized expression and the change in his appearance. That was when he’d needed a break.

The desperate depression he’d fallen into recently had been largely driven by his feelings of inadequacy, failure and lack of understanding (Sandy had helped him see that). With one five minute conversation, Mycroft had rewritten many of the events that triggered his breakdown. Whatever the reason for Mycroft’s absence on the morning after the wedding, he hadn’t left Greg
that day; his intention had been to return, yet he’d returned to an empty room and no explanation for it.

Although he had not related exactly why he’d avoided Greg, the effect of their separation was clear to see – he’d been suffering for it, too. And as soon as he’d found out that Greg had been trying to get in touch, he’d set up this meeting.

**Hardly the actions of a cold, unfeeling man, Greg had realised. Perhaps he wanted to get in touch but didn’t know what to say – from his perspective I’d left him without a word. Embarrassed? Depressed? Hurt?**

Greg realised with a jolt that Mycroft may have been feeling the same inadequacy and sense of failure as he had. Greg knew he could be a stubborn bastard, pushing and prodding until he understood things – it was what made him such a good detective. But Mycroft – he was a considered, reticent man, one who rarely made social overtures and was surprised when others did. It would be entirely in character for him to wait for Greg to make contact, and suffer while he waited. Memories from their conversations at the wedding events came back in snippets.

> “Certainly, I will converse with you, Detective Inspector.”

> “You’re not having a great weekend so far, are you Mycroft?” “I am, actually.”

> “Today has been surprising. Not unpleasant.”

> “That’s not what people usually say...Piss off.” “Not me, Mycroft.”

> “Do you know much about the fort? I did a little reading...” “Go on, then. Tell me about it.”

> “Sherlock doesn’t know...”

> “I feel calm.”

All this had gone through Greg’s head as he stood in the bathroom at Baker Street, knowing Mycroft was waiting for him. As soon as he walked out and saw Mycroft’s face, apprehensive before he schooled his face once more, he felt a flutter of butterflies and uncertainty that his deductions were correct.

When Mycroft had revealed he thought Greg was saying goodbye with his Hamlet quote, the look of anguish and sorrow was genuine, and Greg knew Mycroft was sincere. But where did they go from here? There was still so much to say, so many decisions that needed explanation and context, from both sides.

Greg felt relieved they’d had the opportunity to speak, but it was barely a start. He wasn’t against continuing the conversation, and God knew that he still found Mycroft attractive, but he was too old to rush blind into anything. Kinsale the first time had been a fairytale; this was real life, with real consequences, and a little more boring groundwork would be needed if this relationship was to make it.

**This relationship,** he mused on his choice of words. Did they have one? They had the possibility of one, but nothing was for certain. Although Greg did feel calm about the plan he had made with Mycroft, his lack of extreme emotional reaction actually troubled him a little. He knew the meds would smooth out the peaks and troughs in his mood, but still. Surely he should be screaming in anger, or drinking himself into oblivion, or sobbing into John’s shoulder by now. Instead, he was mentally packing, deciding what to wear, making mental notes to have John take home any perishable food, to contact work, to dig out his passport again.
“So you’re surprised by your reaction,” Sandy said the next afternoon as they sat on Greg’s couch.

19 hours until I leave for Kinsale again, Greg thought to himself absently, then replied to Sandy’s comment. “Lack of reaction, really. I mean, I came home, I did some of the mindfulness stuff we’d practiced, I packed. Shouldn’t I be, I dunno, falling apart again?”

“There’s no right way for you to react to this, Greg. You’ve indicated in the past that you would have been prepared to meet with Mycroft and listen to his explanation for his behaviour since you both returned from Ireland. Now that it’s happened, and you feel that there’s more exploration to be done, it makes sense that you would plan to meet and converse again.”

“We’re going back to Kinsale. Tomorrow. Together,” Greg said.

Sandy’s composure, normally quite carefully constructed, faltered for a moment. “You are?”

Greg nodded. He wasn’t sure enough about this to go into it too much. “It was suggested we take some time to have these conversations away from distractions.”

“And you felt that an international trip together was the best way to do that,” Sandy clarified. Greg nodded again, face impassive. “Did you suggest it or did Mycroft?” Sandy asked.

Greg flushed. “I did. I have no idea why, I just blurted it out, and Mycroft agreed, and now…” he shrugged.

Sandy nodded slowly. “Well overall I think it’s a good idea for you and Mycroft to have some space where you won’t be interrupted. Given the depth and breadth of topics you might want to cover, it will also have the advantage of giving you space for the conversations to happen organically, when you both feel ready.” Sandy smiled encouragingly. “Do you feel comfortable spending that much time alone with him?”

Greg considered the question. He hadn’t thought much about the logistics of the trip; Mycroft had texted him this morning with the time a car would collect him and an assurance that all other arrangements would be taken care of; knowing Mycroft, however, he would hardly expect to spend every moment together. Greg was sure they would both need time to think and consider the conversations they would have while they were there. “Yeah.” He said finally.

“So basically, you’re feeling positive about this opportunity with Mycroft,” Sandy summarised.

“Yes. Yeah,” Greg agreed.

Sandy sat forward now, his serious face on. “Greg, I think it’s important you don’t go into this with any preconceived ideas about what the outcome might be. It may be that you and Mycroft spend a few days communicating openly and honestly and decided that actually, a relationship is not the right thing for you.” Greg nodded automatically. “I also want you to be aware that you might not agree about how to move forward. One of you may want more that the other. You’ll both have to respect the other person’s decision at that point.”

Greg nodded again, distracted by his unexpected reaction to both these statements.

He bade Sandy farewell then sank down again onto the sofa. This morning, he’d believed that he and Mycroft were over, done, and he’d been on the path to acceptance. By lunchtime, he’d planned a trip with Mycroft back to Kinsale, of all places. And now he felt…upset. Upset at the idea that they might do what they intended on this trip – talk about all the stuff that had happened – and still not end up together. The idea rent a hole in his heart, if he was brutally honest.
The only thing he could remember from yesterday with any great clarity was Mycroft’s eyes, the image sharp and clear. *Believe me, please, please, believe me* they had been saying, even as his mouth delivered carefully weighted words. It was the witnessing of Mycroft’s humanity, the toll this experience had taken on him, too, which had sparked that tiny hope in Greg. The hope that despite the misunderstandings and best intentions and all the anxiety and self-doubt that they both obviously struggled through, they might find a way past it all to be who they were those first precious hours in Kinsale.

Shaking himself, Greg stood and went to his bedroom. He needed to be sure he had enough clean pants if he was going to start packing.

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“Take care of yourself, mate,” were John’s parting words to Greg as a black sedan pulled up outside Greg’s flat the next day.

“Listen, John,” Greg began, intending to thank him for everything.

The other man just pulled him into a rough hug, told him, “Yeah, I know, you owe me a bazillion pints,” and released him.

Greg braced himself before opening the door to find it empty save the driver. He was a little relieved – not sure he could restrain himself had it been Anthea, thought he figured she probably had enough of a sense of self-preservation not to be around him for a while. And he and Mycroft would be stuck together on the plane, no need to start the awkwardness too soon. They probably wouldn’t have any really serious conversation until they’d finished travelling, yet it would hang between them, affecting any small talk.

Best to keep that to a minimum, Greg thought. Good thing he’d packed a good book.
Greg scrubbed his hand over his face as the car moved smoothly through London. What the hell was he doing? For all the positive talk he’d given himself in the last two days, he was nervous as hell and still not entirely sure this was the best idea. Once Mycroft had agreed, though, how could he have taken it back? He did want to talk to Mycroft, to work through whatever the hell had happened, but…

His noise of frustration almost covered the sound of his phone pinging. He reached for it, sighing as he did so.

_We should talk._

_MH_

Greg stared.

_Isn’t that what we’re doing this for?_

The ellipsis blinked at him for a long time before the response appeared.

_Perhaps London would be a better idea._

_MH_

Greg stared. Again. Was Mycroft suggesting…

Grunting with frustration, he thumbed the call button, waiting to connect with a swirl of nerves and anticipation.

“Gregory.”

“Hi Mycroft.”

There was a long pause before Greg said awkwardly, “So you don’t think we should go to Kinsale, then?”

Mycroft hesitated before saying carefully, “I’m not sure it’s the best course of action.”

“But I’ve packed,” Greg blurted out, immediately cursing his mouth. He took a deep breath. “Where are you now?”

“At my club.”

Greg nodded though Mycroft couldn’t see him. “Why don’t I come there. We can talk there first and then…see what happens.” There was no reply, and Greg added, “Mycroft?”

“Alright.”

Greg’s chest relaxed – he hadn’t realised how tense he was after even such a short conversation.

“Can you tell my driver to take me there, please?” Greg asked. Experience told him that Mycroft’s employees tended to do what Mycroft told them rather than listening to their passengers.
“Anthea will meet you in the lobby,” Mycroft said, and Greg stiffened.

“Is there…I mean, could someone else…” He fumbled the words, fighting the anger than flowed through him at the thought of seeing Anthea so soon.

Mycroft’s sharply indrawn breath told Greg he’d figured it out. “Of course. Your driver will bring you up.” He paused, then added almost apologetically, “Please remember the rules about silence, Gregory.”

“Yeah, I remember,” Greg said. He’d only been there once, and what an experience that had been. Not one he’d be likely to forget. There was another awkward pause before he said, “Well, bye, then.”

“Goodbye, Gregory.”

Greg ended the call and dropped his phone on the seat next to him, blowing out an explosive breath. He felt the car execute a sharp turn, changing course to the Diogenes Club. He had to admit to himself he was relieved not to be heading to the airport – despite the general calm he’d felt about finally having some resolution to this mess, it was more about the closure and less about Kinsale. The town would be full of memories, and the fact that he and Mycroft were there for just one reason, without the distraction of an event such as the wedding had been playing on his mind. They would hardly have been making small talk.

Though Sandy had been somewhat encouraging, he was obviously surprised that Greg had suggested it.

“And you felt that an international trip together was the best way to do that.”

He had made a good point, that they would need uninterrupted space to talk, but now that he was here, Greg was glad he was facing just one conversation with Mycroft instead of an indefinite trip.

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His footsteps made no sound on the plush carpet as Greg followed his driver through the silent halls of the Diogenes Club. Greg kept his eyes ahead, concentrating on the conversation he was about to have.

When the still-unnamed driver knocked on a door and stepped back, Greg shot him a brief smile, murmured, “Thanks,” and turned to look into sky blue eyes that fell upon him.

“Good morning, Gregory.” Mycroft greeted him, stepping back to allow him into the room. It was a small informal meeting room, as far as informality went here. Panelled walls, several armchairs drawn up together, a small drinks cart, Greg noted automatically. He draw a calming breath as Mycroft closed the door, and they looked at each other.

“Hi,” Greg gave a belated reply. His heart was pounding, but he felt okay. Calm-ish.

“Have a seat. Can I offer you a cup of tea?”

As Greg sat himself down, he saw a tea-tray sitting on the side table, steam gently issuing from the spout of the teapot. “Sure.” Greg replied.

They sat in silence, both watching Mycroft play mother. “Milk, two sugars,” Greg said when Mycroft hesitated over his cup. He took the steaming cup carefully, more used to the heavy mugs emblazoned with the NSY logo than this delicate china.
Once Mycroft had finished doctoring his own cup, he sat back and glanced tentatively at Greg. They each sipped at their tea, filling a second or two, though silence still reigned.

“I thought we should talk,” Mycroft said finally. Greg was relieved he’d broken the silence.

“We should.” Greg knew his reply was short but he had no idea what to say. Mycroft was the one with the words, he should start.

Mycroft cleared his throat, looking down as he ran one finger around the edge of his saucer. “I have no idea how to start this conversation.”

“I have some questions,” Greg said carefully. “Perhaps we could start there?”

“Certainly,” Mycroft managed.

Greg nodded. “I guess the main thing I don’t understand is why you didn’t contact me when we got back to London. I mean, regardless of whether I called you or not.”

“The simple answer is, I didn’t think you’d want me to,” Mycroft replied as though the words were difficult to shape.

“Why not?” Greg asked, wanting Mycroft to continue.

Mycroft sighed. “I critically evaluated our conversations from the last time we were in Kinsale. I was needy, gauche, awkward. To be brutally honest, I find it difficult to view myself as desirable company, platonic or otherwise.” He shrugged self-consciously, face burning crimson. Greg saw him take a deep slightly shaky breath. “If you consent, I think this would be better served as a single narrative, beginning on the morning after the wedding.”

Greg nodded, and there was a pause as he watched Mycroft collect his thoughts.

“My brother would say I have an unsurpassed ability to convince myself of truths regardless of the evidence.” Mycroft smiled wryly to himself as his thoughts obviously drifted to his brother for a moment before he continued speaking. “When I woke that morning, I was flustered, I don’t know the expectations in that situation. It’s not a scenario with which I am familiar. Or comfortable. I needed some space.”

Greg could see the memory flicker across Mycroft’s face, his fear in stark contrast to the usual blank mask he showed the world.

“I have panic attacks.” Mycroft said quietly, looking into his tea. “It’s...overwhelming. Makes it difficult to think logically.”

Greg wondered how many people knew this side of Mycroft. The way he was speaking, the stilted sentences underlined his discomfort with such frank disclosure. Greg felt a wave of sympathy. Mycroft obviously had little experience being so open, and he was trying hard to share himself with Greg.

“I know what that’s like,” Greg said quietly. Mycroft bobbed his head, blinking rapidly as he examined his tea again. Greg didn’t break the silence; Mycroft clearly needed a couple of minutes.

“I didn’t think, obviously. I just needed to walk, and try to figure out what to do.” The memory overcame him and he shot a shy glance at Greg. “You were too distracting, I couldn’t concentrate.” Greg blinked, a little disconcerted by the sudden reference to the intimacy they’d shared. He ignored his own sudden recollections, forcing himself to concentrate on Mycroft again. “I walked
towards the Fort. I didn’t want to encounter anybody in town, and besides…” he trailed off, swallowing before continuing lamely, “it was familiar.”

Greg stared at Mycroft. What’s that supposed to mean? he wondered. He’d interviewed enough people with something to hide to recognize a sentence that did not end as it was intended.

“What?” Mycroft asked, his usual politeness dropping away in bewilderment as he studied Greg.

Greg realised he’d been staring. “That’s where I went to look for you.”

“Really?”

Greg nodded, a slight flush warming his cheeks.

“Oh,” Mycroft said awkwardly. “Anyway,” he said, “I needed a walk. I walked up to the Fort.” He reminded himself where he had been up to. “I thought about our time together.” He placed his empty cup and saucer on the tray, folding his hands and placing them in his lap. “I have not had a lot of experience with such relationships, Greg. The intensity of our connection was confronting and I didn’t know what it means. Meant.”

“You were scared,” Greg summarised, and Mycroft nodded.

“Me too,” Greg admitted quietly. “It’s new to me too.”

Mycroft nodded again, opening and closing his mouth before finally saying, “I still am. I don’t know how to do this properly.”

Greg nodded. That much was evident.

“So you left because you were scared,” Greg confirmed finally. “Why did you come back?”

“I never intended to leave,” Mycroft countered, the stress evident in his voice. “I just needed some space. I needed to think.” He’d said this already but it was important – we’d been having a good time at a wedding where we knew nobody but each other, why would you? I came to the conclusion that you would most likely see it as a holiday romance, nothing more, and it would be best to cut it off before it became awkward.”

Greg was looking at him, waves of sadness and pain rolling through him as he took this in. Mycroft rushed on, “I told you, I don’t know what I’m doing,” and his voice was pure anguish, “I talked myself into it. I told you I do that. We are the same in a lot of ways, but the differences are still significant. Why would someone like you, an experienced, confident man want to be with me? You can surely have your pick of men, or women. I have very little to offer, Greg, and as you said when we met at Baker Street, it was a fairytale time.” He laughed a little bitterly. “No reality required.”

His voice rang against the high ceilings for a long moment. Taking a deep breath, Mycroft ploughed on. “I walked the rest of the way to the Fort. It was daylight, and full of people, but I remembered when we had been there. Together.”

Greg was looking at him, waves of sadness and pain rolling through him as he took this in. Mycroft rushed on, “I told you, I don’t know what I’m doing,” and his voice was pure anguish, “I talked myself into it. I told you I do that. We are the same in a lot of ways, but the differences are still significant. Why would someone like you, an experienced, confident man want to be with me? You can surely have your pick of men, or women. I have very little to offer, Greg, and as you said when we met at Baker Street, it was a fairytale time.” He laughed a little bitterly. “No reality required.”

His voice rang against the high ceilings for a long moment. Taking a deep breath, Mycroft ploughed on. “I walked the rest of the way to the Fort. It was daylight, and full of people, but I remembered when we had been there. Together.”

Greg was breathing deeply now, conscious of every breath as it filled his lungs. Mycroft’s narrative had become deeply emotional, though only the change in his voice and eyes would give it away. Greg started, “Mycroft, I-”

Mycroft held up one hand, his eyes begging Greg to allow him to finish. “My life is grey, Gregory. No highs or lows, just – consistency. That weekend showed me colours I had forgotten ever seeing.”
He took a deep breath, looking into Greg’s eyes as he said baldly, “I don’t take risks. My professional life depends on it, and I am not used to making personal decisions such as this. I consider the options and the evidence, and I act accordingly. In this case, I took precisely the opposite path. I took a risk and came back.”

“And I was gone.” Greg murmured. *Inhale, pause, exhale, pause.*

“And that’s why I didn’t call,” Mycroft finished, finally answering Greg’s question. “I came back, but you were gone.”

Greg nodded, cocking his head as he thought. “So where does that leave us now?” He asked quietly.

There was a long silence, and he wondered if Mycroft was going to answer him at all.

“The fairytale you mentioned was an apt analogy. It wasn’t real. Perhaps...perhaps we need to see if it works here, in the real world.” Mycroft’s voice was low, as though speaking any louder would invalidate his suggestion.

Greg nodded again. It made sense, but he had to still ask, “Do you still want to…” He took a deep breath, pushing himself to put it into words. “Do you still want me?” they hung in the air until he added with difficulty, “Because I think I want you. Still.”

With those words, Mycroft blew out an explosive breath. Greg was fairly sure he had stopped breathing as he waited for Greg to speak.

“God, yes,” came Mycroft’s reply, breathed like a prayer. “If this is...if it can be...as real as it feels, I think I may need more of you. More and more.”

The honesty of his answer threw Greg for a moment before he replied, “Okay, then.”
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

I haven't thanked Kara enough in recent chapters - she has been reading countless rewrites and gently steering this story in the right direction. We wouldn't be here without her! Thank you as well to those who've been reading and commenting, whether once or regularly, I appreciate it more than I can say.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mycroft ran his hand over the soft cashmere jumper, once again questioning his choice of attire. While he trusted the judgement of his tailor, it had been a long time since he had deliberately dressed in what was, to his mind, such a casual manner.

He wore tailored trousers and a slim fitting shirt – insisted on by Paul, who Mycroft had almost regretted asking – as well as the close fitting cashmere in a deep cobalt he would never have chosen for himself. Despite his best intentions, Mycroft’s eyes were always critical, roving over his body, looking for faults. It was only when he caught himself in this negative frame of mind that Mycroft closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

*It's a good colour,* he reminded himself. *The fit is flattering, Paul made you look in that horrendous triad mirror.*

Opening his eyes again, he forced himself to step back and look at the complete picture. He relaxed, admitting to himself that he didn’t look terrible. Greg didn’t seem to mind, and that was what he had to remember.

As he selected cufflinks for his crisp white shirt, Mycroft’s fingers fluttered a little. This would be the seventh time he and Greg had made a deliberate effort to meet for a date. He wasn’t even sure ‘date’ was the right word; while it had been just the two of them, their meetings had been far closer to the platonic end of the spectrum overall. They had talked about all sorts of things, getting to know each other as they each suggested activities - the Chelsea Space Gallery, the Wallace Collection, and a midnight screening of *The Maltese Falcon.*

They were hardly usual early date venues; one of the exhibitions had been artifacts from World War 1’s Intelligence archives, apparently on display 'at the suggestion of a certain Government official'. Mycroft had whispered alternative explanations for almost every fact therein, some true, some deliberately outlandish. By the end of their visit, Greg had been exasperated but grinning, and Mycroft knew he couldn’t be sure how much was real and how much Mycroft had made up.

Mycroft’s favourite date had been the all night café they’d stumbled on after *The Maltese Falcon* had let out. The food was mediocre and the coffee quite average, but the conversation was… memorable. They had been almost the only two there, heads bowed over the pudding delivered with two spoons, though Mycroft had resisted. It had been intimate, sharing their quiet words, and this was the first time Mycroft had felt it spill over from platonic to something more.

The atmosphere had been heavier, their gaze more difficult to break; Mycroft knew his heart had
been thumping harder than usual as he made himself hold Greg’s gaze. They had both spoken hesitantly, with stilted sentences and stumbling words; Greg had not mentioned it when Mycroft’s stutter emerged more than once. But it had been honest and truthful, the first real connection since they’d agreed to start again, more or less.

Once home, Mycroft had lain awake in the few remaining hours until dawn, analyzing every second, searching for layers of meaning until it all blurred together.

They’d both spoken a little about their experiences in London immediately after Kinsale, and Mycroft was astounded by the similarities. The anxiety, depression, nightmares; Greg’s drinking to cope mirrored his own panic attacks as neither was able to deal with the return to real life after such a surreal time in Ireland. Though he hadn’t said it at the time, Mycroft was exceptionally grateful to John for the care he’d taken with Greg; he shuddered to think where Greg would be without John’s medical expertise and refusal to let him struggle alone.

His own life, while lonely and gray, was filled with people; the idea of crawling into bed and not being missed had simply not occurred to him because it couldn’t be allowed to happen. The strictures of his employment and the time sensitive nature of many of his tasks made it next to impossible for him to disappear for more than a few hours.

That fact continued to dictate the slow pace of their still developing relationship. For all their intent, the realities of both their jobs and lives, as well as the mutual desire to keep things private, made it difficult to commit to a time too far in advance. As it was, several dates had been canceled by one or the other as an unavoidable situation arose.

*At least it’s both of us,* Mycroft thought to himself.

Greg was working part time again, but that meant fewer cases rather than more predictable hours. Bodies were still sometimes discovered at inconvenient times, and a police officer’s social life would always take second place. That, at least, was something Mycroft could completely understand.

The slow pace had at least ensured that when there had been an opportunity to meet, Mycroft was almost farcically enthusiastic, having to force himself to calm down, lest he grin at Greg like an imbecile. It had seemed like such a slow shift, but Mycroft finally felt they’d reached a similar place to where they’d been in Kinsale – the easy banter was there, though the underlying tension, complete with flirtation, was conspicuous in its absence. That late night conversation was the first suggestion of a deeper connection once again in their relationship.

Checking once more that his cufflinks were firmly placed, Mycroft turned away from the mirror. Hopefully, this evening wouldn’t be interrupted by either of their offices. Mycroft had left instructions that he was not to be disturbed unless critically necessary, an unheard of instruction until very recently.

Cufflinks secure, he checked the time (five minutes until his driver arrived), before closing his eyes to review the plans for the evening. He’d arranged this especially for Greg, knowing how he delighted in police history. A flutter of his insides made Mycroft squirm as he hoped Greg would enjoy it. He’d certainly called in enough favours to make it happen. Mycroft Holmes, holder of more favours owed than anyone in the British Commonwealth, had finally found a reason to cash them in, and boy, was he enjoying it.

His eyes flew open at the discrete sound of his entry buzzer, pulling him back to the here and now. A final check in the mirror (you look fine, *stop it*) and Mycroft stepped briskly downstairs and into the waiting car.
“H-wow,” Greg said when he slid into the back of the town car.

“Thank you. You look splendid too,” Mycroft replied, flush deepening as he became conscious of it.

Greg grinned at him then, something different in his eyes, and Mycroft felt something twist in his lower abdomen. This was different. This was *flirting*. He swallowed. Maybe his hopes for this evening were not so farfetched, after all.

After a moment, Greg looked out the window and frowned. “Where are we going, exactly?”

Mycroft smiled, like a man holding all the secrets. “Somewhere interesting.”

“Interesting?” Greg repeated, still looking out the window. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say we were headed to the British Museum.”

Mycroft’s eyebrows rose, but he said nothing. When they pulled into the staff parking under the building, though, Greg crowed in delight.

“I knew it!”

Their car drew up to an unmarked door, and both men stepped out. Their driver spoke into the intercom and as they waited for their escort, Mycroft stole another look at Greg. He had been telling the truth earlier – Greg did look good. More than that, he looked healthy. The sea green jumper and open grey shirt were exactly the right colours for him, black jeans lending his outfit a more casual air than Mycroft’s, as usual.

Bringing his eyes back up to Greg’s face, Mycroft realised he was not the only one taking advantage of the few moments they had. Greg’s eyes were roving over his own torso, and he breathed in automatically, tensing his abs but resisting the urge to suck in his stomach.

“That’s a great colour on you,” Greg murmured, too low for the driver to hear. Not that he’d care, he was paid very well to be discreet.

“Thank you,” Mycroft replied, a little flustered at the direct comment.

Before he could speak further, a woman opened the door, offering her ID to the driver before he allowed Mycroft and Greg past him and through the door.

“Pleased to meet you, I’m Emma,” she introduced herself. “I’ll be taking you downstairs.”

She didn’t offer any further details, and Mycroft could feel the anticipation radiating off Greg. So far, so successful.

When they arrived, Emma flicked the lights on, addressing her comments to Mycroft. “I’ll be upstairs all night. Just pick up this phone when you’re ready and I’ll come downstairs to take you out again. All the items you requested are in the gallery over there.” Emma gestured to the left, smiled at them both, then left.

Greg barely waited until the door had closed behind her before blurting out, “This is amazing! What is this? Where are we? How the hell did you…well, I’m guessing you pulled a few strings. But the rest of my questions stand.”

“This is the under gallery of the British Museum. A closed collection, if you like. There are many rooms like this. We are five floors below street level, in the room designated 5-SUT.” He cleared
his throat, watching Greg absorb the information. “This room contains the Sutcliffe Collection. Artifacts and decommissioned evidence from investigations into British serial and mass killers.” Mycroft watched Greg’s face carefully, shoulders tensed as he searched for clues to the detective’s reaction. When a delighted smile broke over his face at the name ‘Sutcliffe’, and only broadened at the further explanation, Mycroft relaxed.

“Well? I’d heard rumours this place existed, but, I mean…” Greg trailed off, glancing around, eyes bright with curiosity.

“Go ahead. Have a look around. I can probably answer some of your questions, but I also want to open the wine.”

“Well?” Greg asked.

Mycroft shrugged. “A small picnic. I hoped you might find the venue intriguing.”

Greg’s broad grin answered that question, and for a moment Mycroft thought he was going to step in and kiss him – their first kiss since Kinsale.

Instead Greg turned, examining the glass cabinet to his right. Mycroft left him to it, making his way over to check that his directions had been followed for the picnic. Satisfied that things were as they should be, he uncorked the wine, pouring two glasses. Greg was happy, so he was happy, content to sit for the moment as he listened to the slow shuffle of Greg moving around the silent space.

Chapter End Notes

In case you were wondering - Peter Sutcliffe, after whom this (entirely fictional) under gallery was named, was subject of one of Britain's biggest investigations. He killed 13 people in 5 years in the late 1970s, and a young Greg Lestrade would certainly have read the accounts of the Yorkshire Ripper, as he was known.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Thank you once again, Kara, for your help and general all around loveliness.

TW: Mention of a child killer in passing. No description or details. <3

Greg recognized the name Sutcliffe immediately, of course. He’d had several ideas of what they might be doing here, but this was beyond his wildest dreams. He knew it was macabre, but ever since he was a small boy reading books about Jack the Ripper he’d been fascinated with police procedure and serial killers in particular. There had been stories about such a room somewhere, storing all the unreleased evidence perhaps, or proof that some high profile person was responsible for unsolved cases.

Greg had never placed much stock in what he’d heard, given it was usually after a pint or three at the end of a long day; still, he’d always wondered if maybe there was a grain of truth in the speculation. And now here he was, presumably never to be able to breathe a word to any living soul, his admission paid with (he suspected) Mycroft’s called in favours. He started with the closest cabinet, looking closely at handwritten accounts of women who had escaped the Ripper; he’d never heard of such evidence existing. Greg strained to make out the faded old-fashioned handwriting before moving on, marveling at the carefully preserved clothing, physical evidence and outlines of police procedures.

When Mycroft appeared beside him, Greg jumped a mile. He’d been lost in the confession of Beverly Allitt to the murders of those under her care, morbidly entranced with her justification for such horrific actions.

“Sorry,” he said with an apologetic smile, “concentrating.”

“Of course,” Mycroft murmured, turning to leave Greg once more.

Instinctively, Greg laid his hand on Mycroft’s arm. “Stay,” he asked, adding, “What can you tell me about this?” Greg gestured to a small book at the back of the cabinet, unlabeled but with a distinctive design carved into the leather binding.

Mycroft blinked at Greg, before deliberately looking at the small book for a moment. “A small book of anatomy, with particular reference to ease of dismemberment. That belonged to Robert Mann, widely believed to be Jack the Ripper.” Greg nodded, though his mouth dropped open in surprise when Mycroft added offhandedly, “He wasn’t, of course.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I am not.” Mycroft replied.

“Wow.” Greg breathed, looking back at the book. His hand slid down Mycroft’s forearm, winding inward until his palm dragged against Mycroft’s, finally settling into place with fingers wound together. His heart was beating hard, a little from the artefact he was staring at, but mostly from the
move he’d just made. He glanced at Mycroft, checking that things were still okay, to find that
Mycroft was doing the same. Greg flashed a small grin, testing the waters, and Mycroft replied in
kind.

Nervous but okay then, Greg thought to himself. He moved on to the next cabinet, Mycroft
keeping up with him, but Greg’s mind was now heading in a completely different direction.

Greg knew he was in a much better place now than he had been a couple of months ago. Those
weeks back in London were easily the worst of his life. Despite what he’d told Fiona, none of the
times she’d dug him out had come close. If not for John, Sandy, and an understanding boss, Greg
didn’t like to think where he’d be right now.

While John and Sandy had started him on the right track, it had been the conversation with Mycroft
at Baker Street that had been the real catalyst for his healing. Once they’d agreed against Kinsale
(Sandy had suggested he’d brought it up hoping to recreate the magic they’d made last time), Greg
knew it was the right decision. He’d started slow, keeping up the medication, regular appointments
with Sandy, part time at work when he was ready. Since he finally had the time (and motivation),
Greg had started running again too, properly running, and he was starting to feel the positive
effects on his health, both mental and physical.

It had been a lot of work, but he was finally feeling more centred, and after the endless drift of
single-parenthood and overwork, having the time to sit and figure out what he actually wanted was
a blessing. Long conversations with Fiona, who’d known him longest of all his friends had helped,
too. Touching base with his girls had helped; both busy with their own lives overseas, they were as
bad at keeping in touch as he was. Nevertheless, talking to them, even briefly, reminded him what
was important.

Greg felt clearer than he had in a long time. Now, he and Mycroft were slowly getting to know each
other, figuring out how they might integrate into each other’s lives, their real lives.

And it was working. It wasn’t perfect, but they were both pragmatic enough to realise that for two
people with such demanding jobs, it was lucky they found any time at all. With the hours of talking
and shared experience, Greg’s confidence in their connection had grown. They had many shared
interests, and on one memorable night, had walked almost in silence around an exhibition of punk
rock memorabilia, the silence comfortable and almost intimate.

That had been when he’d first felt things change. It had made him admit to himself that he wanted
that intimacy with Mycroft beyond a platonic relationship. It had probably lead to that conversation
in the café, too – just a few days later, when the murders and international incidents had abstained
for long enough to allow them a midnight movie date.

Greg had been so tired, blabbering on, and before he knew it, the conversation turned personal. It
had been awkward and stilted and totally necessary. It had answered questions and resolved some
of those left unasked; and more than anything, it had shifted their dynamic once more.

The slight defensiveness had gone, and Greg had found himself flirting a little more with each date,
though it wasn’t until tonight Mycroft had realised what he was doing. Greg grinned a little as he
remembered how surprised Mycroft had looked earlier when he’d complimented that gorgeous
jumper. What a perfect colour against his glorious pale skin...

He must have been staring into space, because Mycroft squeezed his hand.

“Greg?”
Greg shook himself. “Sorry,” he replied.

“Would you like to take a break? We have as long as you’d like, and there’s supper laid out just beyond that cabinet,” Mycroft offered.

Greg smiled. “Supper sounds perfect.”

He allowed Mycroft to lead the way, glancing in more display cabinets as they made their way to the open space set at the back of the gallery. A picnic was laid out on the table in the centre of the space. Greg couldn’t help grinning when his gaze locked on the pizza boxes. Belatedly, the scent reached his nose.

“Angelo’s?” he asked, and Mycroft nodded, obviously pleased with himself.

Greg squeezed his hand before letting it go, reaching over the linen napkins and silverware to open the boxes.

“I hope I’ve chosen adequately.” Mycroft murmured.

Greg gave him a look, then said, “I think we both know you’ve ordered my favourite, Mycroft.” He held Mycroft’s gaze a moment longer before saying quietly, “Thank you.”

Mycroft’s nod of acknowledgment was small, and he indicated that Greg should sit. They were sat at right angles at a corner of the large table, the distance across too far to comfortably talk to one another.

Greg was glad they could sit more closely. The pizza, from his favourite restaurant, a place John had introduced him to, as well as the venue, showed him that Mycroft had put a lot of effort into tonight. They’d more or less taken turns so far to choose where they’d visited, but this was amazing.

Greg let out a groan as he bit into the first slice of pizza, ignoring the cutlery. He watched in amusement as Mycroft cut into his own meal.

“Pretty sure that’s blasphemy, Mycroft.”

“I will never be able to bring myself to eat with my hands. I thought we’d had this conversation?” Mycroft replied.

Greg chuckled. “Of course we did. And that’s why you’ll never be able to try my favourite kebab joint.”

“My life is bereft of meaning,” Mycroft said dramatically, swallowing some pizza and picking up his wine glass. “A toast, Greg?”

Greg picked up his own glass and looked at Mycroft, waiting for him to offer the toast. Mycroft was hesitating, and as Greg’s eyes met his, the uncertainty there was clear. Greg swallowed, still waiting, until Mycroft finally offered, “To friends.”

“Friends.” Greg repeated automatically, touching the rim of his glass to Mycroft’s.

He wasn’t sure how he felt about the toast. Chewing thoughtfully, he wondered if they would ever really be friends. Right now they were in some kind of limbo, neither friends nor lovers, though the tension between them right now was that of the unresolved sexual nature. Greg knew Mycroft wanted more, and he himself also did; a part of him though, was still questioning the wisdom of it.
They'd both made such presumptions last time, been so hurt by the action and inaction of the other. Greg swallowed hard, the pizza almost painful as it went down. He knew that what he wanted was an assurance Mycroft may not have been able to give – that they would never again have such a misunderstanding. In his conversations, Greg had asked John and Fiona both what they thought the chances were of that happening.

“Another cock up like this?” John had asked, before thinking for a moment as he’d drawn on his pint. “Unlikely. Not to this degree, mate. You know each other better now, and neither of you would just leave the other alone until you'd talked it out.” He’d shrugged. “Doesn’t mean you won’t argue, or disagree, or whatever, but you’ll talk about it now.”

Greg had nodded at that. John had made a good point. He and Mycroft had both learned from their mistakes, and were different for it. He didn’t know yet if it was better or not - but it was different, and right now, maybe that was enough to warrant taking the chance, seeing how their ‘different’ might change their romantic dynamic.

“You reckon he left that morning because he needed space to think,” Fiona had repeated thoughtfully. “Well you didn’t know at the time that’s what he needed, but you know it now.” She shrugged. “So if he disappears like that again, you’ll wait it out.” A pause, then she’d added carefully, “Anthea was trying to do the right thing, Greg.”

The look Greg had shot her then had stopped whatever else Fiona had wanted to say; Anthea was not a conversation Greg had been prepared to have with her. Her earlier point had been a valid one, though – now that he knew Mycroft better, Greg would understand better if Mycroft did disappear for some space. He wouldn’t like it, but he would understand it.

All of that, though, did not address his main concern, which boiled down to one thing – could he trust Mycroft, more than a friend trusts a friend? As Greg looked at the man sitting next to him, cutting his pizza into precise pieces with a knife and fork, for God’s sake, he thought the answer was yes. And although that scared the hell out of him, it also filled him with hope.

Picking up his napkin, Greg wiped his face, registering absently that his hands were shaking.

“Mycroft,” he began, waiting until the other man had replaced his knife and fork and was looking at him inquiringly. “I…” he faltered, clearing his throat before beginning again. “I think I’m going to go and see the chief super on Monday. Look at going back to work full time again.” He watched Mycroft’s face, the expression barely shifting. “What…what do you think?”

Mycroft looked surprised. “You want my opinion on the matter?”

“Of course.” Greg took a deep breath and slid the tips of his fingers onto Mycroft’s knee. “You’ll be affected by it, after all.”

Mycroft swallowed, his eyes still on Greg. “Forgive me, Greg, but am I to understand that you are asking me as a friend, or…” his voice trailed off, but the intensity of his gaze left Greg with no reservations about the other option he was posing as a possibility.

“I was hoping,” Greg said, his voice quiet in the empty space, “that we might no longer be friends.”

Heart pounding like a jackhammer, he leaned toward Mycroft, eyes dropping from eyes to mouth in a deliberate statement of intention. Mycroft’s eyes, which Greg had thought could not possibly widen further, blinked twice before locking on Greg’s mouth. Greg saw Mycroft’s lips part ever so slightly. Without thinking, his head tilted to one side as Greg settled his mouth over Mycroft’s.
Neither moved, the press of lips chaste and still; Greg felt relief flood through him as seconds passed and Mycroft did not pull away from the touch. The kiss was bliss, warm and gentle, lasting only a few seconds, but Greg smiled as they parted, leaning back only far enough to be able to see Mycroft’s face. It was another shift in their relationship; a tentative commitment to something more.

Greg smiled at Mycroft, pouring contentment and joy into his expression, hoping Mycroft could read it. He was rewarded with a soft smile.

Okay then, he thought to himself, we’re doing this again.

Chapter End Notes

Beverly Allitt was a real life killer - she was a nurse convicted of killing children in her care.
Robert Mann was genuinely suspected of being Jack the Ripper, and many people believe he is still the most likely suspect in these unsolved murders.
Greg stretched, the familiar ache in his lower back from his terrible chair radiating through his spine. His boss had been enthusiastic about his proposal to return to work full time, and Greg had started back immediately. Donovan, who’d been working mainly for Greg but had been outsourced on admin duties when Greg was absent, had just about hugged him – she loathed admin duties. She’d also offered drinks on Monday night to celebrate; he’d declined, knowing the old habit of a pint or five on a weeknight would do nothing for his new mental and physical health.

When his phone buzzed at a quarter to four the next morning, Greg was even more grateful he’d elected to go home and have an early night. Standing in the half-darkness of a crime scene would always be oddly comforting it its familiarity, but it would never be his favourite way to start a day. It was clearly a homicide, which did smooth the way a little; Greg made sure there were plenty of photos and video before okay-ing the morgue guys to remove the body. He’d already decided that Sherlock would only get calls for the worst of the worst; he would give himself the benefit of the doubt more often, trusting his own skills and experience. And if Sherlock did end up looking over the case, the extra photos and video couldn’t hurt.

Now it was dark again, seventeen hours after that first call had shocked him out of his sleep, and Greg was feeling it. He’d become used to more regular sleep and a decided lack of rude awakenings, dead bodies or no dead bodies. He looked at the pile of paperwork on his desk and sighed. Most of it was from this case – it was moving fast, thankfully – but they’d reached a block, at least until the pathologist report came in. There were tests that couldn’t be rushed, so he might as well head home.

As though by telepathy, his phone pinged.

Am I to assume our dinner is postponed? MH

Greg swore to himself. He’d completely forgotten that Mycroft would be coming over for dinner this evening, in quiet celebration of his return to full time duties. He was over an hour late.

Hope I haven’t kept you waiting too long. Leaving now, if that’s okay. Greg

The reply was almost immediate, coming in as he buttoned his coat.

Of course. MH

As he walked the short distance home, Greg felt the waves of fatigue roll over him again. He scrubbed at his eyes, which did nothing to alleviate the sandy feeling under his eyelids. He drew deep breaths of the cold air and even removed his scarf, hoping the cold air would revive him. It did little but make him shiver, and by the time he was trudging up the stairs to his front door he was cold and tired instead of just tired. Unlocking his door, he blinked, wondering why he hadn’t seen Mycroft outside. There hadn’t even been a car…
“Good evening,” Mycroft said from Greg’s kitchen.

Too tired to object to the breaking and entering, Greg turned a weary smile to him.

“Hi,” he offered, and the exhaustion must have been evident in his tone.

“Shall I order in?” Mycroft asked, stepping forward to take Greg’s coat. “Perhaps it would be more relaxing for you than going out to eat.”

As Greg nodded, Mycroft hung up his coat and scarf, then hesitated, still hovering closer than usual to Greg. Without speaking, Greg slid his arms around Mycroft’s waist, palms sliding under the suit jacket until they met against the satin of the back of his waistcoat. Greg’s head drooped, his face resting against Mycroft’s neck, surrounding him with Mycroft’s unique mix of scents. He felt Mycroft’s arms rise and wrap around him; a hum of contentment was all he could manage. The heat of Mycroft’s body helped warm Greg’s core, and the shivering that had started as he walked home soon abated. He floated for a while, enjoying the gentle intimacy of the quiet prolonged contact. Finally, Greg sighed, kissing the pale skin under his lips before standing up straight.

“Hi,” he said again, smiling at Mycroft.

“I believe we did greetings already,” Mycroft replied gently.

Greg chuckled tiredly. “We did. I just wanted to do it again.” He studied Mycroft’s face, amazed at the little details he’d either forgotten or failed to catalogue the last time he’d mapped its contours. “Dinner here would be excellent if you don’t mind staying in. I’m wrecked.”

Mycroft smiled gently, his eyes roving over Greg’s face at the same time. “Of course. Is there anything in particular you’d like?”

“As long as you’re going to sit on the sofa and eat it with me, anything is fine,” Greg replied, enjoying the slight flush that crept up Mycroft’s face at the bold comment. “I’m going to have a shower, are you okay to…” he waved one arm vaguely around the flat.

Mycroft nodded. “I will be fine. I’ll order now for an hours’ time, unless you’d rather eat earlier?”

Greg shook his head, dropped a quick kiss on Mycroft’s cheek and stepped away, heading into the bathroom in a semi daze. The good that their hug had done, relaxing and heating up his wrecked body, had also reminded him how bone-weary he was.

The shower was just this side of scalding, and Greg did not dawdle, worried that he’d doze against the tiles if he stayed too long. He found a pair of soft track pants and a t-shirt before following his nose out to the kitchen.

“You’ve made…” he paused, looking at the tiny table. Mycroft had made coffee, the scent of which had pulled Greg out of his bedroom. There was also a pot of tea, no, two pots; a bottle of red wine and a bottle of white. The red was open and the white sat in an ice bucket that Greg was sure he did not own.

“Err…” Greg started. “Are we expecting someone?”

Mycroft looked at him with a mixture of embarrassment and defensive pride. “I brought the wine to drink with our meal, but I wasn’t sure which you’d prefer. When you arrived, and I realised how tired you were, I thought that coffee might be best, though it may keep you awake, in which case the tea would be preferable.” He indicated one pot then the other. “This is a blend of decaffeinated black tea, while this is chamomile. Both are excellent calmative agents.”
Greg was speechless, the thought and effort a little overwhelming, especially in his exhaustion. Finding the right words was too hard, so he once again stepped towards Mycroft, this time pressing his palms to Mycroft’s chest and his lips to Mycroft’s mouth, before pulling back and whispering, “Thank you.”

Mycroft smiled, fingers coming to rest on Greg’s hips. “I like to have all possibilities covered.”

“I know.” Greg looked at the table, then back at Mycroft. “I think a glass of wine would be great, thanks. Just a small one though or I’ll be drooling on your shoulder.”

Mycroft pressed his fingers into Greg’s hips in acknowledgement, pouring each of them half a glass of red wine. They touched the rims of their glasses together, eyes meeting warmly before Greg shuffled himself over to the couch.

“Join me?” he asked, and Mycroft followed him over, sitting a respectable distance away. Greg shot him an amused glance before scooting across, leaning his body against Mycroft’s. When Mycroft tentatively lifted his arm, Greg snuggled underneath, humming in satisfaction.

“Comfortable?” Mycroft murmured in amusement.

“Yep,” Greg replied. He was warm and clean, pressed against Mycroft with a glass of excellent wine in his hand. All he needed was…

“Football,” Mycroft noted in a neutral tone of voice as Greg pointed the remote control at the television.

“Don’t worry, I’ll flick it over once I’ve seen the score. Right, was there anything in particular you wanted to watch?” Greg asked, flicking through channels of news, more football, and assorted quiz shows. He sipped at his wine, feeling it flow through his body.

“I don’t watch a lot of television, Greg. I doubt there would be anything I would recognise. Why don’t you choose something?” he suggested. Greg shrugged, leaving it on a music history documentary. They sat in silence for a while, bodies melding together on the sofa as they relaxed into the quiet narration of the show. The cadence of the narrator was soporific, and Greg found his eyes growing heavy. Mycroft’s breathing was deep and regular, and the combination of the warmth and the soothing rhythm was sending Greg to sleep.

A knock at the door made him start, though he relaxed again as Mycroft murmured, “Dinner,” dropping a kiss on Greg’s head before gently extracting himself.

Greg found himself half slumped against the back of the sofa, leaning uncomfortably but too leaden to move. He allowed his eyes to drift closed, the sound from the television and kitchen fading into the background.

“Greg,” Mycroft’s voice was close. He struggled to open his eyes, seeing Mycroft in double until he’d blinked a few times. Clumsily sitting up, Greg smiled sleepily at the man handing him a plate of food.

“Chinese,” Mycroft said quietly, “I thought it would be easiest to manage.”

Greg nodded a little, concentrating his energy on coordinating his fork and his mouth (thank God it wasn’t chopsticks). It was delicious, though his brain was too fuzzy to identify the dishes. He ate on autopilot for a while, until the effort became too much. Just as he wondered if he’d be able to get his plate to the kitchen without dropping it, Greg felt it lifted gently out of his hand. Mycroft.
“Bedtime, I think.” The voice was far away, though the arm around his back was strong and reassuring. With great effort, Greg stood up, swaying alarmingly. The arm that had helped him up tightened, anchoring him to a solid body. Greg shuffled towards his bedroom, the muscle memory driven by many nights stumbling the route in the wee small hours, when post-work drinks were the norm. The arm tight around his body was comforting, and rather than collapsing on his bed he was laid down carefully.

“Stay,” he mumbled, hand reaching blindly towards the body that had helped him in. It was warmth and comfort and he didn’t want to let it go. His fingers touched against a length of arm and he grabbed at it, tugging weakly.

“Alright,” Mycroft’s voice was soft and low. Greg felt the bed dip, then a blanket come to rest over his body. He sighed as Mycroft settled next to him. They weren’t touching nearly enough; Greg rolled towards Mycroft, pressing his face into the soft cotton of Mycroft’s shirt, breathing him in.

Finally.

Another sigh, and the last of his tension drained away. Perfect evening, he thought. Food, wine, Mycroft.

“Did you say something?” Mycroft murmured.

“I’s perfect.” Greg slurred. He felt Mycroft’s arm tighten briefly around his shoulder as he drifted off to sleep, deeply content.
Chapter 25

Much as John hated to admit it, Greg had done the right thing by staying in London. The idea of the two of them shipping back to Kinsale to sort their shit out had appealed to him largely because they would have had no choice but to address their issues and settle it, one way or another. Having said that, the pressure of being there, and with no support if things weren’t going great, may have been a disaster.

This slow courtship, or whatever the hell it was, had been driving John crazy for weeks. Not that it was any of his business, really, but he felt quite invested in the whole affair, given how much he’d put into bringing Greg back from the brink of a breakdown. He’d watched Greg fight hard to heal his mental health, then as he grew stronger, his physical health, too. He was now in a better place than John had seen for a long time, if ever, despite his sporadic meetings with Mycroft.

At their weekly ‘football and a pint’ meetings at the pub, Greg was insisting they weren’t dates, but John could see how much more relaxed his friend was when he’d spent time with Mycroft. From the sounds of it, Mycroft was putting quite an effort into impressing Greg (World War 1 Intelligence artifacts, for goodness sake), and Greg was loving it.

“We’re not dating, John,” Greg had said a number of times.

“And I’m not gay, remember?” John had retorted, raising one eyebrow. They both knew how often John had raised that objection before finally admitting that despite his protestations, he’d fallen hard for Sherlock.

“Well, it’s true, bisexual is not gay,” Greg retorted, ignoring John as he rolled his eyes heavenward.

“Missing the point.” John muttered into his beer. He’d let the argument go, and they’d continued on their way, talking about everything except the exact nature of Greg’s relationship with Mycroft.

That had been four weeks ago. Four weeks of ‘Isn’t Mycroft great?’ and ‘Mycroft said the funniest thing’ and ‘Mycroft thinks that…’ This was the week that John was going to bring up the similarities between Greg and an infatuated teenager and suggest that he admit that he still fancied Mycroft. John could see how much happier and stronger Greg was; it was time he take a deep breath and address The Mycroft Situation, as John had been calling it in his head.

John had arrived a little late at the pub, expecting to find Greg waiting and probably annoyed. He scanned the space, looking for the lone silver head. When he spotted Greg, John froze. He was sitting at the bar, a pint in front of him – half full, he’d been waiting ten minutes or so – but he was not alone. A tall figure, impeccable in a dark suit was standing next to him, head bent down to speak intimately in Greg’s ear. Greg was chuckling now, his body turned towards the tall man, their body language screaming, ‘we’re together.’

John sagged with relief. Finally. He waited a moment, before approaching the bar.

“Mycroft,” John nodded up at him, who turned at the sound of his name.

“John,” Mycroft smiled, looking a hundred times more relaxed than the last time John had seen him, standing in Baker Street negotiating with Greg to discuss the state of their relationship.

“I didn’t realise you were going to be here,” John said. “Can I get you a drink?”

“Thank you, but no. I was just returning Gregory’s scarf,” Mycroft replied, holding up the length of
grey wool.

“Hey, Greg,” John spoke to his friend, who inclined his head and his pint, drinking from the latter. As John turned his attention back to Mycroft, he realised the taller man was frowning at him.

“What?” John asked, wondering what Mycroft could have deduced about him after so few seconds.

“I would point out that it’s taken you long enough, but I suspect the pot calling the kettle black would be an apt retort on your behalf.” Mycroft turned to Greg, murmured, “I will speak to you later, then.”

“Later,” Greg repeated, smiling up at him, before Mycroft nodded stiffly at John and strode out of the pub.

John watched him go, before turning wordlessly to Greg, seating himself heavily on the barstool behind him. “What the fuck just happened?” John asked.

Greg, who had just signaled the barman for two more pints, burst out laughing. It took John a minute to realise it had been months – before Kinsale – since he had heard a genuine laugh from Greg. “Seriously, mate,” John repeated, pausing to drink deeply from his pint when it arrived, “What the actual fuck?”

Greg shrugged, grinning happily. “Had a date last night.”

“Oh, we’re calling them dates now are we?” John replied. “My whole world’s been knocked sideways.”

“I told you, things’ve been…better.” Greg struggled to explain without sounding like a soppy schoolgirl. “We know each other better now. So yeah, last night was definitely a date.”

“Yeah, I could tell you ‘know each other better’ from how he was standing when I came in. What was he whispering in your ear, then?” John asked, half teasing and half curious.

Greg looked at him, challenging. “If you must know, he was reminding me of the last time he returned my scarf.”

John raised his eyebrows at this, having no idea of the story but knowing what the unspoken language between them had said. “I’m betting he kissed you goodnight, then.” John stated, a loud ‘ha!’ of success bursting out as Greg nodded, grinning sheepishly.

“Actually I think I kissed him first,” Greg admitted.

John wanted to say, ‘I told you so’, he wanted to slap Greg on the back and celebrate, but he could see Greg was happy, and that was enough. No need to embarrass the man any further. “I’m happy for you, mate.”

“Yeah, me too,” Greg replied.

“Just…just talk to him, remember.” John couldn’t help adding.

“Meaning, not words, I remember, John. Some of the best advice I’ve been given, I reckon.” Greg told him, looking into his pint in embarrassment. John felt his face go warm at the compliment.

“So, Arsenal sucked this weekend.” John changed the subject, seeing Greg’s shoulders relax at the new direction.
“Yeah, with Maxwell gone...”
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Four hours and three pints each later, Greg and John were grinning broadly at each other as they slapped each other on the back.

“Go and snog him, John,” Greg had said jovially as he poured John into a taxi, sending it on its way to Baker Street. He stood in the street, watching until the taillights had merged into the traffic and a car horn warned him to get off the road.

He stepped back onto the curb, happily tipsy, just this side of drunk. Greg wondered if he should walk home – surely the night air would do him some good? Perhaps a taxi was best, given his slightly hazy recollection of the best route home from here. Might be better not to have to concentrate quite so closely. As he looked up the street, considering again, something caught his eye, making his decision for him.

“Greg.” The sound of his name turned his head.

“I thought you’d gone home.” Greg replied, his mouth breaking into a wide grin regardless. Mycroft stood in front of him, holding open the door of one of his cars. He was as formal as always in public, but even in his slightly squiffy state, Greg could see gentle amusement in his eyes.

“I thought you’d need a lift at some point. I was content to work here until you emerged,” Mycroft replied, his voice a little guarded. “Is that…inappropriate?”

Greg, still relaxed from the beers, chuckled and stepped forward, sliding across the seat into the car. Once Mycroft had joined him, he replied, “I’m going to go with a little creepy but in a good way.”

Mycroft relaxed slightly but raised one eyebrow. “A good way?”

Greg nodded. “Yeah.” He looked at Mycroft and couldn’t help smiling. Mycroft was a little blurry and Greg was a little woozy, which seemed like a good match to Greg. He sighed and shuffled closer to Mycroft, slumping against his warm body. Even in his tipsy state, he felt Mycroft’s surprise stiffen beneath him. Ignoring it, Greg made himself comfortable.

The slight roughness of Mycroft’s wool coat against his stubble felt nice. As his mind drifted, floating with the booze and motion of the car, Mycroft relaxed under him.

Greg thought he might have smiled when Mycroft’s arm finally slid around his waist, hand settling on the denim over Greg’s hip. He breathed deeply, the now familiar combination of soap and cologne and Mycroft enveloping him as the car moved quietly through the streets.

“Greg,” Mycroft’s voice sounded close. He spoke quietly, and Greg could feel the vibration through his chest.

“Mmmm?” Greg replied. He was warm and cozy and his eyes were very heavy for some reason.

“Greg,” Mycroft repeated, “We have arrived at your flat.”

“No no, I’m all warm,” he protested, feeling the thing he was leaning against shift. It was an
alarmingly unsettling sensation, like the earth was going to disappear at any moment.

“It will be warm in your flat, too. We’re still sitting in my car,” Mycroft replied patiently.

Greg frowned, struggling to rouse himself and make sense of Mycroft’s words. When he finally managed to open his eyes and realised where he was, a groan left his throat. “Urgh, sorry,” he managed, fighting to sit up and rub the sandy feeling from his eyes.

“Would you like some help getting inside?” Mycroft asked. Greg nodded sleepily - the brisk rubbing of his eyes was not going to be enough to keep him awake, he could tell - and he gladly accepted Mycroft’s help as he stumbled out of the car.

“Keys?” Mycroft asked, and Greg felt through his pockets until he found them.

Given how difficult he was finding walking, it was a good thing Mycroft was helping him, Greg thought.

“Thanks, Mycroft,” Greg slurred. He grinned as something occurred to him. “You don’t need my keys to get inside.”

Mycroft had one arm around his waist again, the other trying to open the outer door to Greg’s building. “It would be impolite to break in right in front of you, Greg,” He sounded amused, Greg thought giddily.

“There it is,” Mycroft murmured, finally finding the right key. They stumbled in, Greg not really helping too much. Two flights of stairs later and he could feel himself falling asleep again.

“Stay with me Greg,” Mycroft said. It wasn’t until Greg tripped over his own feet that he started hoping Mycroft wasn’t too annoyed at his drunkenness. Worry about it later, his brain advised with its little remaining cognitive ability. He obediently drank the water Mycroft provided, managed to relieve himself without Mycroft’s help, and stumbled into bed. Although one small part of his brain pointed out that he was still dressed, the rest did not care; he was in his bed, and so now it was sleeping time.


He felt hesitant fingers brush across his temple before Mycroft’s voice, sounding a very long way away, said, “Get some sleep, Greg. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“M-kay.”

Greg drifted off, content to be warm and smelling good. Like Mycroft. Lovely.

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Mycroft stood for a few moments in the semi-dark, watching Greg drift into sleep. He felt a smile tug at his lips as Greg snuffled a little, eventually turning over, arms flung across the bed. With the new position he began to snore, and the smile bloomed on Mycroft’s face.

*Good grief,* he thought to himself, *I’m standing in Greg’s bedroom, smiling at his snoring. What a ridiculous man he’s turning me into.* Nevertheless, he stood for a moment longer, watching Greg’s chest rise and fall.

*Good grief,* he thought to himself, *I’m standing in Greg’s bedroom, smiling at his snoring. What a ridiculous man he’s turning me into.* Nevertheless, he stood for a moment longer, watching Greg’s chest rise and fall.
Shaking his head, Mycroft made sure there was water and paracetamol close at hand for Greg before letting himself out of the flat. As much as he wanted to stay (and he doubted that Greg would be unhappy to see him in the morning) there was still a small part of him that needed the reassurance of being asked rather than presuming. He had broken into Greg’s flat, that was true, however he’d been concerned when Greg had not answered the door. The justification was a little weak, but Greg had not seemed to mind. Still, it would not be something he’d be repeating. Unless he had good reason, of course.

His car arrived promptly and took him home with its usual quiet efficiency. Stepping inside, hanging up his coat and scarf, Mycroft looked around restlessly. He moved from room to room, undecided as he ran one finger along the spines of books, the lid of his piano and the kitchen counter; nothing grabbed his attention long enough to bother settling down to it.

When he’d finally completed a lap of the house, Mycroft blew out a frustrated breath and made himself face the truth: he missed Greg. He knew Greg had tomorrow off, and there was nothing that currently required his immediate attention – so he could also have tomorrow off, if he wished.

The image rose in his mind, of himself and Greg standing in Greg’s kitchen, moving around each other as they made breakfast and coffee, steadying hands on hips, mouths pressing in affectionate kisses…

Locking in indecision, Mycroft closed his eyes. Drawing a deep breath into his lungs, he held it for a count of five, before letting it out again. He would not have a panic attack over this. He would not.

What is the worst that could reasonably happen if you go over there? Mycroft asked himself, dredging up some of the techniques he’d all but forgotten to rationalize his fears.

The likelihood that he would ruin what they had was miniscule, he knew. Greg had asked him to stay once before; they had not had an argument in the interim; it was reasonable to assume that Greg would be pleased to see him again. The worst that could reasonably happen, Mycroft concluded with a flutter in his chest, was that Greg might ask him to leave.

Was that something he could accept, if it happened?

Mycroft pressed gently at his chest, pushing against the immediate panic at the idea of rejection. But even if Greg did ask him to leave, it might not be rejection as he imagined it; there were many scenarios and he just had to listen to Greg.

Listen to their meaning, not the words. Mycroft remembered John’s advice, back when they stood in Baker Street together. You’ve got to communicate or this isn’t going to work.

With another deep breath – in, hold, hold, hold, out – Mycroft nodded once.

He strode with purpose for the first time since he’d returned home, collecting the bag he always kept packed in his bedroom, though he added a few items for this decidedly not-work trip.

Hesitating in the kitchen, he packed another bag – grateful more than ever for his standing ‘keep the fridge full’ order. Calling once again for his car, Mycroft ignored the flutter once again in his stomach. It wasn’t until he stood at Greg’s door, lock picks in hand, that he hoped the policeman on the other side would not shoot him as he entered. He paused, then shrugged – Greg had been pretty out of it and on balance it was unlikely.

He eased the door open, holding his breath as he listened for a sound from within. He was
rewarded with the same sound he’d heard as he left – Greg was still snoring, proof that he’d slept through Mycroft’s illegal entrance. Moving quietly, Mycroft set down his bag and stowed the foodstuffs away. He stood in the kitchen, wondering what to do next. There was always work of some kind, but as he blinked at his bag, the clock on the microwave took his attention. It was late, even by his standards, and he had no idea how late Greg would sleep. He should sleep now, for a few hours, then rise in time to make breakfast.

Feeling better now that he had a plan, Mycroft changed into pyjamas and risked brushing his teeth and relieving himself – all to the reassuring chorus of Greg’s snoring – before settling on the couch. He didn’t want to presume that the bed would be open to him, and Greg was sprawled over most of its surface anyway.

The pillow, pilfered off the bed, smelled like Greg, and Mycroft felt comforted by the familiar scent coupled with the regular rise and fall of Greg’s snoring. The combination sent him gently off to sleep.

“Mycroft?” Greg’s voice was sleepy and a little confused, but not angry, Mycroft’s brain realised in the split second before he sat upright.

“Greg! What time is it?” Mycroft asked automatically.

“Dunno…what are you…I thought you went home,” Greg was obviously still sleepy, and it wasn’t light outside, Mycroft could see. Still early then. Really early.

“I came back. With breakfast. For you. Us.” Mycroft shook himself. “I thought I could make your breakfast, so I came back,” He knew he sounded uncertain, and hoped Greg would pick up on it. For once having someone read his emotional state would be a benefit rather than a weakness, he reflected in the back of his mind. The front was busy panicking.

Greg was staring at him, blinking slowly. “Why are you on the couch?” he asked at last, as though that was the main thing confusing him.

“I wasn’t sure…” Mycroft trailed off, waving one hand at the bedroom.

Greg shook his head tiredly. “Come on,” he said, making a clumsy sweeping gesture. “I just need the loo and I’ll be back. Meet you there.”

Heart pounding, Mycroft grabbed his pillow and the spare blanket, venturing into Greg’s bedroom. He was just arranging himself on the far side of the bed when Greg returned, collapsing back into bed with a groan.

“Mmmm,” he murmured, snuggling into Mycroft’s side as he had the last time Mycroft had stayed. He was warm and Mycroft could smell the peppermint that said he’d brushed his teeth again. Definitely a good sign, he thought to himself, the anxiety abating as Greg relaxed.

“I hope you brought bacon,” Greg muttered sleepily.

“Of course,” Mycroft replied. “And real coffee.”

Greg groaned in satisfaction. “I keep saying this while you’re in my bed, but that’s perfect.”

Mycroft was processing this when he felt Greg’s head tilt a little, his lips making contact with Mycroft’s neck. The brush of lips turned into a definite kiss; Mycroft’s heart, which had just slowed down, began to speed up again, his breathing increasing to keep up. The kiss, which had started almost at his collarbone, was working its way up to his ear.
Greg’s arms tightened around Mycroft, who returned the gesture; the reassurance of a hand on the back of his neck made Greg more enthusiastic. A gasp left Mycroft’s open mouth as Greg nipped at his earlobe before pulling it gently into his mouth and sucking on it. Greg chuckled at the sound, releasing Mycroft’s ear and settling his face once again at the junction of shoulder and neck. The tension that had started to build dissipated into something warm and intimate.

“I’m glad you’re here.” Greg murmured, pressing a last emphatic kiss on Mycroft’s neck.

“Thank you.” Mycroft replied, having no idea what the correct response was. Whatever he was supposed to say, his words must have been sufficient, because Greg was soon relaxing into sleep, little puffs of air brushing against Mycroft’s neck as he exhaled.

On reflection, it had been a positive reaction, Mycroft decided. Greg had said explicitly that he was pleased to have Mycroft there, in his bed. The questioning, doubting voice in his head died just a little with that realization, and Mycroft was glad of it. With any luck, he would keep ignoring it and it would soon perish.

In the meantime, he would sleep, arms wrapped around Greg, a very happy man.

Chapter End Notes

Hello dear readers,
A bit of RL stuff has reared up, so there's going to be a short hiatus on this story. I want to do it justice, but my focus is too scattered right now. Things should resolve in due course, and we can continue our journey once again. Thank you for your lovely comments and support, and as always, to the lovely KaraRenee for beta-ing this story.
NEXT UPDATE DECEMBER 1st, 2017.
Hello again! How lovely to see you all again, dear patient readers! I hope the lead into this holiday season has been kind to all of you.

NaNoWriMo is over, which is good for everyone because I finished drafting the rest of this story in November. It's being edited and beta'd and I'm planning on publishing the last chapter around New Year's Eve, with luck and inspired action by myself and Kara (our faithful beta, remember?).

You'll notice a slight difference to the chapter count (remember THHGTTG - DON'T PANIC). It's gone back to '?' only because the writing flowed a little differently while I wrote this half, so I'm not sure there will be another 24 chapters. It's the same amount of story, just a slightly different rhythm, so it's likely to be fewer longer chapters.

Enough chatter from me. Back to London, post-Kinsale, where Greg and Mycroft are learning how to navigate the real world and their blossoming relationship. <3

“Another one.” Sally said flatly, her head barely making it in the door of Greg’s office before disappearing again. He swore under his breath, grabbing his coat, already wishing he’d eaten something more substantial and visited the loo before now.

The string of thefts hadn’t been his division, of course – until the thieves had smacked a security guard too hard, killing him when the aneurysm in his head burst – that was what had pulled him out of bed so early Tuesday morning. Suddenly, Major Crimes had dumped a good portion of the mess on his desk, clearly happy to share the load now there would be a murder charge somewhere in the (hopefully) near future. Three robberies before the murder and one after, with escalating violence at each, had shifted the investigation further and further up Greg’s priority list, until his DCI had brought him in and told him there’d be no new cases on his plate until they’d seen some progress.

‘Until you’ve solved this mess’ was more the message, and Greg had heard it loud and clear.

With less than a week since the last hit, his team and Dimmock’s had worked just about every angle they could think of. Greg had two aces up his sleeve, but he was reluctant to use them unless absolutely necessary. He didn’t want to ask Mycroft for a professional favour at this point – though it would have been fine Before Kinsale (his brain capitalised it automatically, given its importance in his life), he was conscious that their new relationship came with a new dynamic, and he did not want to disrupt it unless absolutely necessary.

Mycroft threatened to sidetrack his thought process, but he held firm. Not now. Not during working hours.

The other option, he thought to himself as Sally started the engine, heading towards Croydon with lights and sirens, was Sherlock. He hadn’t called Sherlock in for several months now – since before Kinsale, actually. There had been a few cold cases, but the private investigations that had come his way, largely courtesy of John’s blog, kept him busy enough he was no longer hassling Greg.
His clearance rate had taken a slight hit (more in time taken than cases solved, he was a DI after all), but Greg felt better about himself in a way. His self-esteem was still a work in progress after everything that had happened recently, and he was very aware of how situations affected his view of himself. Previously he’d been glad to solve cases but slightly uncomfortable with the praise heaped on him by his superiors, knowing that at least some of the credit belonged to Sherlock. Anderson and Sally had both been critical of Sherlock’s involvement, and while he hardly craved their approval, the lack of sour looks and snide comments was a refreshing change.

*Now if she could only see what a sleaze Anderson is, Sally might actually have a shot at happiness,* Greg thought to himself.

He was pulled out of his reverie by their arrival at the scene.

“‘When you say, ‘Another one’,’” Greg asked Sally, surveying the raft of emergency services with a sinking stomach, “you mean another body, don’t you?”

“No.” Sally replied as they exited the car and went looking for the head setup. She turned to face him as they approached the open tent protecting people more or less from the sleety rain. “Double. A security guard and the jeweler. A proper murder this time.” She sounded grim, her face reflecting the solemnity of the news.

“Shit,” Greg muttered, wrestling with the coveralls. He could see a perimeter had been set up keeping out the sticky beaks, and CSU had arrived. At least someone knew what they were doing, he thought to himself. With any luck enough people would be here for a catering tent to appear. His stomach growled in approval at the idea.

“Right, let’s go have a look,” he said grimly. This was not going to be fun.

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“So you’ve got nothing, is that what I’m hearing?” Greg’s boss said irritably. He’d actually shown up at the scene, a rarity with which Greg was disappointed to be honoured.

“We’ve only been here a couple of hours, sir,” Greg said, fighting to keep respect in his tone. The man wanted miracles, and yesterday at that.

“And the rest,” Haroldson said scornfully. “This is hardly the first time we’ve had these guys out and about lately.”

“Before last Tuesday it was Major Crimes’ division,” Greg protested, but the DCI cut him off.

“And they gave you everything they had. Surely with two teams working the murders, plus Major Crimes on their end, we should have at least a couple of suspects by now!”

Before Greg could open his mouth, his superior had gone, waving a hand in irritation. Gritting his teeth, Greg ran one hand through his hair. Need a haircut, he thought absently.

Just as he was contemplating his next move, Sally showed up with a coffee and a kebab.

“I’ll have to commandeer that,” Greg said, taking the kebab with both hands. He wanted the coffee too, but priorities were priorities.

“It’s yours, sir, no need to pull rank,” she replied, putting his coffee on the table behind them. “Haroldson decided there aren’t enough people here to warrant catering so we’re on our own.”
It was a good thing Greg had his mouth full at that point, but Sally could read his face as well as anyone. “I know. He’s an idiot. With any luck, Traffic will want him back soon and they’ll promote you instead.”

Greg snorted at this idea. “With my ‘issues’ lately, doubtful,” he managed before diving in for another mouthful. The kebab wasn’t as good as his favourite place, Kalibar, but right now it was heavenly.

Sally was rolling her eyes before Greg had even started chewing. “Oh, please. Haroldson is the only one who has an ‘issue’ with your ‘issues’,” she said, using sarcastic air quotes each time she said ‘issues’. “Everyone else is fine with it.” She saw the sceptical look on Greg’s face and added, “Everyone’s just glad you’re back. Down here in the minion factory, of course.” She went on, “And I’ve heard from, someone-”

“Anderson,” Greg interjected.

“-Yeah, well, *someone* told me that they’d overheard the Assistant Chief Super’s talking about how great it is to see leaders being open about their mental health. Did you even read their email?”

Greg’s blank look clearly said no, so Sally summarised for him as he continued to eat. “It probably came while you were off. Basically they’re reminding people about the on-staff counsellors, reminding people they should be taking their leave every year, that kind of thing. I’m pretty sure they’ll be making people with too much leave take some.” She looked at Greg pointedly. “You’d better start planning, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you take yours.”

Greg shrugged. He had a lot of time owing, that was true, but he also knew Haroldson frowned on people who took it ‘unless you’re dying’. It was hardly worth the effort, too; getting someone else up to speed so you could leave your cases was a hell of a lot of work. All those reasons – plus the high rent on his central-ish little flat – had conspired in a perfect storm recently; stopping him from finding Mycroft in Kinsale. Yet another reason to be irritable with NSY right now.

Annoyed that it was getting under his skin, Greg balled up the remains of the kebab and lobbed it towards the bin.

“Okay, then.” he said, switching back into work mode. “Is Dimmock here? We might as well coordinate our efforts on this.”

+++ By the time Greg had finished up for the day, he was exhausted, and there was a vague nagging feeling that he’d forgotten something important. The sporadic food and coffee schedule for the day had scrambled his brain, and when he checked his phone to find three missed calls and a text message from Mycroft, he remembered.

Dinner.

“Shit,” he muttered again, reading the text.

*Call me when you can. My meeting has run over time. I apologise.* – MH

A curious mix of relief and disappointment rushed through him, fighting with the fatigue for
primary emotion. Mycroft had not been ringing to ask where he was, he was cancelling their plans.

Greg knew it was about ten pm, not that late by Mycroft’s standards; he barely seemed to sleep, especially when Greg wasn’t around. A text message fifteen minutes ago meant it was unlikely they would see each other that night. The disappointment won out as Greg accepted that his job would be higher pressure than usual over the next few days, longer if there was another hit. Adding that to Mycroft’s schedule, and their tentative weekend plans would be toast. It was almost a week now since they’d seen each other, and Greg was feeling the frustration. Text messaging and phone calls could only go so far to fulfilling the need he had developed – to be close to Mycroft, to touch and smell and see him smile. It was startling how strongly he felt about it after such a short period of time, and from what he could tell, Mycroft felt the same.

Sighing, Greg found a constable to drive him home – had to be some perks of leading this investigation – and composed a reply to Mycroft.

*Just finishing up myself. Another robbery/homicide. I’ll call you when I get home. Miss you.* – Greg

He hesitated over the last sentence before sending it. It was true, and John’s words from that day in Baker Street kept echoing in his mind.

*You’ve got to communicate, or this isn’t going to work.*

John was right, Greg knew it, and he had kept those words in his mind when debating how to approach a situation or explain a difficult idea to Mycroft. They’d served him well, so once again he heeded them.

As he thanked the constable and she went on her way, Greg scrubbed one hand over his face, the cold night air waking him from the stupor into which the warmth of the car had lulled him. He needed more food, he decided; the kebab had been acceptable, but it was hours ago and sleep would not come easily if his stomach continued to complain. He turned to walk around to Kalibar, hoping they’d still be open, when his phone rang.

“Mycroft,” Greg answered in surprise. “I thought your meeting ran over.”

“It did. Unnecessarily so,” Mycroft replied. “I cancelled the remainder. It was extraneous, only borne by the reluctance of a junior member to discharge the responsibilities of his post.” His voice softened. “How are you?”

Greg sighed before he could temper his response. “Hungry, tired, irritated at my boss,” he summarised his day. And night. It was all blurring together. Mycroft had spoken and he’d missed it. “Sorry, could you repeat that?”

“Would you care to dine with me at my club?” Mycroft asked again.

“Right now?” Greg asked, feeling stupid as his mind moved sluggishly.

“The kitchen is always open,” Mycroft replied. “If you tell me what you’d prefer, it will likely be ready when you arrive.”

It took Greg approximately two seconds to decide. “I’ll have Indian. Anything as long as it’s spicy
and accompanied by a few beers.”

“Surely one beer will be sufficient, Greg.”

Greg rolled his eyes good naturedly. “Okay, one beer.”

“Excellent. A car will be with you shortly. The driver will escort you up. Please heed his instructions.”

Greg grinned as it sank in – he was going to see Mycroft tonight. “See you soon then.”

Mycroft’s voice was warm and sweet as honey. “Indeed, Greg.”

Hanging up, Greg stood under a CCTV camera, waiting for his lift. He hadn’t even told Mycroft where he was, knowing that in the unlikely event he wasn’t being monitored, Mycroft’s people could certainly find him, and quickly. His theory was borne out when a sleek black car arrived a few moments later. He recognised the driver and so slid in without a thought.

“Good evening, Detective Inspector.”

Anthea was the last person Greg wanted to see, barring perhaps his boss. He stared at her for a long while before replying stiffly, “Anthea.”

“Still holding that grudge then?” she asked with an arch smile. Greg had no idea how to answer that without getting into a conversation he didn’t want to have, especially right now. Instead he looked out the window, ignoring her until they arrived at the Diogenes Club.

Before he stepped out of the car, he delivered the words he’d been carefully composing in the heavy silence.

“It’s only a grudge if the other person has genuinely apologised and you haven’t accepted it. I’d say I’m still pretty entitled to give the cold shoulder to the woman who made decisions about my relationship without consulting either party involved and has yet to indicate any level of remorse.”

Before she could reply, he shut the door, turning to smile tightly at the driver. As usual, the man was expressionless and silent, leading the way into the club without a word.

Greg followed, using the time to compose himself and shed the irritation of his day and the unexpected meeting with Anthea. He really did have to figure that out, he thought to himself. They would certainly run into each other again, and he should make an effort, for Mycroft’s sake. Certainly not for Anthea’s.

When the driver indicated the door behind which Mycroft waited, Greg smiled at him in thanks, then waited until he left before taking a deep breath (release the tension, his therapist would say), knocking once and entering.

It was a gorgeous room, like the rest of the building he’d glimpsed. In reality, though, Greg couldn’t have told you the colour of the carpet or if the walls were papered, paneled or painted. As soon as his eyes settled on Mycroft, the room faded away, a host of unimportant details. It was corny, he knew, but just the sight of Mycroft, knowing he was in the same space, breathing the same air, their kinetic energy affecting the same collection of molecules, made him feel more relaxed. Mycroft’s suit was the usual dark three-piece, paired today with a mid-blue shirt and tie. Conservative, even for him; must have been an important meeting at some point on his calendar.

“Hi,” Greg said after ensuring the door was closed behind him.
Mycroft smiled in reply, and any remaining tension slipped away from Greg. He knew he was still tired, but the worst of the fatigue no longer bothered him. The gritty eyes, heavy footsteps and tense neck were gone as he basked in the radiance of Mycroft’s smile, moving ever closer as they both stepped forward to close the gap. The room was large enough that it took several seconds, in which Greg absorbed as much detail about Mycroft as he could. By unspoken accord they stopped before touching each other, eyes locked on each other’s faces.

“You look tired,” Mycroft murmured.


A long pause as they continued to drink each other in.

“I was glad you called,” Greg said. I needed to see you sounded too much, so he settled for, “I’m very pleased to see you.”

Mycroft smiled as though he knew what Greg was thinking. He probably did. “Me, too.”

It wasn’t until this admission they both shifted to bridge the final gap, reaching out to slide palms along the fabric of suit jackets, embracing each other. Greg found himself holding onto Mycroft tightly, the contact recharging emotional batteries he had forgotten drained so easily in a case like this one.

Pressure from his boss, working with an unusually large and unfamiliar team and a very short time frame between crime scenes sucked the energy from Greg on all levels. Physical and mental energy were the easiest to boost, at least in the short term, coffee and doughnuts being what they were. Emotional energy, being able to continue to think clearly without being drawn too far into the sensitive side of the case – that was far more difficult to replenish. This chaste contact with Mycroft was doing the trick though.

“Thanks,” Greg said eventually, loosening his arms from around Mycroft’s shoulders. He’d felt Mycroft loosen his own arms earlier, then tighten them again when Greg had not let go; he’d known then that Mycroft would hold him for as long as he needed. The quiet compassion was an added balm to his soul.

“Of course.” Mycroft replied. He touched his lips to Greg’s several times, small, reassuring kisses of support. Greg closed his eyes and accepted them, reveling in the intimacy of such a simple action. “Your meal arrived just before you.”

“Great, I’m starving” Greg told him. They took their seats at the lone table in the large room, Mycroft offering several dishes, rice and naan to Greg. He was spooning some of everything onto his plate while Mycroft opened his beer, pouring it into a frosted glass.

“Fancy,” Greg noted, teasing. He accepted the glass and touched it to Mycroft’s, which contained something sparkling.

“What are you drinking?” he asked Mycroft.

“Soda and lime,” Mycroft supplied.

“You’ve eaten, I assume,” Greg asked before tucking in. It was, of course, incredible. He saw Mycroft nod, but didn’t attempt any more conversation until he’d finished most of the food on his plate. Stomach satisfied, he sat back, draining the last of his beer in contentment.

“You’re sure one beer is the limit?” Greg asked Mycroft.
“It’s up to you, of course, I could-” Mycroft began, but Greg gently cut him off.

“I’m teasing, Mycroft. Any more food or alcohol will send me to sleep, I’m afraid. And I shouldn’t drink any more with my meds, anyway.” He was still self-conscious about the medication Sandy prescribed to help manage his depression, but he was also a stubborn bastard who would not shy away from his life, especially when it came to Mycroft.

“Can you tell me about your day?” Greg asked carefully.

Mycroft’s mouth twisted into a rueful grin. “Not specifically, no. Suffice it to say, several junior members of Government will need to prepare much more thoroughly for their next meetings if they wish to retain their employment.”

Greg grinned. “I gather you weren’t too impressed. They mustn’t be very important in the scheme of things if you cancelled the end of your meeting.”

“Our meeting was intended to be thirty minutes, no longer. It took over two hours to sort through the mess they brought with them. I made it clear while their time may appear important, it paled in comparison to the value of mine.” He looked a little pleased with himself when he admitted, “I may have threatened to send them to North Africa to count camels if their next preparation was not of a satisfactory standard.”

Greg’s grin turned into a chuckle. “I’m sure it will act as enough of an incentive.”

Mycroft smiled in return, taking Greg’s now free fingers and entwining them with his own. They sat for a few moments, fingers shifting slowly along each other, the room quiet save their breathing.

“Can I assume your case is not progressing?” Mycroft asked finally.

“Yep,” Greg answered, the flippant response hiding his actual concern about it. “Haroldson still thinks it should be cleared up last week. Two more bodies tonight, this time shot in the head, so premeditated.” He shook his head, frustration bubbling away again. “Haroldson’s worked white collar so long he’s forgotten what it’s like to deal with this kind of investigation.” Much as he wanted to continue to vent, the swirl of frustration, anger, worry that he would not in fact solve the case, and fatigue muted his ability to voice it. Instead, Greg just shook his head.

“I do not mean to overstep the boundaries of our newly established relationship,” Mycroft began carefully, “however I would be more than happy to act as, shall we say, a Government liaison should you require any further resources?”

Greg smiled at him affectionately. “Thanks Mycroft, I appreciate it. I just…this is my first big case in a long while, the first since I’ve been back, too.” He stopped, too tired to keep talking about it. There was more, but it would have to wait. He yawned, covering his mouth with his hand. “I’m beat. I’ve got to be back in first thing tomorrow. The last thing Haroldson needs is another reason to come down on me.” He didn’t mention the disdain with which Haroldson had treated his stress leave, but it was on his mind.

“I’ll have my driver take you home at once,” Mycroft said.

“Thanks,” Greg murmured. They both stood, walking around the table for a hug before Greg departed.

“Thank you,” Greg repeated himself as he once again embraced Mycroft. “This was exactly what I needed.”
“Anytime,” Mycroft replied.

“What does the rest of your week look like?” Greg asked him after Mycroft has requested a car for Greg.

“Busy, but few appointments that can’t be rearranged,” Mycroft’s reply made Greg smile. It was as clear an invitation as he was going to get.

“I’ll call you if I finish at a reasonable hour, then,” Greg told him. “And if we actually solve the case, I’ll be planning on celebrating with you.”

He grinned at the delicate colour that rose in Mycroft’s cheeks at this. Dropping a final kiss on Mycroft’s cheek, Greg whispered, “Goodnight, Mycroft,” and left.

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If there was one thing Mycroft hated doing, it was asking Sherlock for help. His younger brother, so adept at hiding his emotions when it suited him, allowed the full range of his disgust show when he inevitably sneered some response about Mycroft’s ineptitude.

Unfortunately for Mycroft, Greg’s case was floundering, and he still had not called Sherlock. They had talked, that magical night after the midnight showing of The Maltese Falcon, and Greg had explained his determination to rely less on Sherlock when working cases. Mycroft understood Greg’s professional reasons, as well as the personal – Greg was fiercely independent and his perceived reliance on Sherlock would irk him. He was surprised Greg had worked so well with Sherlock for as long as he had.

Though Mycroft loved his brother, he was not blind to his faults. Sherlock could be rude, acerbic, accurate and disdainful all without saying a word, and that was on a good day. The partnership with John Watson had tempered that somewhat, but he was still not an easy man with whom to work.

This case though, was not going well. There had been another fatality at another robbery two days after Greg had dined with Mycroft at the Diogenes Club; in the press conference, Greg had been more or less crucified for their lack of progress.

Mycroft noticed that the DCI technically overseeing the case was nowhere to be seen; whether he was absenting himself from the failure or simply not supporting his charges, Mycroft was not impressed. Having the man profiled was the work of a moment. Within the hour Mycroft held the pertinent details of Keith Thomas Haroldson’s life.

In summary, he was a ladder climbing bureaucrat, interested only in getting results. His initially impressive rise up the ranks had stalled when several accusations of bullying, intimidation and sexual harassment had been levelled against him. While the charges were never proved, his harsh manner worked against him, putting the investigating internal affairs team offside.

Mycroft read their confidential report to the Police Chief Commissioner. They recommended he be ‘encouraged’ to either move on from NSY or take a ‘less active role in mentoring future leaders’. To that end, he’d been shunted from Traffic to Major Crimes to Fraud to Homicide, where he was currently doing his best to make one Gregory Lestrade, senior Detective Inspector and likely next in line for the permanent DCI job, miserable. His appointment was temporary, until the funding for the job was confirmed. Once that happened, it was probable that he would be moved on once more, however there loomed the possibility that Greg would be passed over for promotion in favour of the more experienced DCI.
Unfortunately for Haroldson, Greg had Mycroft.

Unfortunately for Mycroft, he was certain Greg would not be impressed to learn he was promoted due to Mycroft’s influence, no matter how well deserved.

So Mycroft waited, for the time being. He would do nothing about Haroldson directly; however helping Greg to solve this case, the highest profile for a long time, would boost his chances of earning the promotion on his own merits.

And that brought him back to Sherlock. The insights and connections of which his brother was capable would be invaluable; getting him to help without making a fuss, alerting Haroldson, or irritating Greg was another thing. Despite appearances, Mycroft was actually reasonably comfortable with this whole scenario – the delicate balance, keeping multiple parties and their opposing ideals happy was the bread and butter of his work.

Now to convince Sherlock. And for that, Mycroft had a plan.
Picking up the phone, Mycroft called Greg. They hadn’t spoken in almost two days, and the distracted, “Lestrade,” with which Greg answered the phone still made his breath catch.

“Greg, I have a question,” said Mycroft, heart beating fast.

*Remember John’s words,* Mycroft coached himself, using his iron resolve to cage the panic attack, trapping it before it took control of his body. He gripped the phone, grateful his phone call had connected and he could have this conversation before his courage deserted him. *Communicate.* Usually his ‘plan’ would consist of deals done in the shadows, markers called in and created as he manipulated people to his bidding. Now that he was exploring this new paradigm with Greg, though, Mycroft was determined to find a new way, even if it meant working differently. Only with Greg of course – other players were fair game. He smiled a little despite himself. As always, Greg was the exception.

“Shoot,” said Greg a little absently.

Mycrof took a deep breath and plunged in. “I would like to respectfully suggest Sherlock be granted limited access to the crime scene reports from this case.”

He waited, listening to the background noise through the phone line. Greg was in his office, the muffled sounds of people talking providing a backdrop to their conversation.

“That’s not a question.” Greg’s voice came into his ear.

“You’re probably right,” This time, Mycroft could hear the frustration in Greg’s sigh. Experience at Greg’s crime scenes told him the detective was probably running one hand through his hair at this point. Mycroft’s hands itched to do the same. “Damn it, we just can’t see the link. There must be a reason they’re targeting these businesses. And why did…” Greg trailed off, reining in his questions. Mycroft heard him take a deep breath. “I’ll bring the crime scene reports home tonight. Tell Sherlock if he meets me there I’d appreciate it.”

Mycrof could hear the defeat in Greg’s voice, and a space in him ached to soothe it away. “Shall I bring supper?” he asked, mentally reviewing his evening appointments. Nothing that couldn’t be rescheduled. “I can be there by 8pm.”

“Really?” asked Greg. “That would be great. I’ve given the team the night off, 12 hours break, barring new developments. We all need some down time.”

“Respite will be good for all of you, I’m sure.” replied Mycroft.

“Yeah, we’ll see.” said Greg. “Look, I’ve gotta go. I’ll see you tonight?”

“I hope your afternoon is productive. Good afternoon, Greg.”

Mycrof hung up and steepled his fingers, considering the conversation. It had gone as he hoped, yet he still felt guilty about possibly suggesting Greg was not capable of doing his job without help. He would have to ensure he apologised this evening. *Communication,* he reminded himself. Next step – getting Sherlock to Greg’s house. Knowing Sherlock’s preference for texting, Mycroft
composed a message.

*Brother – I would appreciate your presence at Greg’s flat this evening. 8pm.*

The response was immediate, which Mycroft took as a good sign. If he was genuinely disinterested, he would simply ignore it.

*I would prefer not to be trapped in such a small space with your corpulent self.* - SH

Mycroft ground his teeth.

*I would consider it a personal favour, Sherlock. Greg requires your assistance with his current case, as we discussed.*

The reply this time was longer in coming, which Mycroft took as another good sign – Sherlock was considering his proposal. Finally, a new message appeared.

*Fine. 8pm.* - SH

Mycroft dropped his phone, sighing. Sherlock would be insufferable this evening. At least he could try to deflect the worst of his brother’s words from Greg.

+++ 
Knocking on Greg’s door, Mycroft shifted the bags containing their meal from one hand to the other. He had restrained himself this time, smiling slightly at his memory of the last time he’d brought dinner here.

“Something funny?” Greg’s voice cut in, and Mycroft realised the door had opened, revealing a freshly showered Greg leaning against the doorframe.

“I was just remembering the last time I arranged you a meal here.” said Mycroft. He lifted the bag. “I restrained myself to one drink option this time.” He was rewarded with a wide smile and his heart skipped a beat at the sight.

“Come in,” murmured Greg, swinging the door open and stepping back.

Mycroft did so, placing the bags on the floor by the coat hooks. He hung his coat and turned but before he could do more than open his mouth Greg was pressing him back into the wall. He smelled clean, like soap and shampoo and the light masculine deodorant he favoured. Mycroft
melted back, allowing Greg’s weight to press into him as their mouths met. It wasn’t quite unbridled passion, but this was more than a chaste greeting kiss. He’d missed it, but it wasn’t until he was here, being kissed again, that he realised just how much. His arms came up around Greg’s back, holding him close as their mouths explored, relearning the details they’d all but forgotten in the weeks since their last proper embrace.

Mycroft allowed his teeth to graze over Greg’s lower lip, and the resulting growl was surprising and arousing. Greg’s hands slid lower, from Mycroft’s shoulders to his hips and around the curve of his arse. Mycroft gasped as strong fingers dug into the firm muscle of his glutes. Instinctively his hips kicked forward, pushing against Greg’s, eliciting another deep growl as their bodies fit together intimately.

“Christ,” muttered Greg, his mouth swollen as he licked his lips, breathing hard against Mycroft’s cheek. The cool air made Mycroft shiver; he prised his eyes open to look at Greg. The dark brown eyes were bright with arousal, yet he smiled at Mycroft.

“I should take the food to the kitchen,” said Mycroft, his heart pounding. There was an uncomfortable throbbing in his groin and he was sure the line of his trousers was disturbed by the raging erection currently pressed against his pants.

“Mmmm,” agreed Greg, pressing kisses along Mycroft’s jaw. When he stopped to pay particular attention to a spot just under Mycroft’s jaw, he forgot about the food, concentrating instead on trying to control the whimpers that were coming from his throat.

“I’d really rather you didn’t do that,” said Greg between kisses. Mycroft made an interrogatory noise, all he could manage at the moment. “I’d rather hear you.” When it registered what Greg meant, a loud, “Oh!” sounded into the hall.

“I’d rather not, if it’s all the same.”

The new voice was vaguely disgusted. Greg and Mycroft sprang apart, turning to the doorway. Sherlock stood in his coat and scarf, looking for all the world like the disapproving older brother.

“Hi Sherlock,” tried Greg, adjusting his shirt, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth.

“Urgh,” replied Sherlock, sweeping past both of them into Greg’s apartment. Mycroft caught Greg’s eye and they shared a semi-embarrassed grin.

Greg dropped a quick kiss on his mouth before following Sherlock. “You do dinner, I’ll deal with your brother,” he threw over his shoulder. Mycroft collected the insulated bags and busied himself in the kitchen, serving their meals and the non-alcoholic cider he’d brought to compliment it. There was no serving tray, of course, so he set dinner up on the table before venturing into the sitting room to find Greg standing on one side of the room, away from Sherlock who had crime scene photos spread all over the floor.

Mycroft must have looked surprised, because Greg spoke. “I’m over here not thinking, or talking, or breathing more than necessary,” said Greg loudly, aiming his words more at Sherlock than Mycroft. Sherlock waved one hand, apparently telling Greg to go away. Mycroft frowned at his brother before beckoning to Greg. The detective stepped carefully over the photo array before joining Mycroft in the kitchen.

“Indian,” murmured Mycroft as Greg seated himself.

“I can see that.” Greg told him, though with a good grace. Sitting down, he took Mycroft’s hand,
kissing the knuckles before indicating the seat opposite. “Join me?”

Mycroft sat, enjoying watching Greg relax as he ate and drank. Mycroft ate a little of each dish, mindful of the heavy sauces and carbohydrate laden side dishes. When Greg pushed his empty plate away, Mycroft gladly did the same though his was not yet finished.

“Not hungry?” Greg asked him.

Mycroft shrugged. “Late lunch,” he said. It wasn’t a lie, technically; the few bites of sandwich he’d eaten while reading notes on his late afternoon meeting was the first food since his early morning cereal. Changing the subject – he wasn’t going to discuss his weight in any way with Sherlock in the next room – Mycroft looked critically at Greg. “You look exhausted.”

“Thanks,” said Greg wryly, slumping in his chair. “That’s why I ordered everyone to take a break. We don’t have anything new to do and if there’s another homicide…” he shook his head. “Nobody’s going to see anything useful unless they get a decent feed and some rest.”

“You can cross one of those things off your list, then,” said Mycroft, indicating the empty plates. He stood, clearing their plates and beginning to tidy the kitchen. Greg levered himself up to help, winding his arms around Mycroft as he stood at the sink. Just as Mycroft turned to face Greg, Sherlock burst in, nose wrinkling in disgust at the embrace he’d interrupted once again.

“If I thought you two could keep your hands off each other for long enough I’d stay here,” he said. “As it is, I need to think. I’ve looked at all the photos and read the crime scene reports.” He swept past, tossing, “I’ll call you if I see anything,” over his shoulder. Greg and Mycroft heard the door slam after him.

“Ten pounds says he’s put the photos back,” said Greg sarcastically under his breath.

Mycroft looked startled, then chuckled. “No bet,” he replied. “I wouldn’t take your money so easily.”

Greg grinned back, resting his head on Mycroft’s shoulder. It was heavy and warm, and Mycroft soaked up the contentment he was radiating. When Greg’s breathing began to slow, Mycroft reluctantly roused him.

“Greg? I should go and let you rest.”

Greg groaned, lifting his head. His eyes were hooded, face wreathed in a silly grin. “I wish you could stay,” he groaned. “I sleep much better when you’re here.”

Mycroft’s heart picked up at this, and he swallowed. “Well actually,” he started, seeing the frown form on Greg’s face, “I packed for overnight and happened to clear my schedule to synchronise with yours. I mean,” he swallowed nervously, “if you’d prefer I stayed, of course.” The response was slow, but the happiness was so genuine Mycroft could not have mistaken it for anything else.

“That’d be fantastic,” murmured Greg.

“Why don’t you get ready for bed while I clean up in here, then?” Mycroft asked, dropping a kiss on Greg’s head. The silver head nodded in agreement before he shuffled off towards the bedroom. Mycroft took the few moments of solitude to remind himself that Greg said yes because he wanted to, and he would have said something if he thought Mycroft was overstepping their boundaries. Once he’d dealt with the insecurities, he relaxed, leaning against the sink, a dishcloth in one hand, allowing the pleasure of Greg’s acceptance wash through him. _He wants me to stay_, Mycroft thought, a spark of happiness flaring inside him.
When the kitchen was tidy, the leftovers secured in the refrigerator, Mycroft collected his overnight bag from the entranceway and made his way to the bedroom. Greg was sitting up in bed, obviously waiting for him, though his eyelids drooped as Mycroft watched.

“Lie down, Greg,” Mycroft admonished him gently. “I’ll only be a few moments.” He brushed his teeth and used the facilities as quickly as possible before changing into his pyjamas and sliding into bed with Greg. The sheets were cool on his side but warmer where Greg was curled towards him. Mycroft smiled affectionately at the dark eyelashes spread across olive skin. When would he ever have had a chance to notice such a detail outside of this relationship? Making himself comfortable, Mycroft mirrored Greg’s pose – knees bent inwards, one hand resting next to Greg’s by his face. Their little fingers were just touching as Mycroft drifted off to sleep to the sound of Greg’s gentle snores.

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It was not yet light when Mycroft stirred, the unfamiliar press of another body against his own pulling him out of his slumber. A body was pressed against his back; a warm body with a familiar scent, at that. Greg. The initial tension at discovering another person dissipated quickly, Mycroft leaning back into the embrace. The hours of sleep he’d accrued were more than sufficient, therefore his body was ready to rise. He had slept unusually well; it was close to his usual alarm time anyway. His internal clock was highly accurate, and as he came more fully awake, he realised he was cradled in a pair of strong arms. Greg’s arm rested over his side, hand sitting close to Mycroft’s mouth. Without thinking too much about it, Mycroft dropped his head a little, kissing the knuckles presented to him.

Greg sighed.

Experimentally, Mycroft repeated his action, a little more deliberately this time.

Greg half-sighed, half-groaned.

Entranced, Mycroft opened his mouth over the biggest knuckle, sucking on it, the slightest scrape of teeth across the tender skin.

Greg definitely groaned, his hips wriggling restlessly, face pressing into the back of Mycroft’s neck.

Well, then. Mycroft paused. Greg was still asleep. If he stopped now, and either went back to sleep or rose from the bed, Greg would probably be none the wiser. Continuing would almost certainly lead to…more. They were in bed, with nowhere to be for a number of hours, barring international incidents or a highly specific homicide. Mycroft swallowed at the idea of some variation of the mutual shower in Kinsale, when he and Greg had shared their one and only sexual encounter. It had been more intimate than anything he’d experienced in his lifetime. Mycroft had a reasonable sexual history, given his ability for manipulation. He’d spent enough time in the diplomatic corps seducing young women and men and using that fact to his advantage. Few of those encounters had been repeated; even fewer had had more than the most base level of enjoyment attached. His time with Greg, brief as it had been, had provided Mycroft with more emotional fulfilment than all his years previous to that.

More? Yes, he wanted more. And he was fairly sure Greg felt the same.

Reaching his own hand out, Mycroft carefully tilted Greg’s hand back until his fingertip brushed Mycroft’s lower lip. He pressed his tongue to the fingerprint, all his senses focussed on Greg and any potential response. Nothing. Ducking his head a little further, Mycroft closed his mouth around
the finger, lips pressing on the first knuckle. Gentle suction, and there it was – another groan, another shift. Mycroft gradually increased the pressure, sucking the digit further into his mouth, using his tongue to explore as he catalogued the increasing rate of Greg’s breathing, the shift of his hips, and growing firmness against his arse. Without his own concentration on his mouth and the response to it, Mycroft knew he would also be writhing by this point – his ears were filled with his own rushing blood and highly controlled breathing as much as Greg’s rough breaths.

Mycroft’s focus was so narrow that when Greg’s hand shifted of its own accord, a second finger pushing into his mouth, he gasped before accommodating it, running his tongue over and between the digits with abandon. It was clear that Greg was awake to some extent, but when the fingers in Mycroft’s mouth withdrew and started down his chest with intent, Mycroft gasped then moaned, the surprise overtaken by a powerful burst of arousal. His focus had scattered to the winds, and the floodgates had opened, the desire he’d not noticed while concentrating on Greg now spilling over his body like fire, sparking tongues of flame from every point of contact with Greg. There were lips pressed to the back of his neck, pressure all down his back to the hard length pressed into his arse. Greg’s whole body was curled in, and when Mycroft straightened his legs out as Greg’s fingers brushed the fine hairs of his lower belly, Greg’s upper leg curled over Mycroft’s, pressing him into the mattress. Greg’s fingers were teasing now, tracing the line of the hard cock pressing against Mycroft’s pyjamas. Mycroft’s hips bucked, the light touch agony and ecstasy, another line of desirous fire to torture him.

“Please,” whimpered Mycroft, and he felt Greg’s shortle reverberate through him. “Please…” he repeated, gasping again when Greg pressed his fingers into the soft flesh at his waist in order to duck under Mycroft’s pyjama trousers.

“Mmmm,” hummed Greg, the sound almost drowned out by the shout rent from Mycroft’s throat as sturdy fingers closed around his cock. The wetness from his mouth, along with the pre-come leaking from his cock, combined to make the touch slick and smooth, Greg’s fingers sliding easily from tip to root and back. His stroke was languid, the sounds of his action combining with two sets of ragged breathing.

Mycroft’s panting was interspersed with moans; a dim part of his brain registered Greg’s earlier request to hear his arousal, but nothing could have held him still as Greg’s hand moved over his body. When the rhythm sped up, Mycroft’s lower abdomen began to tense, a spring curling in his belly as the arousal built almost beyond what he could stand. Of their own volition his hips began to cant, thrusting into Greg’s fist. Dimly he heard Greg murmuring words of encouragement as his fingers curled into the mattress; with one final, stuttering thrust and shout Mycroft fell over the edge, the coiled desire in his belly exploding into white hot fireworks. His throat hurt; had he been shouting? Greg’s hand was still on him, though slower and gentler, the kisses on his neck and shoulders reassuring and affectionate. Mycroft slumped over, the weight of Greg pressing him half onto his stomach.

“Urgh,” he complained weakly, pushing back out of the lines of come striping across the sheets.

“Oh, sorry,” said Greg, his voice gravelly with sleep and lust. For a moment Mycroft lay, still gasping to breathe regularly, when he felt the mattress begin to shake. Glancing over, he saw Greg looking intently at him, mouth hanging open, eyes roving over Mycroft’s body as his hand worked his own straining erection. Mycroft could see from the tension in his neck and face that Greg was close; he hesitated, wanting to touch Greg but needing permission.

“Please,” managed Greg, “touch me, anywhere Mycroft…” The moment Mycroft’s hand pressed against his neck Greg groaned low in his throat, the tempo increasing then dropping away as he came, lines appearing on the sheet, his own t-shirt, and Mycroft’s sleeve.
“Oh,” moaned Greg, his hand slowing on himself as he finished. The cordlike neck muscles relaxed, his spine slumped, face rearranging into calm once again. Mycroft kept his hand on Greg, feeling his pulse thud; he’d never paid so much attention to someone during sex before and it was fascinating. As he made to move closer, he realised there was now come on the sheets between them, not to mention on both their pyjamas. There would have to be some kind of clean-up before they rested again.

When he made to get up, Greg reached out. Mycroft turned back, saying quietly, “I’ll just find a washcloth, shall I?”

Greg looked down at the bed, himself, and Mycroft. “Oh shit, I came on you.” Mycroft saw him colour. “Er, sorry about that.”

“It’s fine, Greg,” replied Mycroft, smiling to ease the embarrassment. “I’ll be back in a moment.”

It was odd, he thought absently as he found and wet a washcloth, here he was walking around in someone else’s home, having just come (loudly, if the rasp of this throat was anything to go by), and having watched Greg come, looked into his eyes as the orgasm had hit, yet he wasn’t sinking into a puddle of shame. Interesting. Mycroft set that idea away to ponder as he returned to the bedroom. Greg had rearranged the blankets, dragging a spare duvet from somewhere.

“We can lie on the other duvet,” he explained as he wiped his hands clean, yawning. “I could still do with more sleep, to be honest.”

“Of course. There are still several hours until you need to rise,” replied Mycroft. He’d managed to get the mess off his pyjamas but the sleeve was now wet; at a loss, he looked over to see what Greg had done with his soiled t-shirt. It was gone and he was snuggled topless under the blanket. Alright, then, Mycroft thought boldly, and stripped his own top off, diving under the duvet as quickly as possible.

“Joining me, then?” purred Greg.

“It appears so,” said Mycroft.

They smiled at each other for a long, slow moment before Greg said, “You woke me up, Mycroft.”

In the half darkness, Mycroft blushed. “I apologise, Greg.”

He heard the chuckle and felt arms gather him in, head resting on the warm bare shoulder. “Not a complaint, not at all. Just surprised.”

“That makes two of us,” Mycroft replied dryly, delighted at the rumble from below his ear.

“Much as I’d love to chat, I’m falling asleep again,” admitted Greg, his words already slowing and slurring.

“Of course. Sleep, Gregoire.” As Greg’s breathing evened out, Mycroft smiled to himself. He’d made the first move, in a tentative way, and the response had been positive. More than positive, enthusiastic. With every reinforcement of that idea, he felt the self-doubting voice fade just a little. With any luck, it would be a soundless echo in the near future.
Chapter 29

Greg stretched, smacking his alarm clock with a practiced hand. No matter where he sprawled across the bed he could find and silence it without opening his eyes. Today he seemed to be in the middle of the bed; there was someone warm here too, someone that smelled like…

Mycroft.

As he woke further, memories flooded back of the previous evening, everything tinged with a haze of exhaustion; Mycroft, quiet and considerate until Greg drifted off to sleep to the sound of him brushing his teeth. His smile broadened as he then remembered the dream he’d had, of Mycroft kissing his fingers – which turned into a rather enjoyable middle of the night, half asleep hand-job. Mycroft had come hard, shaking and shouting Greg’s name, almost pushing Greg over the edge himself. Certainly twelve hours well spent, his brain supplied. Ignoring the unpleasant reminder of what he had been taking a rest from, Greg rolled back towards Mycroft, who was still tucked into his side, blinking sleepily.

“It’s after seven,” whispered Greg apologetically. “The team’s meeting at the Yard at eight.” Mycroft immediately shifted, allowing Greg to extricate his arm. Greg laid one hand on Mycroft’s bare shoulder, ignoring the thrill that ran through him at the contact. “I do have time for a kiss, though,” he said, smiling as he did exactly that. He felt Mycroft relax, though he pulled away a moment later.

“I should brush my teeth,” Mycroft protested, though it was hardly compelling.

“I need a shower and a shave,” said Greg. He looked hopefully at Mycroft. “You didn’t bring coffee, by and chance.”

“I’m sorry, I did not.” Mycroft replied. “I could go and-”

Greg cut him off. “Don’t be ridiculous. It’s fine. I’ll stop somewhere on the way in.” He winked at Mycroft before padding away towards the bathroom.

Mycroft immediately dived for his phone, unplugging it and texting rapidly for a moment.

Greg, watching from the doorway, raised an eyebrow when Mycroft spotted him. “I’m assuming you’ve just directed a junior member of staff to pick me up an excellent coffee and meet me here,” He cocked his head, watching Mycroft, before adding, “with a car, to avoid the tube.” Mycroft nodded, a small smile gracing his mouth.

“Mycroft Holmes, what would I do without you?” asked Greg, crossing his arms.

“Drink terrible coffee?” suggested Mycroft. Greg’s laughter followed him as he walked towards the bathroom.

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As Greg tied his tie, drinking his excellent coffee and hoping to have a minute to grab some toast, he grinned at Mycroft. The British Government himself was sitting in Greg’s kitchen looking calm and collected and perfectly put together despite having risen and showered after Greg.

“I have plenty of experience refreshing myself in a minimum time, Greg,” murmured Mycroft, reading his mind once again. Greg shrugged, taking another mouthful of coffee and eyeing off the
bread bin. He looked at his watch and swore – barely time for a kiss, then.

“I’m meeting John for a drink tonight. He might even pass on Sherlock’s impressions of the crime scene.” Greg told Mycroft as he grabbed his briefcase and coat. Pausing for the first time, he turned to face Mycroft. “Maybe tomorrow night?”

Mycroft made an apologetic face. “My schedule tomorrow is quite fixed, I’m afraid,” he said. “I expect to be out of the country until the end of the weekend, however I will ask…I will contact you on Sunday, all things going well.”

Greg nodded, ignoring his sinking heart. Four days? At least he knew that Mycroft was going and that he intended to return. “I look forward to it.” He leaned forward, offering a kiss that was accepted when Mycroft met him halfway, pressing their lips together. “Safe travels.”

Without stopping again, Greg turned and made his way down the stairs to the waiting car. He’d be fairly close to on time, but knowing he’d left Mycroft for so long was disappointing. As he watched London slide past his window, John’s voice whispered to him, and he pulled out his phone.

*I’ll miss you. – Greg*

The response was immediate.

*And I you. A package will arrive today with a new phone. The number will be the same however the encryption level will be significantly increased. – MH*

*Of course. – Greg*

Reading between the lines, Greg could see there was some kind of security concern. Must be the personal messages, he thought to himself. He wondered what would happen if he’d actually sent something racier – and then realised that for a man like Mycroft, who as far as he knew had never had a public relationship at all, information about any relationship might be of interest to the wrong sort of people. He wondered idly how many people Mycroft had actually opened up to in the past. It probably wasn’t many, given his hesitancy.

The realisation made Greg’s heart break a little for the reserved man.

Things were cautiously good between them, the time they were spending together infrequent by usual standards, but the enforced slower pace did have its benefits, too. Given all that had happened in Kinsale, it was good to have time to adjust to each other, to consider the direction they were taking. Kinsale had been the fairy tale, and this was real life. Finding a place for each other within their already busy lives would prove whether they valued the relationship enough to carve that space. If one or neither could, it would die a natural death; on the other hand, if both could make the time, Greg had the feeling it could be the healthiest, most stable relationship he’d ever been in.

Celia had never really embraced the ‘wife of a copper’ existence, even at the beginning. There had
always been weekends and late nights, missed dinners and too-tired-to-eat nights, and the reality of it had always sat badly with her. With Mycroft, both of them would be responsible for plans falling through, probably more often than either would like.

The unique situation they found themselves in offered something Greg never thought he’d find outside of dating another officer – acceptance. The times he had cancelled one of their dates, Mycroft had shown only concern that he was working too hard, eating enough, sleeping enough. He never expressed anger or resentment, only disappointment for the time missed. Greg hoped that he had done the same on the times it had been Mycroft making the call.

He understood the kind of life Mycroft lived, though the level of importance rose far above his head, of course. Greg had thought for a while he would be annoyed when Mycroft would not (could not) share the details of his day, and when they did talk, it was rare they shared more than the basics of their working day anyway. Unless it was of particular interest to Mycroft, he didn’t discuss details of his cases, out of habit. It was certain that Mycroft would have the security clearance if he cared to know, but they seemed to have so many other things to talk about, it didn’t matter. It certainly didn’t feel like Mycroft was hiding something. Greg grinned to himself. All in all, it was good, he thought, content with the simple word.

+++  

“Lestrade!” the voice barking his name was brash and familiar. Greg, just stepping out of the lift, sighed before dumping his coffee cup and turning to face DCI Haroldson.

“Yes, sir?” he replied, habit now keeping the sarcasm out of his voice.

“Where the hell have all your people been all night?”

Greg blinked at him. “I gave both teams a break, sir. They’ve been working late and early since this broke.” He stopped there, not wanting to sound defensive, though the implication he was not doing his job rankled.

“A break? We’ve got a serial killer, or more than one, running around London and you’re taking a break?” Haroldson looked like he was about to bust a pipe, his face was so red. The whole floor was watching now, and Greg felt his face flush, more with anger that Haroldson would make this such a public dressing down than with embarrassment.

“We haven’t had a new scene in three days,” said Greg levelly. He looked Haroldson in the eye as he spoke, refusing to be cowed. “This team, and I mean both my people and Dimmock’s as well as Forensics, have worked more than a week’s overtime each since this case was transferred to us, looking at every angle we can think of. We’ve interviewed over a hundred witnesses and suspects. All the businesses considered likely targets have been contacted and Forensics has been working non-stop with four hourly reports since Sunday to keep us up to date on the mountain of evidence they’ve got to analyse.”

He paused for a breath, seeing the frustration continuing to build on the face of his questionably qualified superior. “Apart from the budgetary concerns, the Union will be all over us if we don’t allow a decent break, even with a killer running around London. With respect, sir, I was told to focus on getting this case solved, and no one’s going to be any good without a decent sleep, a shower and some down time. Not to mention, every single person has worked their arse off and they deserve it.”

Greg stopped, letting the silence hang in the air, waiting for Haroldson to come back with something about insubordination or something similar. His eyes darted uneasily around at the
teams watching, waiting to see what he would say in the face of Greg’s calm defense.

“You’d better get back to work then,” blustered Haroldson before turning and slamming his office door.

Greg was relieved but not surprised Haroldson had backed down. The man didn’t have the balls to call him out further, Greg knew. Haroldson knew that if Greg was disciplined and went over his head, it would come back on the DCI. Not that any of that had won him any brownie points – Haroldson would hate him even more now. Sinking into his chair, Greg groaned. What he wouldn’t give for another of Mycroft’s coffees, he thought longingly. The run in with his boss had soured the last of the delicious taste and Greg knew how bad the office brew would be.

“Thanks boss,” said Sally, coming in with a cup of the aforementioned terrible coffee for him.

“Telling it like it is, Donovan,” replied Greg wearily. He knew the others would have heard him defending their work ethic; it was a good team, if a little inexperienced. Donovan was the best Sergeant he had. They’d worked together long enough that she could read his moods, knew how he liked to work; he could reliably leave her to get started on things without him. She’d be a good DI one day, if she could let go of a few grudges here and there.

“Still, sir,” said Sally, checking outside that Haroldson was still sulking in his office, “We appreciate you standing up to him.”

Greg knew his opinion of Haroldson was matched by just about everyone on the team; only Anderson seemed to have any genuine respect for him.

“Has he ever been decent to work for?” asked Greg. Haroldson had first appeared at Homicide while he was on leave. Sally had still been on admin duties and had only heard the gossip for a while before her first encounter with him.

In answer to his question, she snorted. “The first time he spoke to me was to ask me what kind of weakling DI takes time off when he’s feeling sad,” she replied. “Needless to say, I’ve wanted to knee him in the balls ever since.”

It was Greg’s turn to snort – he could see Sally calmly doing just that given enough provocation.

“Don’t do it,” he advised. “With any luck he won’t be around long. Richards worked with him in Fraud, said he’s been bounced around for a while. They’re either hoping he leaves or finally does something they can actually fire him for.”

“And then the natural successor can take over, and peace will reign through the land once more,” pronounced Sally with a flourish.

Greg rolled his eyes and was just about to say something about not jinxing the peace when McNair stuck his head in the door. “Another one,” he said breathlessly before disappearing.

“At least they waited until we’d come in this morning,” said Sally as Greg grabbed his coat, feeling the familiar rush of adrenaline as he prepared to deal with yet another violent death. So much for peace reigning through the land, he thought to himself.

+++ By half six, the scene was clear. Forensics had come and gone, Anderson trying to have a conversation with Sally before she snapped at him to get back to work. Greg had privately grinned, hoping the shattered peace extended to their office romance, too. They’d taken as many names as
possible and the junior officers were starting on interviews, a sketch artist working with the two witnesses, though Greg held out little hope. As usual, there was almost no useful evidence. The only bright point was that the more places they hit, the more chance there was they would make a mistake, or reveal their strategy. Until then, he was going to keep to his plan, meeting John for a pint.

“Just the one tonight, I’m heading back once we’re done,” Greg told him when they arrived.

“You can switch to water or whatever, but you’re staying at least an hour,” replied John. “I need a break. Whatever you gave Sherlock is royally pissing him off, and he’s paying it forward.”

Greg grunted sympathetically; another part of his brain observed that if Sherlock couldn’t see a pattern, there may not be one. “Well we had another one today, I’m going to send a copy of the details over later. Maybe another scene will help him find a pattern.”


“Good,” replied Greg, a self-conscious smile coming to his face. “He stayed the night last night.”

“Ah, did he cross paths with Sherlock?” asked John, and when Greg confirmed it, he went on, “Well that explains why Sherlock was in such a foul mood when he arrived home, then. I thought he’d be out far longer, too.”

“He said if he thought we could keep our hands off each other he’d stay,” shrugged Greg, grinning when John rolled his eyes.

“And could you?” asked John slyly, chuckling when Greg shook his head emphatically. “No details please.” John added.

“I’m not really the kiss and tell kind, John,” said Greg cheerfully.

“That is fine, mate, I’d rather not hear,” John told him. He put his pint down and looked at Greg. “You look happier.”

Greg nodded. “I am, but it’s early days. Still juggling work and trying to get out for a run every now and then, and the old stuff – sleep, stress, eating better…” John knew every detail of Greg’s struggles, he didn’t need to go into details.

“Have you seen Sandy lately?” asked John.

“Not since I’ve been back at work,” Greg admitted. “The meds are still good, and he said to give it a few weeks unless something fell apart, so…” he shrugged. “I’ve got an appointment this coming weekend just to touch base with him.”

John nodded.

“My new boss is an arse,” Greg changed the subject abruptly. “Makes Saddam Hussein look like a fairy princess.”

John snorted into his beer at this. “Has he met Sherlock?”

“No, and I’m going to keep it that way,” said Greg in a firmer voice than he’d planned. At John’s surprised face, he explained the conflict he’d had with Haroldson, including today’s public dressing down. “If he knew I was bringing Sherlock in, especially on such a big case, I’d be toast,”
Greg concluded. “I thought the private cases were keeping him going, anyway?”

John shrugged. “They are. But you know how he gets, wanting to show off when he find a connection or cracks the case or whatever.”

“Yeah,” nodded Greg. “If you think he’ll listen, warn him about Haroldson, would you? The last thing I need is Sherlock spouting off at him and getting himself arrested or something.”

“Oh yeah he always listens to me,” said John sarcastically. “I’m like his Oprah.”

Greg stared for a moment before breaking into laughter. “Oprah?” he choked out.

John shrugged. “Army vets with PTSD watch a lot of daytime telly, okay?”

“Whatever,” sniggered Greg, draining the last of his pint and checking his watch. “Look, I should go, make sure I’m seen around the office while we tread water on this. I’m gonna drop into Baker Street tomorrow afternoon if I haven’t heard from Sherlock.” John nodded, raising his glass in farewell as Greg navigated his way back out of the pub.
“Gareth,” the voice before him was quiet, yet it pulled Greg from his doze. He sat up, looking blearily around at his office in the half light of dawn. Must have fallen asleep at his desk again after drinks with John. Dammit.

“Christ, what time is it?” he croaked, looking at Sherlock. The man looked like he’d just stepped out of a fashion magazine, Greg thought irritably, hair all wild and perfect, coat and scarf carelessly elegant.

“Six forty three AM,” replied Sherlock. He looked a little manic but otherwise normal, Greg noted. It was almost automatic to check after so many years of dealing with him high.

“What are you doing here?” asked Greg. He was still a long way from fully awake and he stretched, trying to get his body moving a little. God, his neck was stiff.

“I’ve found a connection between the stores that have been targeted.” Sherlock’s words did a better job of waking Greg than the perfunctory stretches.

“Right.” said Greg, sitting up and paying attention. Sherlock dropped a packet of photos on his desk – the crime scene shots Greg had given him.

“All the shops are in random parts of town. Different types of business, different opening hours, different clientele,” recited Sherlock. Greg was impatient, but he did his best to hide it. Sherlock was above all else a drama queen, and cutting him off mid-denouement only made him sulk and refuse to share. Once the showboating was over, he’d get down to it.

“Looking at their financial records, each business is owned by a company rather than an individual. And each company is part owned by a silent partner based in South Africa. A very recent silent partner.” Greg nodded. It was a pretty tenuous link, but from the sound of it, there was more. “Not only that,” Sherlock went on, “each business had a delivery of stock in the two days before they were robbed. Different stock for different shops – plastic cutlery, pet food, cheap jewellery, handmade soaps.” Sherlock’s eyes were sparkling. There was no doubt he loved this bit. Greg just wished he’d get to the point.

“No need to get impatient, Gavin,” said Sherlock smugly. “Each company had a delivery, and each delivery company – there are six represented – had a casual delivery driver on that day.” He pulled out another sheaf of photographs, grainy security shots. “Eight businesses, three delivery companies, four different names.” He laid out the photos for Greg. “But only one face.” In each photo was a man, sometimes turned half away from the camera, but all recognisable as the same person.

“The same delivery driver for each shop?” asked Greg, peering at the photos. Sherlock nodded. “How did we miss this?” Before Sherlock could answer, Greg held up one hand. “Yes, thank you, I’m sure you have many new and charming insights as to the failings of the police force.”

“I was going to say,” said Sherlock, “several of these came from CCTV outside the shops. If you’d just looked at the shop’s footage, his face would be largely obscured. I called in a favour from Mycroft, he sent one of his minions to find these for me.” He shot Greg a Look. “I’m surprised you didn’t ask him for help yourself.”

Greg shrugged, not prepared to enter a discussion about the nature of his relationship with Sherlock
right now. He frowned. “How did you know to look at the driver’s faces?” he asked. “If there were different names?”

Sherlock shrugged as though it was obvious. “Four names over eight deliveries and three companies is a stretch of reasonable coincidence.” His expression turned smug. “Besides, all their names were the names of famous South African rugby players.”

Greg blinked at him. “There is no possible way you could have known that.” A second later he grinned as Sherlock tossed his head impatiently. “John.”

“Yes, alright, John saw the names on my murder board and made the connection.” admitted Sherlock. Greg couldn’t keep the grin from his face. The only thing better than, well, almost anything was when Sherlock had to admit he didn’t know something.

“Well thanks for that, it’s the first lead we’ve really had.” said Greg, standing up. He needed coffee if he was going to function. It was right on seven now, so the team would start filtering in soon. He’d get them on it and they’d scour London looking for their mysterious driver.

He looked up, intending to say a final thanks to Sherlock, only to see the tail of that ridiculous coat sweep out of the room. Rolling his eyes, a flash of motion caught his eye on the other side of his office.

“Donovan!” he bawled, and she stepped into his office, still in her coat and gloves.

“Boss. What a lovely start to the day,” she greeted him.

“Lovely whatever, I’ve got a lead.” said Greg without preamble. Her eyes lit up, and Sally discarded her coat and gloves while listening to him explain.

“Wow, did you figure that out…” she trailed off, figuring out the answer. Looking at Greg, she put her hands up. “I don’t even care, boss. As far as I’m concerned, you worked through the night on this. Nice one.”

“Cheers, Sal,” he said.

“Just drag me with you when you move up in the world, right?”

“You’ll get there on your own, as long as you remember to bring your boss a coffee in the morning,” Greg told her.

“On second thoughts, I might go and work with Haroldson. He seems alright.” Greg flipped her off, and she returned the favour, calling, “I’ll get the team on this,” as she walked back out of his office.

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The gentle hum of the plane’s engine almost lulled Mycroft to sleep before they’d even climbed to cruising altitude. The trip had been non-negotiable, even with his power; tactics were just as important as anything, and meeting someone on their home soil often gave them a feeling of security that could work in the favour of a skilled manipulator such as Mycroft. In this case he had been successful. Only now, after two and a half days away and very little sleep, was he feeling the strain.

Before he could rest, though, there was one thought in his mind: Greg.
Gregory.

Gregoire, as he’d become affectionately known in Mycroft’s head and occasionally aloud. Mummy Holmes had used French interchangeably with English when he had been growing up, and Mycroft always associated the language with a sense of comfort. The words flowed far more easily in French and when his stutter grew particularly bad he would sometimes speak only in French for days. Now, he thumbed the keyboard on his phone restlessly.

Would you

If I were to

I will land

Mycroft chewed at his lip in frustration as he wondered how to phrase his message. *I need to see you* seemed a little too much, yet that was how he felt. *Communicate.*, whispered John’s voice in his mind.

*I would very much like to see you tonight. My flat? – MH*

Having nothing more pressing, Mycroft stared at his phone, knowing the message had sent, heart skipping a beat when it was marked as read. No ellipsis appeared; evidently Greg was thinking before he typed.

Closing his eyes, Mycroft concentrated on his breathing, blanking his mind for five full minutes. He was not going to allow negative thoughts into his head. Greg was allowed to think before answering. Mycroft instead made a list of all the legitimate reasons Greg might have for not being able to meet with him tonight that did not involve him not wanting to do so. The list was approaching fifty when his phone buzzed (although ‘having contracted smallpox’ might have seemed a little farfetched, Mycroft knew more than the average man about near misses with biological weapons). An answer.

Taking one last deep breath (*inhale, pause, exhale, pause*) Mycroft looked at his screen.

*Love to. Will be at work. Send a driver? – Greg*

A relieved smile broke over his face. Interestingly, the possibility that Greg was also trying to find the words to downplay his enthusiasm had not occurred to him until he saw the reply.
Sitting back in his seat, Mycroft smiled to himself. He had several hours in which to rest before he saw Greg. The weekend had been stressful, even by his standards, and he felt himself slip more easily into sleep than he had for days.

Arriving home, Mycroft calculated he had fifteen minutes until Greg arrived. Enough time for a quick shower, then. It was a perfunctory event, washing the scent of the plane and av-gas from his hair and skin. He felt much better after his short rest on the plane, and wondered, as he dried himself and dressed in dark trousers and a shirt, how Greg’s weekend had been. He knew there had been another hit on a hairdresser on Thursday after business hours; fortunately nobody had been hurt. There had been no further incidents, but also no significant progress, as far as his source could tell him.

As his fingers rolled up the crisp sleeves of his shirt, Mycroft allowed himself to daydream, Greg’s eyes dancing before his own. Knowing the real thing would soon be before him was…Mycroft considered his reaction. It was a mixture of emotions, most of which were unfamiliar to him. He finished his sleeves before examining the swirl of emotions. Relief, anticipation, excitement – he felt his cock give a jump at this one, as though weighing in – nervousness. These four days had been the longest they had been separated since their memorable conversation at Baker Street. There would be longer stretches, of course, though for the first time in his life, Mycroft was considering how long he spent overseas from the perspective of one who has something to come home to.

Already he had delegated several upcoming commitments with the justification that it was imprudent for him to be irreplaceable; there should be at least one other person, preferably two, able to take over the majority of his work at any one time. While giving up his autonomy was difficult, the idea of seeing Greg more regularly made the process far easier. Sometimes he still heard the voice in his head taunting him for making such concessions so early in their relationship; indeed, he was not even sure it could be classified as such at this stage. And yet another voice pointed out that if he did not make an effort, they (and the voice meant ‘Greg’) would surely tire of the long gaps between their liaisons, the broken plans, the mysterious trips that could not be explained. It was a risk, and a significant one, yet Mycroft found himself taking it.

The flashing light in the corner of his room blinked twice, indicating a visitor had passed the facial recognition security at the door. Heart jumping, Mycroft checked the image – definitely Greg – and buzzed him in before descending the stairs.

“Good evening, Greg,” said Mycroft quietly, voice carrying across the entranceway.

Greg was looking around, a little awed by the large space. Before Mycroft could explain that it was not actually his flat but a Government building, Greg’s eyes had fixed on his. Without a word, the detective dropped his bag and strode to Mycroft, enveloping him in a fierce hug. The silver head was ducked towards him, face pressed into Mycroft’s neck. Startled, Mycroft’s arms came up around Greg, holding him tightly.

“Greg?” Mycroft’s voice was muffled, but he felt Greg shake his head. Not ready to talk then. Mycroft closed his eyes instead, sweeping his hands slowly up and down Greg’s back, the wool of his coat slightly scratchy against his palms. He was warm, Mycroft noted, but shaking slightly, and his breathing was heavy, puffs of air moving across his neck.

“Mmmmph,” Greg exhaled finally, loosening his grip on Mycroft. It wasn’t until he stood up
straight, blinking eyes that had been closed against the light that Mycroft could see how exhausted Greg looked. His eyes were red with dark bags underneath. When he tried to smile at Mycroft, it was wobbly and not at all convincing. The slump of his shoulders and slight asymmetry of his posture told Mycroft there had been precious few hours in a real bed and at least one night sleeping at his desk. More than any of these signs was the defeat and...there was something else in his eyes that struck Mycroft with concern.

“Greg?” asked Mycroft, the same as before.

“It’s been a long week,” replied Greg, his voice weary.

“That appears to be an understatement,” said Mycroft cautiously.

Greg tried to laugh, but it came out more like a sob. “Yeah. We’ve been pushing pretty hard.” He ran one hand through his hair, which explained why it was such a disaster, tufts sticking up in all directions.

“Would you like to talk about it?” asked Mycroft. His fingers itching to reach out and touch Greg, to anchor them to each other, but he was unsure how the gesture would be received. Would Greg prefer some personal space?

“I want to curl up somewhere warm with you.” said Greg, the exhaustion flattening out any inflection in his voice.

Mycroft nodded. “When was the last time you ate?”

“Umm, sometime...what time is it?” asked Greg.

“Might I suggest a plan for the evening?” said Mycroft. When Greg nodded, Mycroft proposed, “You should have a shower. I have spare pyjamas if you wish,” his face flamed at the suggestion but he pressed on, “while I prepare you something to eat. After which we can curl up somewhere warm together.” The blissful smile that bloomed weakly on Greg’s face told Mycroft this was a good plan. He picked up Greg’s bag and guided him up the stairs.

“Do you have overnight things in here?” asked Mycroft. Greg nodded, leaning against the wall of the bedroom, staring longingly at the bed. Mycroft opened the bag, fishing out the tracksuit and t-shirt similar to the ones Greg had slept in at Kinsale, as well as a toiletry bag.

“The towels are clean, please help yourself to anything you find,” said Mycroft, showing Greg the way to the bathroom. He was glad he’d had the foresight to change the towels after his own shower, allowing Greg the privacy to see to his ablutions. “I will return in fifteen minutes with something to eat.”

As he turned to leave, Greg’s hand caught on his bare forearm. “Thank you,” he murmured, swaying a little.

“Be careful on the wet tiles,” replied Mycroft, his expression concerned. As he made his way downstairs to the kitchen he wondered if he should have suggested a bath. What if Greg slipped and fell? Although falling asleep in the bath was equally dangerous. Mind half on the perils of washing while fatigued, Mycroft prepared a meal of cold roast beef sandwiches. Recalling Greg’s previous request for spicy food, he made up a tray of sandwiches with an array of condiments, adding a pot of yoghurt and stewed fruit as an afterthought. A pot of tea, camomile for relaxation, completed the meal.

Fourteen minutes and fifty seconds later, Mycroft knocked on the door of the bathroom, hesitantly...
sticking his head around the corner.

“Greg?” he asked for the third time that evening.

“I’m here.” A voice came out of the steam, the water turning off. Mycroft opened a bath sheet, enveloping Greg as he stepped out of the shower. Water sluiced off him as Mycroft wrapped the large towel around his shoulders, pulling him in for another hug.

“Mmmm, you’re warm,” hummed Mycroft.

“And you’re wet, now,” pointed out Greg. The water had made a large wet patch, turning the white shirt translucent at one shoulder.

Mycroft shrugged, tamping down the initial panic. It’s only a shoulder, and he’s naked as the day he was born, he told himself. Focus on what Greg needs.

“The meal is waiting. Would you like to get dressed?” asked Mycroft.

Greg nodded, his eyes still heavy and bloodshot. Mycroft had trapped both his arms with the sheet; as Greg struggled to free himself, Mycroft took another towel and started drying the silver head. Greg stilled, his eyes closing as a sigh escaped him. Without speaking, Mycroft finished his head, hanging the towel back on the rail. He untucked the end of the bath sheet, freeing Greg’s arms, but Greg just stood, eyes closed and arms slightly spread from his body. It was an unspoken invitation.

Mycroft hesitated before taking the end of the towel he still held and beginning to dry Greg’s arm. He moved up the forearm, dusted with silver hairs, towards Greg’s shoulders. They were stronger than they appeared under his shirts, with several scars across their expanse. Only one appeared surgical, Mycroft noted. He worked his way down the other arm, a blurry tattoo on the bicep drawing his attention. A mental note to ask Greg about it, he thought.

Stepping around to Greg’s back, Mycroft swallowed hard. He rubbed the towel down 2, 4, 10 vertebrae, a brace of ribs on each side. The softness between his ribs and hipbones, the swell of his arse. Mycroft’s hands trembled at the trust that was being placed in him, as Greg stood perfectly still, eyes closed, allowing Mycroft access to his whole physical being. Kneeling, Mycroft took the towel in both hands, one following the curve of exquisite buttock down and under, brushing Greg’s balls as he dried the upper thigh.

Working downwards Mycroft found several more scars on both calves; they were strong, like his thighs, a runner’s legs. More questions, Mycroft thought to himself.

The back finished, Mycroft ducked around to Greg’s front. He’d finished all four limbs now. All that remained was Greg’s chest, abdomen and groin. Flashing a look, Mycroft saw with a startled glance that Greg’s cock was semi erect. A quick glance upwards told him that his breathing was normal, eyes still closed, face serene. A reaction to being touched, physiological rather than personal, Mycroft thought.

He caressed Greg’s chest, placing his bare hand against the skin for a moment, feeling the heart pounding steadily underneath. The towel shifted lower, picking up the sparkling droplets caught in grey and white chest hair, trailing lower and lower, leading towards the increasingly erect cock waiting for Mycroft. He dried Greg’s groin carefully, wondering if he was expected to…or…

As he stood in front of Greg, clutching the towel and beginning to lose himself in the agony of indecision, Greg’s eyes opened, settling immediately on Mycroft. “Thank you,” said Greg, stepping forward and kissing Mycroft as though he was the single most precious thing in the world. Their
eyes locked, Greg’s sending the same message as his kiss and his words.

His brain was still processing this while Greg turned to the sleeping clothes Mycroft had laid out. Ignoring his erection apart from the care with which he drew on his pants, Greg hung up the bathmat and took the towel from Mycroft’s hand.

“Did you say there was food?” he asked.

Mutely, Mycroft nodded. Greg offered his hand and they intertwined their fingers, Greg’s still warm and supple from his shower.

“Roast beef, I hope that will be sufficient,” murmured Mycroft as they settled on the bed. Greg seated himself against the headboard, sighing in contentment. At his instruction, Mycroft doctored a sandwich for him, adding pickles and horseradish with a generous hand. Greg demolished two in quick succession before Mycroft offered the fruit.

“My mother always had Greek yogurt,” Greg told Mycroft, the approval clear in his eyes as he ate. Finally, he appeared sated, and Mycroft poured them both a cup of camomile tea.

“I will be back in a moment,” said Mycroft quietly, placing their tea on the bedside table. He changed in the bathroom, still too self-conscious to undress so blatantly in front of Greg. Teeth brushed and loo visited, he returned to bed, sliding onto the duvet next to Greg, curling around his body. They shifted back and forth until each was comfortable.

“Better?” asked Mycroft after a few moments. When there was no response, he risked moving a little so he could see Greg’s face. It was beautiful in repose, he thought, smiling gently to himself. Greg snuffled a little and sighed in his sleep. Careful not to jostle, Mycroft snuggled down beside him, flicking off the light. The slow breathing and body heat filled the room, and Mycroft slipped easily into sleep.
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

I have been remiss in not yet thanking Kara, the wonderful beta without whom we wouldn't be here. She wasn't fazed when I told her how much I'd written (lots) and how soon I needed the first part beta'ed (very soon) - actually she sat down and marathoned her way through this whole second part so I could edit again at my leisure. What a superstar. Thank you, as always, Kara.

Greg groaned as he was dragged into consciousness.

“Greg,” Mycroft’s voice was sounding in his ear, a hand gently shaking his shoulder.

“Yeah?” he replied, feeling the roughness in his throat. Not enough sleep, his groggy mind protested.

“Your phone,” said Mycroft, passing it to Greg. He’d missed the call, but the ID said it was NSY.

“It’s work,” muttered Greg apologetically. Mycroft’s bedside light was on, but Greg still made to move, to allow Mycroft to return to sleep. 5.13am, he saw. Christ.

“Stay, it’s fine,” murmured Mycroft.

Greg gladly did so, returning the call. “This is Lestrade,” he said shortly, hearing the tension in his voice.

“Sir, it’s Sally.” The voice was thrumming with energy, but Greg couldn’t decide if it was good or bad. She’d been on call tonight, he remembered; he would only be having this conversation if something had happened.

“What?” he asked.

“They’ve got someone in custody,” she said, and he slumped with relief.

“And?” he said, resting his head in his shaking hand. It was hardly the end, but even if this was a small fish in the larger pond, it was a breakthrough.

“Security at one of the places we flagged,” said Sally, “he winged this guy. He’s at Bart’s getting stitched up, it’s not too bad so they’ll release him in a few hours. We’re interviewing the security guard now.”

Greg nodded, exchanged a few more details with Sally, promising to be there within the hour. When he hung up, Greg allowed his phone to drop into his lap, taking a few deep breaths in and out as he tried to control his adrenaline fueled body.

“I’ll make breakfast,” said Mycroft. “Would you like to shower before you go?” Before he could rise from the bed, Greg had leaned sideways, arms embracing Mycroft. It was another hug like the night before, when he’d needed to hold Mycroft and be held before any words could even try and explain himself. Mycroft, bless him, simply acquiesced, winding his arms as best he could around
Greg and allowing him to breathe.

“They have someone in custody,” Greg told Mycroft, when they’d both sat up again. “Sherlock was brilliant. He found the connection, and we tapped into the security companies. Didn’t want to alert them in case there were insiders planting the replacements, but when certain names came up on jobs, we made sure the businesses were under surveillance. One of them paid off this morning.” His smile was pure relief, though he knew there was a long way to go.

Mycroft’s expression was proud and comforting both at once. “Congratulations. You have worked hard for this, you deserve your success.”

“Not success yet,” Greg told him, scratching at the growth on his chin. “I reckon this guy is a small cog in the big wheel. We’ll have to see what we can get out of him.”

Mycroft nodded. He probably knew more about this than Greg did, the detective realised.

“I will arrange some breakfast while you shave, if you like,” suggested Mycroft.

Greg grinned at him. “Yes please.” He dropped a quick kiss on Mycroft before heading to the bathroom for the aforementioned shave.

Greg wondered how Haroldson would see this development. Probably annoyed the guy doesn’t have his boss's name tattooed on his arse, Greg thought wryly as he navigated the familiar planes of his face with a razor. Whatever. As long as he stuck to writing memos and badgering Greg, the rest of the team was free to do what they were very good at – tracking down the people responsible for whatever this was that had cost so many people their lives.

+++  

Striding into work at 6am, Greg greeted Sally with a big grin. “Well done,” he said. It was traditional to thank everybody that had helped on an arrest like this – he liked to think he was showing his recognition and gratitude to all the members of the team. It took all of them for this success to happen, and he remembered as a junior officer working his arse off on some mind numbing but essential task, only for nobody to even acknowledge it had been done. He would not be that kind of leader, Greg had decided when he’d first been promoted to DI.

“Thanks, boss,” said Sally. “This guy, Thomas James Kitchener, was part of the team that broke into that amazing bakery on Elizabeth Street. They’d had a delivery by a fill in driver called Adriaan Strauss, so we’ve been watching it. One of our guys winged him as they tried to escape. He’s been at Bart’s for a couple of hours now, two uniforms on him.”

“Right,” said Greg, flicking through the man’s rap sheet a practiced eye, getting a feel for the man and his record. “Is Haroldson in yet?”

Sally snorted. “Been and gone, sir.”

Greg frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Our esteemed leader has had today booked for a personal day for over a week, and he’s decided to take that day. His tee time’s around noon, apparently, and his ‘mental health’ is at stake if he doesn’t make it. He came in, signed off on Kitchener being transferred out of St. Bart’s over here, and booked it.” While none of that was a surprise to Greg, he still shook his head at hearing it had actually happened. He’d been reamed out for giving his team 12 hours break when there was nothing happening, and yet when they finally have someone in custody, their DCI declares his holiday time to be more important. Considering his attitude to Greg’s extended leave, this was a bit
rich. Greg thought Haroldson needed a bit of coaching on the definition of ‘mental health’ days.

“Fine.” Greg bit out. “We’ll have to do it on our own then.” Sally’s face said, like we always do, which Greg privately agreed with. He and Sally talked over interview techniques before Greg called the Forensics tech at the scene – Anderson.

“Anderson, it’s Lestrade.”

“What is it, I do have a crime scene to process,” retorted Anderson.

Greg bit back a sharp reply, reminding Anderson as gently as possible that he needed all physical evidence expedited.

“You and every other DI out there,” muttered the technician before hanging up.

Greg shook his head. One of these days someone was going to deck him, and Greg sincerely hoped to be there when it happened.

“Right,” said Greg, finding Sally supervising the uniforms bringing a very sore, very sulky looking man into the interview room. “Let’s do this, shall we?”

+++ Three hours later, Greg was quite pleased with how the interview had gone. Thomas Kitchener was a low level guy for hire, as Greg suspected. His instructions were simple; find the packages hidden in the recent deliveries, but steal enough to make it look like a regular robbery. He got to keep whatever he took, apart from the packages, plus his fee. When Greg asked him what was in the packages, he said that he had no idea; his job was to take them to a post office box and lock them inside. Someone else would collect them, and his money would be there a few days later. That was it.

“What about the others?” Greg asked him. There had been two other men at the scene; they’d run off when Kitchener had been shot.

“Dunno,” replied Kitchener, and nothing would make him give up the names of his accomplices.

“So one of them has the package now,” said Greg later, as he and Sally sat eating lunch in his office. They were talking over possible scenarios, taking into account Kitchener’s statement. “If they do know where the PO box is, do you think they’ll do the drop?”

Sally shrugged, swallowing. “Possibly. Doesn’t sound like he told them about the packages. His share wasn’t much, and he doesn’t have any history of violence.” She was right, Greg knew; his priors were for stealing cars, petty theft and the like. “So let’s say this happened: Kitchener get approached somehow, to retrieve these packages, leave them in a PO box. He decides that since his profit is whatever he can carry, he could do with some help. But he asks the wrong guys – one of them has a temper, and he hits out at a guard. Kitchener wants him out but he can’t risk it, this guy knows the game and he could rat Kitchener out if he’s excluded. So Kitchener keeps calling him in, but only when the merchandise is bulky.” Sally took another forkful of noodles as Greg considered it. He mentally reviewed Kitchener’s behaviour in the interview – he’d been emphatic that the violence wasn’t down to him, and Greg had thought he was frightened by something. It all fit, he thought.

Okay, let’s go with that as a working theory,” said Greg, standing up and binning the remains of his own chow mein. “Let’s get some people on all Kitchener’s known associates with violent priors, especially with firearms. Also guys he might have met in prison, he was inside early last
year for a few months. Might have made a new friend or two.”

Sally nodded, jumping up and heading out to round up the teams and alert Dimmock. Greg nabbed Jackson as he passed, a young enthusiastic DC, and had him organise reprints of the crime scene photos as well as images of Thomas Kitchener and all the names on Sally’s new list. They would need a proper murder board for this. The phrase jumped into his head and made him think of Sherlock.

On impulse, Greg took out his phone and shot off a quick message.

*Thanks for the other night. Very helpful. – Greg*

The reply was immediate.

*Of course it was. – SH*

Greg rolled his eyes, but he was grinning. Sherlock was a wanker, that much was true, but Greg could be a little more grateful especially when he worked at such short notice. Stretching out a kink in his neck, Greg turned to Kitchener’s file. He’d need to know this inside out before he briefed Haroldson tomorrow, assuming he’d be in of course.

+++ By the end of the day, Greg’s office was deserted. Haroldson had not made another appearance, and Greg had taken the opportunity to hold a team meeting. He’d congratulated everyone again on their work, though he also warned them to make sure everything was above board; they wanted a solid conviction out of this. He split the teams up into pairs, each taking a selection of names to find out who might potentially be the accomplices of Kitchener. They had a statement from the security guard at the shop, as well as the CCTV from the surrounding streets; Greg had texted Mycroft earlier and a link had been emailed with CCTV for five blocks around for the hour around the time of the shooting. Cross referencing would take time but Greg knew it was the best way to narrow the field. Once everyone had their assignments, Greg had one more message for them all.

“I want this office empty by 8pm,” he said. “Seriously. We’ve all worked really hard now, and if there’s another hit I’ll expect to see you here ASAP, but we all need to take care of ourselves too. Remember that new mental health protocol. It’s not there just to look good. The brass are behind it and so am I. Go home, have a shower, introduce yourself to your significant other-”

“Get a leg over!” someone called, to general applause and cat calling.

“-yeah, if that floats your boat,” replied Greg, grinning. “But relax, you won’t be any good to anyone if you’re burning out. This place needs to be deserted, 8pm til 6am unless you get a breakthrough.” He’d dismissed them then, the group breaking up, some thanking him, others offering their congratulations to him for the arrest. The mood was buoyant, as it always was after an arrest, and Greg knew it wouldn’t last, but he also knew he could do a lot to boost morale in the coming days. And it started with a clear understanding that their well-being did not take a backseat to this. There were times for all-nighters and times to stop for a moment and breathe.
As soon as it hit 8pm, Greg had hustled the last few out, before closing his own briefcase and heading home. It was dark but he tied double knots in his runners, donned his hi-vis vest and plodded around Regent’s Park for an hour. Sweaty and out of breath when he returned, the endorphins soon kicked in and Greg felt much more human after a shower. He was still very conscious of the tenuous nature of his mental health; taking his meds every day was a reminder that he needed to make an effort or he’d end up back where he’d been after Kinsale. Tonight’s run, as slow and perfunctory as it had felt, was a part of that. He would never run every day, but doing it when he had the time would help keep things rolling along smoothly.

Once Greg was showered and sitting with his beer (he’d imposed a one beer limit on weeknights now), he picked up his phone and found a number he did not use as often as he should. Waiting for the call to connect, Greg stared at the muted television, colours bouncing in a seizure inducing array.

“Oui?” he heard, the light feminine voice distracted.

“Hi, sweetheart, it’s Dad,” said Greg, slipping awkwardly into French.

“Papa!” the voice said, pleasure now clear in the tone. Fortunately, she switched back to English. “How are you?”

“Still here,” replied Greg. “How are you?” He smiled as Imogen started talking about her work, her dogs, the life she was building in Geneva. Greg still found it hard to believe that he’d managed to sire a daughter so driven she’d been offered one of only three internships working for CERN in Switzerland. Her obsession with physics had started when she was a child throwing things off a table, trying to understand why apples landed before feathers. Greg had been out of his depth, and in the end he had the Science Club at Gennie’s school to thank for fostering her interest and encouraging her to follow it as a career.

“Wow, that sounds amazing,” said Greg, not quite sure what exactly she was working on. That wasn’t as important as hearing the excitement in her voice, though. He could hear how happy she was, and that had always been his goal for her. Wherever she was, as long as she was happy, he was happy. Even if it had to be in Switzerland.

“It is. But you have no idea what I’ve just said,” Imogen told him.

“Well,” he began, “No.” They both laughed.

“What have you been doing? Fiona sent me pictures from her wedding, it looked amazing. Did you see the boys? How are they?” Imogen peppered him with questions about the wedding, which Greg could answer mostly honestly if he ignored the rest of his trip to Kinsale.

“Did you meet anyone there?” asked Imogen coyly, and Greg wondered how to answer. He didn’t know if Fiona had mentioned it to Imogen, but he wasn’t sure he was ready to explain the convoluted path he and Mycroft had taken quite yet.

“What did Fiona say?” asked Greg, hedging.

“She said you were thick as thieves with the most gorgeous guest there,” said Imogen promptly. Greg couldn’t tell if she was telling the truth or taking the piss.

What the hell, he thought to himself. “I was, actually,” he replied as casually as possible.
“Really?” She squealed, making Greg chuckle at the surprise in her voice. “Tell me everything! Well not everything. G-rated everything.” He could picture her leaning her chin on one hand as she listened, the classic thinker’s pose she had been adopting long before he took her to see one of the Rodin casts in person.

“I’ve known Mycroft for a while, but we bumped into each other before the first dinner and things clicked,” said Greg, heart in his mouth as he waited for her reaction.

“Mycroft?” repeated Imogen. “That is one unique name,” she chuckled.

“Yeah, he’s the only one I’ve ever met,” replied Greg.

“So, have you seen him since then?” asked Imogen.

“On and off,” replied Greg evasively. She did not need to know the whole saga. “We’ve settled things more now, though.”

“Are you happy, Papa?” she asked seriously.

“Yeah,” he said, a goofy grin spread across his face as he thought about Mycroft. “I’d be happier if you were coming home for Christmas, though…”

“Actually, Sim and I have been talking,” she said, “and we’re both coming to stay. Well not literally. We’ll get a hotel for a few days. Might not be over actual Christmas, it’s a good chance to get some time with the labs when everyone’s away, and I think she said they’d already committed to Trent’s family for Christmas Dinner.”

“I don’t care when it is,” said Greg, feeling his throat tighten a little at the idea of both his daughters in the same city, with him, near Christmas. “You tell me when, I will take the time off. Promise.” He cleared his throat, the sudden emotion surprising him with its intensity.

“Great. We’ll work out the details,” said Imogen. “I’ve got to go, Dad, got to feed the dogs and get them out to the park before it closes.”


“Love you too, Papa,” she replied.

Both his girls home for Christmas, Greg thought in a slight daze. He’d been hoping for a group phone call if he was lucky. Drawing on his good mood, he made another call.

“Good evening, Greg.” The voice on the other end was warm and affectionate, and Greg knew he’d managed to catch Mycroft alone.

On a whim he replied in French. “I wanted to call and hear your voice. I had a good phone call and wanted to share it with you.”

Greg could almost hear the surprise before Mycroft replied with a flawless accent, “To whom was the phone call?”

“My daughter, Imogen.”

“Naturally it was good, then.”

“She and her sister have colluded to come to London this Christmas for a few days.” Greg could hear the pleasure in his own voice, and the answering smile in Mycroft’s.
“That is wonderful,” he replied. “Has it been long since you’ve seen them?”

“Can we switch back to English? My French is pretty rusty,” asked Greg.

“Of course,” said Mycroft immediately in English.

“Thanks. I saw both of them early this year, but it’s been quite a while since we’ve all been together.”

“I’m sure it will be delightful.” said Mycroft.

“Assuming this case is wrapped up, should be great,” said Greg, using the clumsy segue to ask, “so how was your day?”

“Busy but productive,” Mycroft told him. “I am in the process of working with a colleague on a delicate project. We are still determining the best dynamic for our interactions.”

Greg took a moment to figure out what Mycroft was saying. **Difficult co-worker,** he translated. Right. “Oh, that’s annoying,” he said. “I had the pleasure of a boss-free day, myself.”

“Really?” replied Mycroft. “I would have thought he’d be present, given the arrest this morning.”

“You, me and the rest of the force,” said Greg dryly. “Having said that, working around him is easier when he’s not there.” Greg stretched his shoulders and neck, re arranging himself on the couch. “My team is good, so is Dimmock’s. He’s really coming along, too. They works best if you just let them do their thing a lot of the time. Which Haroldson does not understand.”

“He’s a micromanager,” Mycroft translated.

“Worse than that, he’s an inexperienced, critical micromanager,” said Greg. “Haroldson may have may fine qualities, but I haven’t seen them yet.”

Mycroft’s chuckle was warm and intimate. “That’s no way to speak about your boss, Greg.”

“Maybe.” said Greg. Mycroft didn’t have to work with the man, and Greg wasn’t going to start an argument about it.

“I did take the opportunity to remind everyone about the new mental health policy,” Greg told him. “Pointed out that I support it, and so does the brass, so everyone was to be out of there for 10 hours tonight unless we have a breakthrough.” He shook his head. “None of them will be any good if they’re exhausted. It’s not good for them.”

“That’s the kind of thinking that makes for loyal troops, Greg,” said Mycroft, and there was respect in his voice.

“Can’t expect them to exist on bad coffee and doughnuts,” replied Greg, though Mycroft’s words meant a lot to him.

“I suspect that when DCI Haroldson moves on to greener pastures, they will look at you for possible promotion, Greg,” added Mycroft.

“Well, who knows,” replied Greg. He hated speculating about his career prospects. “This latest mental health thing probably didn’t help my case.”

“Why not?” Mycroft asked in surprise. “As you just pointed out to me, several of the senior management have been vocal in their support of the new program. Surely a senior officer who
openly supports the program and has been seen to both use it and encourage, nay demand, that his team take care of themselves is a valuable asset?”

Greg chuckled. “I’ve never really thought of it like that, I guess.”

“Your reaction to what happened was not a weakness, Greg,” Mycroft told him, his voice very quiet and almost tentative. Greg didn’t say anything the comment taking him by surprise. “Only a fool would consider seeking professional assistance for a health issue to be a weakness.”

“Thank you,” said Greg, unsure what the right answer was, if any.

There was a short, awkward silence before Mycroft asked, “I trust the CCTV was useful today.”

Greg nodded, relieved to have a new topic. “It was, thanks. Hopefully we can get some action going, looking for the others that were there last night.”

“I trust your excellent team has the task well in hand.” Mycroft assured him. “They have you to lead them, after all.”

Another pause, and Greg sighed. Communicate. “I wish you were here,” he blurted, wincing at the cliché.

Mycroft had not spoken for a moment, and Greg wondered if he’d stepped over some kind of line. After a long moment, Mycroft almost whispered, “Me, too.”

The silence this time was still awkward, though there was a level of uncertainty which had been absent earlier. Just as Greg was about to open his mouth, the call waiting on his phone pinged. He checked and saw Sally’s number.

“Shit, it’s work, I’m sorry, I’ve got to go,” blurted Greg.

“I understand. I hope it is good news,” said Mycroft, a little stiffly, Greg thought.

“Good night,” he replied, waiting to hear Mycroft reply before he hung up, answering Sally’s call.

“Get in here now,” said Sally flatly. “Get a cab, I’ll explain while you’re on the way.” Greg immediately hung up, grabbed the nearest coat and shoes and bolted out the front door. If Sally wanted him moving before she explained, it was something big. Huge, even.

As soon as he was in a cab, he called Sally back. “Go,” he said, listening intently as he tied his shoes, phone mashed between his ear and shoulder. Thank God she was experienced enough to be calm and concise, he thought as she spoke rapid fire into his ear.

“Jackson’s just finished reviewing the CCTV footage. He was watching the last file from North Street and there was a car he recognised. He tracked both the accomplices from the shop to the car. They get in and get driven away. We checked the plates, and they’re fake.” She paused, taking a deep breath before blurtling out, “It’s Haroldson’s car, Greg.”


“It’s his. You know he has that stupid massive Land Rover with the personalised badge on the front? The plates are fake but you can see the badge, clear as day. Jackson and Thun have gone back and looked through CCTV from the others. The same car, with the same wrong badge was at three other scenes. Including the homicides.”
Greg swore, quietly and viciously. Whomever was in that car was an accessory to murder, if they drove away from that scene carrying the perpetrators. “Anything on the driver?” he asked.

“No, but we’ve all heard Haroldson brag about how nobody’s allowed to drive it except him,” said Sally, voice vibrating with suppressed excitement.

“Right. So what’s happening?” asked Greg. His heart was pumping now, all thoughts of sleep gone. No way he could rest when the whole mess was about to unravel in his lap.

“Jackson had the sense to call me and then shut up. It’s just him and Thun and me right now at the station.” Greg could hear from her voice she was waiting for instructions.

“If you were me, what would you do next?” he asked, testing her.

“We need to get our evidence straight then go over his head. I’d call Parkmore, get her down here when we’ve got our ducks straight.”

Greg nodded. “Right. I’m five minutes away.” After he hung up, Greg stared out the window, not seeing the lights fly past the taxi window. What the hell was going on? Was his boss a part of this whole thing? Maybe he knew what was in the packages. Greg’s head swirled with questions. He took out his notebook and wrote them down as they came to him. It helped take them out of his head so he could concentrate.
Chapter 32

Over the following two days, Greg had been careful to keep the possibility of Haroldson’s involvement between the smallest possible number of people – himself, Sally, Jackson and Thun. He’d quietly directed the two junior officers to delve more fully into how Haroldson had dealt with each scene so far – had he visited? Checked evidence? Spoken to witnesses? Sally had quietly reviewed each of the other team’s findings on the off chance someone else had found something useful. Nothing else had showed up, so Greg called Assistant Commissioner Parkmore in for a meeting late on Wednesday. He scheduled it for 9pm, late enough that everyone else would have left the office – or at least Haroldson would have.

When their boss arrived, Greg let Sally take point. Laura Parkmore was not too happy to be called out at the tail end of a Wednesday evening, but she sat and listened as Sally outlined the evidence. It wasn’t a lot, but enough to warrant officially talking to Haroldson. The delicacies of questioning such a senior officer meant Greg had no choice but to call an Assistant Commissioner, even at such a late hour. Parkmore had insisted on meeting them at the office.

“Lestrade, this is your case, correct?” Parkmore asked him.

He nodded. “Yes, ma’am. My team and DI Dimmock’s have been working it. Donovan’s the leading DS.”

“Right,” she nodded. “And you want to pull Haroldson in and ask him about this.” She waved one hand at the photo board they’d painstakingly erected over the past two days.

“We think there’s enough to question him, yes,” answered Greg carefully.

Parkmore pinned him with a narrow stare. “Does this have anything to do with the fact that he’s an arsehole, or is there an actual possibility that he’s involved in this?”

Greg’s lip twitched. “Regardless of my personal feelings, this warrants an informal conversation at the very least. Ma’am. Hence your involvement.”

She nodded, evidently satisfied. “Okay. Let’s keep this under wraps, then,” she stared pointedly at Jackson and Thun, both of whom looked terrified, “but I want you to look further into him generally, his movements, financials, the works. Quietly. Can you do that?” she asked Greg.

“I have a contact at, well, a contact,” he said evasively. “Very discreet and well connected. We can have everything there is to have on Haroldson by Friday morning.”

“Good,” said Parkmore. “In that case, do the interview later in the evening when it’s quieter. I’ll leave it up to you to play it as you will, Lestrade, but for God’s sake, make it above board.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Greg, the others nodding fervently.

“Good work,” Parkmore directed at Jackson and Thun, before nodding again to Greg and Sally and striding out.

“Fuck,” muttered Sally. She turned to Greg. “Who’s this contact of yours, then?”

“Confidential.” Greg grinned at her. He waved at the junior officers, still looking stunned at their impromptu meeting with the Assistant Commissioner. “If you two want to get home, I’d suggest some sleep. I’ll talk to you both on Friday, probably late afternoon, so we can all go over the intel
we have on Haroldson and plan the interview.”

“Us?” asked Thun pointing at herself and Jackson.

“You did good work, Thun. Do you want to see how to set up an interview like this?” Sally said. Both nodded eagerly, and she said, “Well, then. See you tomorrow morning.”

When they’d scuttled, she rolled her eyes good naturedly at Greg. “Ah, kids.”

“I’m going to make a call,” said Greg. “Then we’ll talk.”

He walked into his office, dialing Mycroft who picked up on the first ring.

“It’s me.” said Greg, very aware of how his voice carried in the silent office. “I need a favour.”

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As it turned out, Haroldson was the least exemplary police officer around. Mycroft’s digging had uncovered a number of questionable contacts and connections with names that had come up in this case.

“I can’t believe all this,” said Sally to Greg as they sat on his couch Thursday evening, reading the files Mycroft had dropped over earlier. “He’s moved around at the Yard, but he keeps running into the same guys. The same guys that keep coming up in this case.” She shifted a sheet, poring over it for a minute before pointing at Greg then standing, pacing the tiny space.

“Okay let me see if I’ve got this straight. Haroldson joins the force, beat cop working the housing commissions. He meets a lot of street kids and whatever. One of them grows up to be a highflyer in his dad’s gang. Adem Huambo.” She shifts to show an image of a gang tattoo incorporating the Angolan flag. “Daddy Huambo emigrated from South Africa, still had contacts in the blood diamond business from his time in Angola. It’s speculated that he imported them and smuggled them out to sell to legit jewelers in Antwerp, is that right?”

Greg nods. The story is only backed up by circumstantial evidence, but it fits every piece. “Dad has a heart attack about a year ago, passes away. Meanwhile, Haroldson is bumping around NSY, meeting a whole lot of young offenders with interesting skills. He gives some kids warnings instead of booking them so they’ll owe him. He keeps in touch with these kids, including Adem. When Dad dies, Adem takes over the business, buying into a whole lot of legit businesses as silent partner. He approaches Haroldson with a proposal to get the diamonds though London and out to Belgium. Haroldson uses his network of kids as mules. One kid gets given the package to hide in a delivery to a store partially owned by Adem. Someone else hacks the computer systems, assigning their guy to deliver the right packages to the right stores. Another team breaks in, steals the package and leaves it in a PO box. An intermediate picks it up and delivers it to the smugglers.”

Greg nodded, scratching at the back of his neck. “But things go wrong. One of the team is too violent and he kills someone. By then he wants in and threatens the whole thing unless he gets to stay.”

Sally picked up the thread of the story again. “That’s where Haroldson has to take a hand in it. He was there for the first hit to check it went okay, but he couldn’t be seen at all of them, he probably wanted to make sure he had a decent alibi. He was at this one because it was getting too hot. He was going to do something to get rid of the loose cannon,” she finished. The silence stretched on as they considered this scenario and how it fit with the evidence.

“This is fucking insane,” Greg muttered. “Right. We need to get to work. Let’s get Jackson and
Thun into the office and we can start looking for as much evidence as possible to link Haroldson to all these names.”

For all the stress Greg had felt about doing this interview, it had been fruitless. Haroldson sat silently, unusually calm and still for a man so prone to violent shouting. He listened as Greg outlined the evidence, mostly circumstantial, that placed him at two crime scenes and linked him to the smugglers and a number of suspects in these crimes.

When Greg asked if he had anything to say, Haroldson sneered at him and spat, “Prove it.” Frustrated, Greg left him there while he went to talk to Sally. They stood in the observation room, watching Haroldson lean back on his chair, oozing confidence and smirking at the one way mirror.

“What do you reckon?” Greg asked her. His eyes were still on Haroldson. Smug fucker.

Sally shrugged. “I dunno.” She folded her arms and looked at their murder board leaning against the far wall. “We can’t keep him,” she said as though Greg had suggested it.

“I know,” he replied. “Might have tipped our hand, though.” He gritted his teeth against the frustration.

Sally looked at him, long and hard, before stepping in. “Look. We can keep him for 24 hours. We’ve got another 20 hours of that. As soon as we let him go, this whole thing collapses and we’ll never find the other main players.” Greg nodded, agreeing, unwilling to open his mouth and snap at her. All this was obvious, why was she telling him?

Taking a deep breath, speaking as though it hurt, Sally said, “You should call Sherlock.”

“What?” Greg said, his eyes flicking to her face in surprise. Sally couldn’t stand Sherlock, had only really tolerated his involvement earlier. Why was she suggesting him now?

“Yes, I know, I’m not his biggest fan,” Sally said, “but we need him right now or Haroldson’s going to walk.”

Eyes again locked on Haroldson, Greg chewed the inside of his cheek as he thought. Sally was right. Without something more substantial, Haroldson was going to walk out of there, probably disappear with his blood money and they’d have nothing but a few low level kids to prosecute. The idea of it ate away at his stomach. As much as he wanted to work independently of Sherlock, to earn every piece of this conviction, Greg had to admit that he was out of his depth. Fuck, he hated asking for help. Turning to look at Sally, he sighed. If Sally was suggesting it, Sherlock must be their best option. Her face was calm, used to giving him time to come to terms with moving on things he wasn’t totally happy about.

Without taking his eyes off Sally, Greg took out his phone and dialed Sherlock. “Can you come?” he asked.

“The Yard?” replied Sherlock, not wasting time on social niceties.

“Yes,” said Greg. He could explain when Sherlock arrived. That would give him time to swallow the rest of his pride. Taking down this arsehole was more important than his ego, anyway.

“Half an hour,” said Sherlock before hanging up.

“Half an hour.” Greg told Sally. He indicated Haroldson, still looking relaxed and unfazed. Greg resisted the urge to kick something. “Do you want to tell him we’re going to hold him, or should I?”
Sherlock swept in as though gracing the stage at Royal Albert Hall rather than entering a mainly empty office building at eleven thirty at night.

“Everything’s in the conference room.” Greg told him. Sherlock nodded, and Greg could read his impatience. “We need to prove Haroldson is connected to the diamond smuggling and the kids hitting these shops.”

Sherlock must have approved of the concise summary, because he looked at Greg and said, “Right. Have a timeframe?”

“Gotta book him in 19 hours or let him go,” said Greg.

“Get out, then,” Sherlock told him, the glee in his eyes evident as he shut the door against Greg.

“Is there any point doing any work? Freak’ll figure it out,” said Sally.

“I can’t leave him here with all that unsupervised,” Greg told her. “And his name’s Sherlock.”

“Really,” said Sally, though she didn’t comment again. “Well I’m going to kip in the break room if you need me.”

Greg waved one hand off at her, yawning as he made his way back to his desk. It was going to be a long, long weekend.

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“We have to let him go,” said Greg evenly, rubbing at his scratchy eyes. Their time was up, even though Sherlock had found something. Something that had made him run off over an hour ago without a word. Frustrated at the whole situation, Greg rang down to lockup, authorising them to release Haroldson. The words left a sour taste in his mouth, worse than the office coffee.

“You’re not going down there?” asked Sally, and Greg gave her a dark look. For ten minutes they collected and sorted all the evidence Sherlock had been looking at, neither speaking. A weeks’ work almost, gone to waste. Haroldson would leave, clean up his trail and either appear clean or disappear. Either way, there was nothing Greg could do about it now.

“Well that’s all done, then,” Sherlock’s voice echoed through the office.

Greg glanced at Sally, made a ‘stay there’ gesture, and walked out to meet him. “Had to let him go,” said Greg shortly.

“I know,” said Sherlock calmly, a slight smile on his face.

“You know?” Greg replied blankly.

“Yes. I know. You did tell me when I came in,” said Sherlock. “In two days, I’ll have all the evidence you need to link him to the diamonds, the smuggling and the shootings. All of it.”

“Two days?” said Greg disbelievingly.

“Yes,” confirmed Sherlock. “Keep your ears open, George, if anything happens I’m sure to hear about it.” He clapped Greg on the shoulder, fingers digging uncomfortably under his collar, looked at him intently for a moment before turning on his heel and leaving.
Greg looked after him for a moment before grabbing his phone and shooting off a quick text.

_Tell Sherlock if I don’t get an explanation I’m arresting him for perverting the course. No joke._ – Greg

John replied within seconds.

_So he’s been with you? Never told me where he was going. I’ll text you when he gets home._ – JHW

Greg chucked his phone onto his desk, pacing with frustration. As he stood in the empty office, Sally still cleaning up in the conference room, the door swung open and Haroldson stood there, his malevolent stare boring into Greg.

“Haroldson.” Greg nodded, dispensing with the formalities. It was a little redundant to call your boss ‘sir’ when you’d held him without charge for a day.

“Lestrade.” spat out Haroldson, his voice low and dangerous. Greg stood his ground and wished he had his gun. Haroldson wouldn’t be armed, given his very recent release from police custody, but still…As Greg watched, he dropped a pile of personal possessions on the desk nearest and started reassembling himself – belt, tie, watch and wallet all finding their natural place on his body.

“I’m on administrative leave,” said Haroldson.

“Right,” acknowledged Greg. He was watching Haroldson carefully, though the man wasn’t moving any closer.

“This is a decision you’re going to regret,” said Haroldson conversationally, “though I doubt you’ll live long enough to regret it much. Probably not even two days.”

“Really,” replied Greg, his heart pounding like a bass drum. Had Haroldson just threatened him? He wished for a moment he could have recorded their exchange so far. _Two days…recorded…_ Sometimes, Greg’s brain made funny little leaps. Usually it was pulling some odd facts together, reframing them in a new way so they suddenly made sense. Sherlock had touched him – Sherlock never touched him. His fingers had dug under Greg’s collar, pressing into his neck. Sherlock had explicitly told him the evidence would be there in two days. Sherlock had said, ‘If you hear anything good I’m sure to know about it.’ Greg’s brain reshaped them to one shining new fact: _Sherlock had known Haroldson would come to taunt Greg. Sherlock had bugged Greg._ Greg had to restrain himself from running fingertips under his collar, where he knew a microbug would be clinging to his jacket.

Thinking fast, Greg asked evenly, “Did you just threaten me, Haroldson?”

“Threaten? Of course not. What if you’d bugged the place?” he chuckled to himself. “But you can’t do that, can you? Public place, police officers and all that. No, you’re too dim to think far enough ahead for that, Lestrade. That’s why you’re still a DI and I’m a DCI.”

“Not for much longer,” goaded Greg. “All this, connections to organised crime, smuggling, the
accessory to murder charges? Hard to be a DCI when you’re in prison.” He grinned a feral sort of grin. “I’m sure there’s lots of fellas there who can’t wait to see you, too.”

Furious, Haroldson stepped forwards. “I’ve cut you a lot of slack, you insubordinate little shit. You have no idea how the system really works, swanning around like homicide’s the be all and end all of this fucking town. I’m telling you, more lives are taken when arsehole smugglers kill their people rather than risk them talking.”

“This was all about saving people?” asked Greg in disbelief.

“Loyalty!” shouted Haroldson. He pointed a finger a Greg, underlining his word with stabs of his finger. “I helped these kids when they were looking at jail time for petty theft, fraud, jacking cars. They knew they were safe with me. I looked out for them, paid them decent wages.” He was raving now, Greg saw. Let him dig his own grave. “And then Kitchener brings in his fucking friend, trigger happy dickhead who kills people.” Haroldson shook his head, throwing Greg a look of contempt such as he’d never seen. “Why the fuck am I telling you this? You don’t give a shit.” He stabbed his finger at Greg once more. “Good luck getting any of this to stick. Loyalty is worth more than a few years behind bars.” Spitting contemptuously on the floor Haroldson stalked out of the room. The silence was deafening except for the pounding in Greg’s ears. He found himself suddenly light headed and reaching for a chair, he sank down into it.

“Greg?” Sally’s voice came from the conference room, and it was a moment before he realised she’d used his first name.

“Yeah,” he replied weakly.

“Are you alright? Fuck,” said Sally, her eyes raking over him as though he might have been shot.

“Yeah,” managed Greg, though he was still shaking like a leaf.

“I think I recorded some of it on my phone. The quality’s not great though,” she told him, still looking at him like he might pass out. It was possible, he conceded, given how fast his heart was thumping.

“Sherlock’s got that covered. At least, I hope he has. Call me, for fuck’s sake.” said Greg. Sally was giving him a funny look, but he waved her off as his phone started to ring.

“Sherlock.”

“It’s John. Are you alright?” the voice was calm but worried.

“You heard that.”

“Better than that, we recorded it,” said John with satisfaction.

“Good. Tell Sherlock he’s a genius. No, wait, don’t,” said Greg.

John snorted a laugh. “Noted.”

“Fuck,” repeated Greg.

“Where are you staying tonight?” John asked him.

Greg shrugged, too tired from the encounter to think.

“I’m calling Mycroft,” said John, talking over Greg’s weak protestations. “He’ll either put you up
at his house, or at his club or whatever but you’ll be safe. Stay there, tell Sally not to go, either. He’ll come and get you both in person.”

John hung up before Greg could protest. He shrugged up at Sally. “Sherlock bugged me, recorded the whole thing,” he said.

“Oh,” said Greg. “Right,” said Sally. She sounded relieved, he thought. She stared at him for a moment before asking, “Where are you staying tonight?”

“John’s calling Mycroft,” answered Greg without thinking.

“Sherlock’s brother?” Sally asked in confusion. “Why would he do that?”

“Long story, Sally,” answered Greg. He looked up at her. “Any chance of a cuppa?”

She rolled her eyes but let his terrible segue pass. He wasn’t up for the coming out conversation right now, though she’d probably spot it when he came to pick Greg up. She wasn’t his best DS for nothing, he thought.

Twenty minutes or so later, Mycroft and Anthea strode into the office. Anthea immediately took up a defensive position at the door. Mycroft moved directly for Greg, stopping inches from him.

“Greg,” said Mycroft in a voice that was superficially calm but thrummed with an underlying tension. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah, fine.” replied Greg. “Sally’s been telling me all about what’s happening on Neighbours, it’s fascinating.”

Mycroft barely nodded at Sally, who raised her eyebrows as she saw the attention he paid to Greg. Oh, but there would be questions, Greg thought, before saying quietly to Mycroft, “Ready to go, though.”

Mycroft nodded, before addressing Sally. “There is a car for you downstairs.”

“Thank you,” replied Sally, grabbing her things before they all trooped out the door. Mycroft walked beside Greg, Anthea leading with Sally as they made their way downstairs to the waiting black cars. Sally raised one hand as she closed the door of her car. Anthea climbed into the seat beside the driver of the other car, Greg and Mycroft in the back seat. As soon as the privacy screen was up, Mycroft turned to Greg, his eyes full of concern.

“John told me nothing. What happened?”

When Greg had explained what had happened with Haroldson, Mycroft’s face set. “You will stay with me until he is re-apprehended,” stated Mycroft. Even if Greg had wanted to argue, Mycroft’s face and tone broached no discussion, which was fine with Greg.

“I’ll need some things.” he said.

“Of course. We will go to your flat now. Simon will accompany you inside while you pack.”

Greg was actually quite relieved that Mycroft was taking over, making the decisions. At this point all he wanted to do was sleep. The disappointment and frustration of having to let Haroldson go free compounded his tiredness, pushing him beyond it and into wired. He found himself tapping one knee, looking blindly out the window as they trailed through the streets. He jumped when Mycroft’s had slid over his, stilling his fingers. Greg looked up, the reassuring smile helping him
calm down. He started making a mental list of the things he would need to pack on their stop at his flat.

When they finally made it to Mycroft’s, Greg had cycled back to exhausted. He followed Mycroft up the stairs and into the bathroom, undressing and showering on autopilot. A towel around his waist, and he padded unsteadily back into the bedroom, collapsing on the bed and into sleep without a further thought.

Sunday was a blur of sleep, food brought to the bedroom and served by Mycroft, quietly murmured conversations and rubbish TV. Mycroft was in and out, working in his office and checking on Greg often. He was quite happy for the space, knowing Mycroft was near but not feeling smothered. Cups of tea were plentiful and a few texts to Sally to reassure each other that they were both okay was the extent of his contact with the outside world.
Chapter 33

On Monday morning, Mycroft appeared from his office as Greg woke to his alarm.

“Good morning,” said Mycroft.

He was dressed already; probably been up for hours, Greg thought. “Hi,” he said. “I’ve got to go into work today.” He groaned at the thought of the work that lay ahead. It was likely there would be no resolution, a few low level guys picked up but the main players slipping past once again. Plus the threat of Haroldson hanging over his head; he would have to set up an urgent meeting with Parkmore to update her. She would know he’d been released, but the threats were something else.

“I will accompany you to your office, if you don’t mind,” said Mycroft, though his tone did not really offer an alternative.

Truth be told, Mycroft would be a comfort, even in a professional capacity. Greg was pleased he would be there. “Great. I’ll just have a shower,” Greg told him, swinging legs over the edge of the bed. Once he’d stood up, Mycroft dropped a kiss on his temple before murmuring something about tea as he left the room.

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Greg felt an unusual flutter in his stomach as they approached the Yard. He took a deep breath, felt a last squeeze of his hand from Mycroft, and exited the car. “Why are you here, officially?” asked Greg quietly as they made their way upstairs.

“I am the independent liaison with the Home Office. Given the potential for other governments to be involved, Her Majesty’s government would like to be kept abreast of this situation,” replied Mycroft with a perfect poker face.

“Un-huh,” said Greg sceptically, unable to keep the grin off his face. They pushed through the door to the wider office, Greg still looking at Mycroft, before the utter silence made him turn.

Jackson was standing in the middle of the office with Haroldson and a uniformed officer. Haroldson had clearly been arrested, his hands cuffed in front of him, face as dark as a storm cloud.

“You!” roared Haroldson when he spotted Greg. Despite his handcuffs he wrenched the unwary uniform’s gun from his belt, smacking him behind the ear and knocking him out. Grinning viciously, Haroldson aimed right for Greg, who had automatically raised his hands in surrender. It seemed to take an age for him speak, though Greg thought it might be the rushing blood in his ears that slowed down the sound. Nobody moved.

“You and your fucking boyfriend, walking in here like you own the place,” sneered Haroldson, waving the gun between Greg and Mycroft. “Not even subtle, the way you swan all over London together. Fucking poofers!”

Neither Greg nor Mycroft spoke, not wanting to exacerbate an already tense situation. Haroldson was breathing heavily, his eyes wild, and Greg thought there was a very real chance he was getting shot today. While he was wondering how good a shot Haroldson really was, the gun stopped waving and settled on him.

Rock solid, Greg saw with a sinking heart. Not good.
“Two days, I said,” hissed Haroldson, his finger squeezing the trigger.

Before he could shoot, Greg felt himself being pushed out of the way, the explosion of the gunshot marking the moment he hit the floor, breath whooshing out of him. Greg’s vision swam for a moment, and he looked around for the body that had shoved him out of the way. From far away he could hear voices, feel the vibration of feet thumping on the floor as people ran. As he sat up he saw a crumpled figure resting half across his lower legs. A figure dressed impeccably in a pinstriped suit and black coat, auburn hair mussed now that he’d fallen to the floor.

Mycroft.

Greg’s mind stalled and raced at the same time. He felt his mouth moving as he pulled his legs free, stomach swooping sickeningly as the body slumped to the floor.

Mycroft’s body.

Scrambling, ignoring the woozy feeling in his head, Greg reached for Mycroft shoulders, feeling the pain in his throat as he cried out something. Mycroft’s name, a denial, a plea, he did not know. Frantically, he pulled Mycroft over, intent on his torso, where the bullet surely hit. His hands swept over the waistcoat, frowning when he felt no blood. So focused was he on looking for a wound that when a deep shuddering breath rattled through Mycroft, he froze.

“Greg,” said Mycroft, hands searching as his head rose, eyes unfocused. “Greg?”

“Mycroft!” breathed Greg. He was suddenly very aware of his body – shaking hands, swimming head, wide eyes – and sat down suddenly, like a toddler whose balance had deserted him.

“Vest,” said Mycroft, and Greg understood. The main question (Why?) could wait – right now he was trying not to vomit, the adrenaline and shock setting in. Mycroft struggled to sit up, wincing again the pain. Vest or not, getting shot hurt.

“I thought…” Greg drew a breath, closing his eyes as he felt the air move into his lungs.

“I know,” Mycroft told him quietly, and Greg realised they were still sitting in the middle of his office floor, surrounded by most of his team. Some officers were dealing with Haroldson, who had been unceremoniously tackled and re-cuffed, hands behind him.

Greg saw grim faces as they stood around the incapacitated body. Someone had gagged him, Greg saw with pleasure, thought he’d have to be sure the gag disappeared before any of the brass got wind of it. Attempted police shooting or no, they weren’t going to stoop to his level.

The rest of the team – mainly people who worked more closely with Greg – had run to him and Mycroft. Someone was on the phone to 999, getting an ambulance in. Sally, Anderson and Thun were crouched around them; Jackson had been far closer to Haroldson and was talking to the uniform whose gun had been taken. Greg made a mental note to touch base at some point; the kid looked about ready to vomit himself.

“Are you okay?” Sally asked him.

“Fine,” he said shortly. “Just winded.” His ribs were a bit sore and he’d banged his head on the floor a bit, but he’d been concussed often enough to know he was alright this time. “I want the paras to check Mycroft over though. Did he hit his head?”

Greg was looking at Mycroft as he spoke, watching him touch the side of his head and wince. That was a yes, then. He stayed beside Mycroft, not touching but not moving, either, until the
paramedics arrived and gently reminded him they needed space to work. Sally escorted him to a desk, shoving a cup of tea in his hand. He sipped at it, almost gagging on the sweet liquid.

“Just drink it,” she said, and he complied, turning his lip up and all the sugar. Ducking her head in closer, she said soberly, “You’re lucky he was there. Why the hell was he wearing a vest?”

Greg shook his head. His throat had closed up at the flash of memory – feeling himself being pushed aside, the report of the gun, so loud in the enclosed space…

Sally put one hand on his arm in silent comradeship and they sat in silence for a moment, the bustle of the room moving around them. Greg’s eyes were drawn as always to Mycroft, who seemed to be arguing with the paramedics. He must be okay, then, Greg thought, the edges of his mouth twitching.

“So you and he…” asked Sally. Greg nodded, not taking his eyes from Mycroft. “I saw how he was looking at you on Saturday night.” She shook her head, just visible in his peripheral vision. “As I said, you’re a lucky man.”

“I am,” replied Greg, smiling lopsidedly as Mycroft caught his eye across the room. Sighing, he drained the last of his tea.

“Want another?” asked Sally, taking his mug. “The usual, I mean,” she clarified, and he agreed immediately. Mycroft was just leaving the paramedics when Greg heard a collective, ‘ooohh’ from the kitchenette. Turning, Greg saw Sally stalking back towards him. He could read her body language well enough to know she was royally pissed at something. A flash of someone bent double by the dishwasher, and people shifted, blocking his view.

Greg raised one interrogatory eyebrow when Sally passed over his tea. “Anderson,” she said flatly. Greg was surprised – they’d still been seeing each other as far as he knew. “He had some… opinions about same sex marriage.” Greg raised his eyebrows even further when she added, “He’ll reconsider while the bruised balls heal, I suspect.” The satisfaction in her voice was so deep he could do nothing but raise his mug to her in silent salute.

Mycroft had made his way back across the office at that point, wincing a little and still clearly aware of the wound on his head. “The paramedics have cleared me to go, however they would prefer I have company for the next twelve hours.” Greg nodded immediately, unwilling to let Mycroft out of his sight for the foreseeable future, but Sally cleared her throat apologetically. “IA’s going to want to interview both of you, and Parkmore’s on her way over…” she shrugged at the bureaucracy.

“I’ll just have a word over there.” Mycroft indicated the Chief Superintendent, who had walked in and was looking aghast at the scene. Greg was pleased to note that Haroldson was still lying trussed up on the floor. Nobody was in a particular hurry to move him or make him any more comfortable, which seemed to be karma at its best as far as he was concerned. Greg was content to watch Mycroft make his way across the room, exchange a few words with the Super before shaking hands and wending back to Greg. “We’re free to go,” he said simply. “Internal Affairs will be in touch later today for an interview.”

Mycroft waited as Greg drained the last of his tea and stood, looking at Sally. “I’ll call you,” Greg said to Sally, who nodded. “Make sure you talk to that uniform, what’s his name?”

“Patil, I think.”

“Talk to him, make sure he knows it wasn’t his fault, okay?”
Sally nodded and Greg turned to Mycroft, ready to go home, or at least back to Mycroft’s flat. He hadn’t thought he’d be heading back out of the office again so soon, though it was a relief to think that the Haroldson problem would be largely taken care of. They would still need to make a case for the smuggling, but the accessory charges would not be such a priority. He’d be in jail for the rest of his life after today.

Thinking about it again made Greg shiver, and in the back of their car, Mycroft wordlessly wrapped one arm around Greg’s shoulder, pulling him close. Greg turned to him, breathing in his scent, listening to the heartbeat thump reassuringly against his ear. His hand lay against Mycroft’s chest, at least until he felt something under his palm. Wriggling his hand around, Greg lifted his head to look. His finger probed the hole in the waistcoat. There was a corresponding hole in the shirt and Greg could feel the rough texture of the ballistics vest underneath.

“Christ,” he muttered, placing his palm firmly against the place, as though to fix it with his body heat alone. Greg felt the anxiety rise in him again, the raw terror he’d felt in that moment when he’d seen Mycroft literally fall at his feet, having taken a bullet for him. His body had been so still, the perfect suit useless against that little piece of metal…

“Greg,” Mycroft’s voice was soft but firm. “I’m here.”

Greg nodded, working on his breathing as he struggled to contain his emotion. He’d almost lost Mycroft. Mycroft had jumped in front of a bullet for him. A bullet, for Christ’s sake.

His defences crumbling, Greg felt himself gasping for air, breaths more like sobs as his fingers curled desperately into Mycroft’s lapel. He was shaking, hands clenched tight, forearms screaming at the effort of keeping his muscles rigid. Mycroft’s other arm came around him, hips shifting so he could more fully envelope Greg.

“I’m here. I’m safe. I’m safe,” repeated Mycroft, the quiet, simple words grounding Greg.

*He’s safe. He’s here. He’s safe.* Greg whispered to himself. Gradually the shaking subsided, his sobbing breaths slowing as his heart rate eased.

“We’re here, Greg,” said Mycroft. Greg took a deep breath, packing his emotional responses away for the moment. He stepped out of the car, on autopilot now, following Mycroft into the flat, up the stairs and into the shower.

“We seem to be making a habit of this,” muttered Greg, the déjà vu strong as Mycroft guided him into the bathroom.

“If you could refrain from such exciting adventures, we could stop,” retorted Mycroft without heat. Greg grinned automatically, recognising the gentle tease but unable to form a reply. Instead he began to undress, fingers lingering over his own chest, smooth now, though it might have been marred by a bullet hole if…

Greg stopped himself, concentrating instead on using the shampoo and body wash in the right places. Once he was done, he made a half-hearted effort at drying himself before wrapping a towel around his waist and walking to the bed.

Greg sank onto the bed, his legs almost buckling under him. There was no way he could do more than breathe right now – the exhaustion so profound even that automatic task seemed to take energy. Allowing gravity to drag him down to the bed, he lay sideways, knees curled up, eyes staring blankly at the wall. His hair was still wet from the shower; he could feel the blanket
shifting as the water seeped into it, changing the fibres as they drew the water in. His bare skin was still warm against the cool sheets – were they clean? They smelled clean – and the contrast tingled along his arm and side, down his legs to where his toes curled against the cotton.

Greg’s brain felt flat, two dimensional. So many events had taken place, so much information had passed into his brain it was as though all his thoughts had been used up for the day. Vaguely, he heard the water running in the shower, then it stopped; the quiet rhythm of a towel over skin, then feet padding from the bathroom to the bedroom. These sounds were a world away, and it was only when the bed dipped that Greg really focussed on the other person.

“Mycroft,” he whispered, unable to push air with sufficient force to draw much sound from his throat. The sound was loud enough in the otherwise silence to carry across to the man on the other side of the bed. He too was wet; the water in his hair changed it to darkest auburn, though the droplets still melted into the sheets the same as those from the silver hair.

Without a word, long fingers encouraged Greg to sit up, pressing a glass of water to his mouth. Greg did not question it, swallowing gladly before sinking back down to the sheets. Long arms enfolded him, and he pressed his ear to the warm chest, the reverberating heartbeat comforting him as sleep pulled him under.

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“MYCROFT!” shouted Greg desperately, the sound ripped from his throat. He was in the office, blood pouring from Mycroft’s chest, tugging at his lapels, begging him to be alive. Haroldson was laughing maniacally, the gun huge and growing, bigger and bigger until Mycroft finally sat up, looking at him and calling his name. It was oddly insistent, as thought he was distracted and Mycroft was trying to get his attention.

“Greg! Greg, wake up. Greg.”

With an enormous effort, Greg opened his eyes, gasping as the dream fell away. The light was grey and he was tangled in something, constricting fabric across his thighs and stomach.

“What…wha…” he tried, wincing as his dry mouth struggled with the speech.

“Nightmare,” explained Mycroft, pressing a glass of water into his hand.

Greg clutched at it, sipping the liquid as it moistened his mouth. When Mycroft took the glass back, Greg shifted around, pulling the sheet out from around his body. He still felt anxious, the images not entirely faded from his mind.

“Denmark?” asked Mycroft quietly. His short statements were a change from his usual formal speech by Greg found he liked it – it was far easier to figure out what he meant when it was just the bare necessities.

“Yeah,” replied Greg.

Mycroft’s hand settled on his shoulder, and he closed his eyes, the warm weight good but not enough.

Turning to Mycroft, Greg met his eyes, trying to put all of what he needed into that gaze. He needed skin on skin, close and hot, breathing and gasping, blood pumping with life and awareness. Mycroft’s hand came up and cupped his neck and Greg went willingly, kissing Mycroft hard, crowding into his personal space, almost knocking his backwards. He chased Mycroft back against the headboard, climbing into his lap as they kissed, hungry and desperate as Greg sought to
assuage his craving.

He was biting at Mycroft’s mouth, teeth and tongue and lips, nipping then kissing in turn, and Mycroft was just keeping up, hands on Greg’s hips now, holding tight. Greg was holding Mycroft’s head, angling to drive the kiss deeper. He wiggled closer, finally shuffling one knee over so he was straddling Mycroft, pressing their bodies together.

Frustrated by the fabric, Greg tore his mouth away, tugging at Mycroft’s t-shirt, impatient to reach the skin below. Mycroft hesitated before looking at Greg, and Greg wondered what he saw that made him continue, pulling his shirt off, allowing Greg to see him.

At no point had the bruise crossed Greg’s mind, but the instant the t-shirt was gone, the dark red stain against pale skin made him still. Greg knew the force from a bullet was dispersed by a vest, and had to go somewhere; better a nasty bruise than a hole. He’d even see a few, shaken his head at some of the near misses.

Never though had the sight taken his breath away. This was the very spot the bullet had struck; there was a darker spot that would probably scab a little to the left of centre. Haroldson had been a good shot. By Greg’s estimation, the bullet would have hit Mycroft’s heart or at least his lung, leaving the outcome uncertain at best.

Greg stretched out his fingertips, pausing before he made contact. It would be sore, of course it would. He settled for resting his fingers on the rounded shoulder, brushing the freckles he’d first noticed a lifetime ago, their first night in Kinsale.

“Freckles,” murmured Mycroft, echoing Greg’s comment on that night. Now, it made him smile, though the sadness that had overcome him was threatening to swamp all other emotions. He could have lost Mycroft, could have missed out on this moment, and all the moments they had ahead of them.

“Closer,” managed Greg, rolling his hand over Mycroft’s shoulder and down his back, bringing their torsos together, favouring Mycroft’s left.

Understanding, Mycroft shifted his weight, tipping Greg over, covering the silver-fuzzed chest with his own. Greg’s eyes widened, then he gasped, the press of skin exactly what he needed. The towel he’d wrapped himself in before sleeping was gone, and he could feel Mycroft’s soft cotton pyjama trousers. One thumb hooked into the waistband, ineffectively tugging them down. It took Mycroft levering himself up on one elbow to manage to kick them down far enough, until they could lie skin to skin along the length of their bodies.

“Mmmmmmm,” hummed Greg, the nerves coming alive at the contact. Mycroft’s skin was warm, his auburn body hair tangling with Greg’s tugging just a little as they shifted together. Their bodies slid along each other, Mycroft eventually pressed against Greg’s side. This made Greg’s semi-erect cock both obvious and untouched; he noticed Mycroft noticing, and the attention sent more blood rushing south, filling him out with each beat of his heart.

“You need to forget,” said Mycroft, “Just for a short while.” His hand was roving over Greg’s torso, flat and soothing, the other curled behind his head, fingers tangled in the silver hair, now dry to the touch. Greg moaned at the idea, his own hands frustratingly held away from the most interesting parts of Mycroft by their relative positions.

As Greg closed his eyes, reveling in the feel of Mycroft sliding his hands across sensitive skin, allowing the sensation to keep him from his nightmares, he breathed deeply. Soon, Mycroft’s hand drifted lower, towards the gently bouncing cock dripping a puddle of pre-come onto Greg’s
stomach. He frowned as it departed for a moment, only to groan aloud when it returned, the lube not quite warm as it slicked over his cock, Mycroft’s hand sliding freely as he stroked. It was slow to begin, but Greg wanted more; he wanted fast and visceral and oh-my-God-we’re-alive. Leaning over, he licked at Mycroft’s skin before biting on the muscle of his neck, growling as he did so.

Mycroft gasped, jerking his head back to stare at Greg. Without a word he twisted, lowering his head and taking Greg’s cock in his mouth. His lubed up hand dropped lower, tugging gently at Greg’s balls as he sucked hard; the explosion of intense new sensations made Greg yell as stars burst before his eyes.

There was nothing but the feel of hot and warm, slick and blurry as the orgasm built hard and fast before hitting him like a train, shattering him into a thousand quivering pieces. Breathing hard, Greg felt Mycroft’s hand soothing him. He wasn’t exactly sure he came down, the lovely afterglow sliding seamlessly into sleep, Mycroft curled up beside him.
Chapter 34

Greg stared at the eggs in front of him, not sure how he’d stomach the food he knew he should eat. The previous day was a blur, much like the Sunday before, food and sleep and rubbish TV, Mycroft checking on him periodically. The day had been soft and ill defined, just as he needed, but Wednesday morning had come too quickly. He poked at them with his fork, nibbling at some toast without enthusiasm.

“You need to eat, Greg,” said Mycroft, bringing coffee over to the table.

“I know,” he replied, taking a real bite of toast. The coffee helped him swallow it, his anxiety stealing the moisture from his mouth.

Without warning, Mycroft stood up, saying, “They’re here.”

“How did you know that?” asked Greg, his curiosity overshadowing the nerves for a moment.

“Lights,” said Mycroft, indicating the subtle bulbs in the corner of the room.

Greg nodded. Before he answered the door, Mycroft pressed one hand to Greg’s shoulder, kissing him gently. “I will be fine,” he murmured.

Greg examined his eggs again, the previous mouthful of toast stuck in his throat so he couldn’t speak. He could hear the almost silent footsteps of Mycroft answering the door, the murmur of voices as the IA investigators came in. While Greg knew it was highly unusual for them to come to a private residence, he resented the intrusion into what he thought of as his sanctuary. Another string pulled, he assumed; normally IA would investigate immediately after an incident, and at the station, too. Mycroft must have shown them into the office to set up, because it was only he who returned.

“They will be ready in the office,” Mycroft told him. “Would you prefer I went before or after you?”

Greg considered, pushing uneaten egg around his plate. “Before,” he whispered. He wanted to be able to walk right out of this nightmare and into Mycroft’s arms.

“I will not be long,” murmured Mycroft, pressing another kiss into Greg’s hair. Again Greg couldn’t look up, instead listening to the sounds of Mycroft leaving. His mind was curiously blank and it felt odd to be in Mycroft’s house without him. The sturdy construction of the house made any sound from the study inaudible, and Greg felt completely alone. Even the sounds from the street were heavily muted, giving the impression of total isolation. It was a sharp contrast to his flat, where the rumble of cars and occasional shouts from the street were a constant backdrop to noise from the flat.

Giving up on his breakfast, Greg pottered around the kitchen, moving slowly as he cleared the plates and cups, watching the cold coffee swirl down the drain. He stared as it flowed, wondering what Mycroft was telling the investigators. Did they know who he was, or had he maintained his ‘Government liaison’ cover? Was he explaining his reasoning for wearing the vest? A stab of jealousy hit as Greg realised he didn’t know why Mycroft had been wearing it. Would he be the last to find out? With an effort, Greg pushed the anxious thoughts away. Mycroft would tell them what he needed to then it would be Greg’s turn to do the same.

As he employed some of Sandy’s breathing exercises, Mycroft emerged from the study. “They’re
“Okay,” croaked Greg, his throat dry. Turning to Mycroft, he pulled him close and hard, gripping the satin waistcoat at Mycroft’s back for a fierce moment before letting go and striding purposefully towards the office. He knew he’d feel better when it was done. He just had to do it, then he could sink into Mycroft’s arms and start to heal before this afternoon’s meeting with Parkmore.

+++ Assistant Commissioner Parkmore waved Greg in, finishing up a phone call as he sat down. Sank down, more accurately – he was exhausted after the last four weeks.

“Lestrade,” she started, and he straightened.

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied.

“What a fucking disaster,” she said, looking him over speculatively.

“Yes, ma’am,” agreed Greg. He had no idea where she was going with this, but agreeing with her seemed to be the best option.

Leaning over, she opened the bottom drawer of her desk. For a second Greg thought she was about to pull out a bottle of Scotch. Instead, it was a bag of jelly babies. She pulled them open, still looking at Greg, offering him the bag.

“Thank you,” he muttered, taking some.

They chewed in silence until she spoke, abruptly sitting up and brushing icing sugar off her hands. “Alright, I’ve had a talk with the Commissioner, and she’s pretty adamant we need to get this all sorted as soon as possible. She wants to know who I’d recommend to take the DCI position.” Greg’s heart began to beat faster, almost drowning out her words when she said, “I said you. Do you think that’s something you’d be interested in?”

Greg found himself nodding before he could really even consider it. He made himself concentrate, as she’d continued. “Good, I’ve already started the paperwork. There’s going to be a bit of shuffling, but it will be effective immediately. Congratulations.” The phrase was perfunctory, and before Greg could thank her she was onto the next point. “That leaves a vacancy at DI level. There’ll have to be interviews but if there’s anyone you’d recommend it would lend quite a bit of weight as they’ll be reporting to you.”

“Thank you.” Greg’s brain finally caught up with it all. “Er, Sally Donovan’s the DS I’ve been working with. I’d like the panel to consider her for the DI position.”

“Very well,” Parkmore said, making a note. “As for the shuffling, you have a hell of a lot of annual leave owing, especially with all the extra hours on this case, so you’re on leave ‘til at least the New Year. The paperwork is coming, but you can either clear your desk or elect to keep the same office. The other office is a bit bigger, but…” she shrugged.

“I’d rather stay, if it’s all the same,” answered Greg. The idea of shifting his whole office worth of stuff thirty metres just because his title had changed seemed ridiculous.

“Fine, we’ll just put your new DI in that office. Might even get two if the new budget goes through,” she quipped.
Greg recognised a joke when he heard one, and he snorted a laugh on cue. “I won’t hold my breath, ma’am.”

“Call me Laura, at least in here. We’ll be having weekly meetings anyway,” she said, and Greg nodded again, his brain still running full speed just to keep up.

“Right, anything else?” she asked.

“Er, I was wondering if I could make a request,” asked Greg, then at the surprise on her face, added, “I just wanted to see if I could have Dimmock, er, as one of my broader team. We worked well together, I think he’ll make a good DI with some more guidance.”

“Can’t see that being a problem,” she said, making a note. “Anything else?”

“Not right now,” answered Greg. His mind was still assimilating the new information, hustling just to keep up.

“Right, we’ll see you next year, then,” she told him, the dismissal firm but not rude.

Greg nodded (he felt like a jack in the box with all the mute nodding today), shook her offered hand and let himself out of the office. Bloody hell. On autopilot, he made his way back to his office, looking around the small space. The other office was bigger, he thought, but he was comfortable here, and if he was honest with himself, too damn lazy to move.

As he started thinking about what he might need to take home for his enforced holidays (nothing), what notes he’d need to leave (none, he’d had no other cases but this one and he could leave most of the paperwork to Sally), and what else he still had to do today (talk to Sally and Dimmock, maybe Anderson if he could stomach it, check in on Mycroft, make sure he hadn’t left any food in his desk), Sally stuck her head in the door.

“Got a minute, boss?” she asked, closing the door behind herself when he beckoned her in.

“What’s up?”

“I was going to ask you the same. What’d Parkmore want? You’re not on admin leave or anything, are you?” asked Sally.

“Worse.” Greg couldn’t help tease a bit. When her face dropped though he explained, “They’re promoting me. I’ll be taking the DCI place, but they are making me take leave for a few weeks. Yes I know,” he responded to her delighted ‘I told you so’ expression. “Don’t get too cocky, I’m recommending you for the vacant DI position, so I’d crack that Inspector manual if I was you. Interviews and the exam. You’d better ace it, I’ll want you around.”

Greg grinned as the shock on her face morphed back into delight. “Thanks, boss,” was all she said, but he knew how chuffed she was at the mark of support.

“Yeah, well, who else is gonna make sure I look good to the brass?” he asked teasingly.

She snorted. “Detective Chief Inspector Lestrade, you are the brass.”

Detective Chief Inspector Lestrade. Greg hadn’t even said it to himself yet, and he felt his face break into a grin at the sound of it. “Bloody hell,” he said to himself. He and Sally stared at each other for a minute before she asked, “So when does this leave begin?”

Greg looked at his watch and replied, “About now. Gotta have a few conversations first but
basically, I’m done til New Year or so.”

“Nice for some,” said Sally. When they both stood and Greg walked around the desk, she hesitated before giving him a perfunctory hug. It was a bit awkward, but when she said, “Merry Christmas, then,” he understood this was a combination congratulations, thanks and Seasons’ Greetings hug.

“You too,” he replied, adding cheekily, “Enjoy your admin leave while I’m gone, won’t you?”

Without saying a word, Sally flipped him the bird. “Study the manual!” he called after her before finding Dimmock. His office happened to be right next door to the old DCI’s. Greg knew the walls were cheap office dividers – he might have the shared wall removed so Dimmock and Sally could share the space. Might make sense since they’d be relatively inexperienced, and Dimmock wouldn’t get snarky that the new kid would have the bigger office. Greg gave himself a quick reminder that Sally didn’t actually have the job yet, though he knew she’d blitz the interview and exam. Putting that to the side, he knocked on Dimmock’s door.

“Got a minute, Toby?”

It was a short conversation, just a heads up really. Greg had been DI for six years before Dimmock; he had no expectations of being promoted above Greg, and just seemed to be relieved to have Haroldson gone.

“I’m looking forward to working with you again, sir,” said Dimmock as Greg left. It was on the tip of Greg’s tongue to correct him, to say, ‘call me Greg,’ but he realised that ‘sir’ was something he’d be hearing more often now. He could do what Parkmore – Laura – had done, have his direct charges call him Greg when they were in the office, he supposed, though Sally, who’d been with him since she started, would probably always call him boss. God, he hoped she got the promotion – it would be great to have two DI’s he knew already, that he could rely on. Based on Haroldson’s load, he’d have three or four DI’s and their teams; there were several DCI’s at Homicide and they shared the DI’s pretty evenly.

Still musing on the turn of events today, Greg did a quick sweep of his desk, grabbed his personal belongings and left the building. He was still exhausted, though adrenaline was keeping him upright, and the last thing he needed was a conversation with Anderson sucking at his soul.

As Greg stood on the pavement, wondering if a cab would magically appear to take him home, a black sedan magically appeared to take him home. The window lowered and Anthea’s face appeared, staring at him impassively. Too tired to argue or walk off, Greg climbed silently in. The car took off in the opposite direction from his house, but he didn’t care. The silence stretched on, Greg too tired to try sparring with her. He knew he’d been rude and cold last time they’d met, but he’d also been honest; she had shown no remorse for her actions, not to him anyway, and he felt no altruism towards her.

“I made a bad decision in Kinsale,” said Anthea quietly, breaking the tense atmosphere. Greg did not reply. “I’m sorry it affected you as it did.”

“And what about Mycroft?” asked Greg without turning his head.

“What about him?” said Anthea. When Greg raised an eyebrow, still staring at the back of the seat in front of him, she reluctantly said, “We have spoken. He understands my motives and has been assured I will not overstep again.”

“Are you sorry your actions affected him as they did?” asked Greg, deliberately using her words again.
“Yes,” she replied. “Of course.”

Greg sat with that for a moment, trying to decide what path to take. He and Anthea would run into each other, even have to work together, sort of, especially if Mycroft was out of the country or otherwise out of contact. He sighed. He was too old to hold grudges, and deep down he knew she’d acted in what she thought was Mycroft’s best interests. He turned to her, looking right into her eyes for a moment before speaking.

“I will defend him with my life, you know that.” Greg told her.

“I know,” said Anthea calmly. “But he is still my top priority.”

Greg nodded. They both knew where they stood then. Not friends, but allies. That, he could work with.
Chapter 35

Mycroft winced as he reached for his tea. The doctor had ruled out broken ribs, but he was still sore, the skin pulling over the bruise that had already started to form on his chest. Haroldson had behaved exactly as he’d predicted, taking a firearm by force and aiming for the torso, as any police officer would. His protective vest had worked, but as always, it left an impressive bruise and soreness.

Seeing the security light flash, Mycroft turned his attention to the doorway. Anthea would let Greg in when he arrived home (home? he thought to himself. Interesting). She had been reluctant to go and meet him, but Mycroft had been adamant – they needed to be able to work together, even if they didn’t like each other. He knew Greg would put his upset aside eventually, though sooner would suit Mycroft, of course. When Greg appeared, looking tired and carrying a small box of items, Mycroft frowned.

“What happened?” he asked, carefully levering himself off the couch. He wasn’t in that much pain, but the sharp stabs when he moved too fast were worth the effort to try and avoid.

“They promoted me,” said Greg. He’d dropped the box on the side table, and stood swaying slightly, face blank with tiredness despite the extra sleep over the last few days. Mycroft’s eyebrow rose, though he was not entirely surprised. Greg was an excellent leader, and even the senior officers at NSY couldn’t fail to see how exemplary his work was.

“Congratulations. I’ll have to arrange a decent coffee machine for your office, if you’ll be spending more time there,” murmured Mycroft, moving closer. When he stepped in, sliding Greg’s coat off his shoulders and draping it over the box, Greg let his forehead drop, resting on Mycroft’s shoulder. Without conscious thought Mycroft wrapped his arms around Greg’s waist, keeping them low to avoid triggering the sharp pull on his chest. “What else?” he asked. “I hope you have been granted a period of leave. This last week has been exceptionally stressful for you.”

“You’re the one who got shot,” retorted Greg though without a drop of malice.

“You discovered and exposed your boss as a smuggler and accessory to murder, had your personal life exposed to your entire team and watched me get shot.” Mycroft pointed out. “Any one of those things would be grounds for a break.”

“They’ve made me take my annual leave,” said Greg, his voice still muffled as his head leaned against Mycroft. He turned, resting his temple instead. “I have a bit saved up.” At the raised eyebrow, Mycroft saw him sigh. “Alright, I have a lot saved up. They’re making me take a few weeks, don’t know how long yet. But until the New Year at least.” He rolled his head back, pressing his face into Mycroft’s neck.

“Well deserved, Greg.” Mycroft whispered in his ear. “Would you like a drink in celebration?”

“You don’t have any beer,” complained Greg.

“Scotch?” suggested Mycroft.

Greg turned his nose up. “You’ve never seen me drink Scotch, Mycroft because it’s basically rocket fuel.” His voice was getting progressively sleepier.

Mycroft’s eyebrow rose at the description, but he ignored it. “You seem quite tired. Would you like to take a shower while I prepare something to eat? You could take a rest, if you like.”
Greg’s grin was only half visible as he said, “This sounds familiar.”

Mycroft smiled. “Well you will arrive at my door exhausted and hungry, Greg. I must care for you.” He felt Greg burrow a little closer at his words, and he tightened his arms just a bit. They were swaying together now, the warmth and comfort going both ways. Mycroft had dozed on the couch while Greg had been out, but the previous night had been an anxious period, with little sleep as he’d battled his demons through the night. What if, what if, what if… had played through his head, and Mycroft had used all the calming techniques he knew to keep himself from panicking.

Before they became too relaxed to move anywhere, Mycroft gently levered Greg away. “Shower,” he insisted, turning Greg around and gently pushing him to start his trip up the stairs. “I’ll make the food.”

His fridge bore more food than he’d thought it did, though it was entirely possible that Anthea had arranged a top up in light of yesterday’s events. Mycroft heated some soup and bread, moving carefully up the stairs with the tray. The shower was no longer running, and he saw Greg step out of the bathroom wearing the spare robe Mycroft had purchased. Spare really meant Greg’s Mycroft had admitted only to himself. It wasn’t as though he was in the habit of inviting men, or women, or anyone, into his personal bathroom.

“Better?” asked Mycroft, though he could already see the drowsy expression of a more relaxed man.

They sat on the bed, cradling large mugs of soup, eating in the silence of two people half way towards sleep already. When Greg almost dropped his as he jerked awake, Mycroft gently took it from his hand. “Sleep time,” he murmured, pulling back the covers. As last time, he left Greg dozing while he prepared for bed, examining his bruise in the mirror before dressing in pyjamas. It was a little odd to be doing such in the middle of the day, but Mycroft had learned to sleep when he could, so it was hardly unheard of. Sliding into bed beside Greg, he looked fondly at the silver head, already asleep, curled towards the side Mycroft would soon inhabit.

“Sleep well, Gregoire,” murmured Mycroft, pressing a soft kiss into his temple. Greg did not even stir, a sign of how tired he was, and Mycroft curled up opposite, content to drift off to sleep.

+++When Mycroft woke, it took him some time to determine the time. He’d slept for several hours, he thought; best he stay awake now for a while so as not to disturb his circadian rhythm too much. Glancing over at Greg, Mycroft suppressed a grin. He was lying in exactly the same place as when Mycroft had come to bed; even the arrival of a warm body had not tempted him to shift. Carefully Mycroft extracted himself from the bed, electing to don his robe over getting dressed. It felt a bit risqué, like walking around half dressed. He rarely left the bedroom without at least a shirt and waistcoat, but today felt different. Padding into the kitchen (Cold floor! Why did he not own slippers?), Mycroft boiled the kettle, setting out a tea tray as he waited for the water to sufficiently heat. Before he could mount the stairs, however, a sleepy figure appeared in the doorway, robe haphazardly tied around his waist.

“My?” Greg’s voice, still raspy from sleep, asked amid a yawn.

Mycroft smiled at him, ignoring the pet name. “Hello,” he replied. “I made tea. You were supposed to be in bed.”

“Enough sleep for now,” mumbled Greg, shuffling over to find Mycroft, who dropped the tea leaves when Greg’s arms wrapped around him. “Needed to find you instead.”
“You’re quite…tactile.” Mycroft noted without complaint. Snuggly, touchy, affectionate, or warm were all more accurate, but he had never used the word snuggly in his life and was not about to start now, no matter how apt the term.

“I’ve been told I’m snuggly,” said Greg, burrowing into Mycroft’s side again. He sighed with contentment, Mycroft’s arms winding around him once again. They stood like that for a long while, until Greg finally raised his head, eyes more alert and full of warmth. “Hello,” he said to Mycroft, more awake than he had been earlier.

“I think we covered that already,” Mycroft told him, tipping out the tepid water to begin the tea again.

“You did,” said Greg, “I was still waking up.”

“How did you sleep?” asked Mycroft.

“Well,” Greg replied, “I still feel like I’ve been slugged with a lorry, but a good night tonight and I’ll be much better tomorrow.”

“Good,” replied Mycroft. “What are you planning to do with your time off?”

Greg shrugged. He was still standing quite close to Mycroft, seemingly reluctant to move too far away. The unconscious desire made Mycroft’s pulse speed up as he was very aware of Greg’s robe and the uncertainty of what exactly lay beneath it. “Dunno, yet,” replied Greg. “Christ, it’s December isn’t it? I hadn’t even noticed. Christmas, I guess.”

“Aren’t your daughters coming to London this year?” asked Mycroft, adding tea to the warmed pot.

“Oh yeah,” Greg’s face brightened at the thought. “Soon. I don’t even know what day it is. You’ll have to meet them.”

“I will?” said Mycroft, sitting beside Greg, the tray on the table before them. Was he that important? He wondered.

“Of course,” replied Greg, his look softening so that Mycroft was sure he read the uncertainty on his face. “I want you to meet them, and I want them to meet you.” He hesitated, and Mycroft wondered if he remembered John’s words sometimes as Mycroft did. “You’re the three most important people in my life, I want you to all meet each other.” He turned to pour the tea then, probably to hide his face, Mycroft registered absently. His mind had more or less stopped with this pronouncement; he had no recollection of hearing anything remotely similar from anyone in his whole life.

“Am I?” Mycroft’s mouth moved of its own volition, the question slipping out, allowing his vulnerability and insecurity to hang in the air between them. Greg’s hands stilled on the teapot and he turned to look at Mycroft, sitting so close their knees knocked under the table. Greg’s eyes were soft and open, and Mycroft could read his own determination and vulnerability in them.

“Yes.” Greg spoke quietly but clearly. “You are so important to me, Mycroft.” In the silence that followed, Mycroft only heard his heart beating, the pounding much faster than usual, and his breathing, still slow and measured but shallower. Greg’s hand rose slowly (though that might have been his mind playing tricks), gently settling over the place the bullet had almost run into Mycroft. It was a featherlight touch, through layers of soft cotton and terry towelling, but Mycroft fancied he could feel the heat from Greg’s hand. The atmosphere between them changed as Greg’s fingers traced the fibres of the robe. “You stepped in front of a man with a gun, Mycroft.”
“I knew I was protected,” protested Mycroft, though his voice was a whisper. “You were not.”

“He could have shot you in the head,” Greg pointed out.

Mycroft bowed his head in acknowledgement. “A calculated risk, then,” he conceded. Greg’s fingers sat on his robe still, before drawing away and passing Mycroft his tea. “Thank you,” said Mycroft, unsure where they stood precisely.

“I’m going to call Sandy today,” said Greg. “After this week, I think John might do it for me if I don’t.” he shrugged self-consciously. “Besides it will be good to talk to him.” He was embarrassed to admit he found the counselling beneficial, Mycroft realised.

“I’m glad you’re taking advantage of his expertise,” said Mycroft.

Greg nodded. He looked down at his tea, and Mycroft was fascinated at the contrast between his wide strong hands and the delicate china of the teacup. “How are you?” he asked quietly. “You were shot at, after all.”

Mycroft shrugged, pushing down on the deep fear he’d been ignoring since that morning. “I have been shot before, Greg. Actually shot.”

“Have you?” asked Greg.

“You seem surprised,” said Mycroft.


“Oxford,” replied Mycroft. When Greg responded with an unexpected bark of laughter, he rolled his eyes. As expected, he thought. “One of the young men in my dormitory brought his Daddy’s hunting rifle with him. I suspect he was trying to impress someone. When it discharged without warning in the common room, the bullet hit me.”

Greg’s eyes had been drawn from the tea, but now they sparkled, the skin folding into wrinkles as he clarified, “I meant, where were you shot?” One hand waved vaguely over Mycroft’s body.

“Ah,” said Mycroft, feeling his face flush. How had they gone from ‘how are you, you’ve been shot’ to this conversation, in which Greg would certainly mock him one he’d answered this question? Accepting the inevitable, he answered with as much dignity as he could muster, “The bullet struck me in the upper thigh.”

“Upper thigh as in upper thigh, or as in euphemism for somewhere else?” asked Greg, a grin threatening the edge of his pursed lips.

“The latter,” admitted Mycroft. He closed his eyes before saying, “The scar disappears into the gluteal sulcus.”

“Gluteal...” repeated Greg, frowning over the unfamiliar term. “Did you get shot in the arse, Mycroft Holmes?”

“The gluteal sulcus is the point at which the upper thigh joins the buttock,” said Mycroft, eyes opening as the flush of humiliation heated his cheeks. He knew his posture has stiffened and his words had become stuffier. He also knew this was a defensive measure for the moment when Greg would surely begin taunting him. As he watched Greg process the new information, Mycroft braced for the reaction he anticipated.
What he had not anticipated was a wince of sympathy. “I bet that hurt,” said Greg, adding, “And I bet no one let you forget it, either.”

Mycroft shook his head. “They weren’t exactly forgiving,” he agreed cautiously. Greg really was remarkable, he thought to himself, sipping his tea.

“We’ve strayed quite far from my original question, you know.” Greg pointed out. “I asked you how you’re doing.”

Mycroft nodded, taking another sip of tea to buy himself some time. Greg’s unexpected response had thrown him, and this question, with its myriad of acceptable responses, felt like a challenge, or an opportunity. It was entirely possible that Mycroft could be truthful, entirely truthful and Greg would neither mock him nor use the information to his advantage. While Mycroft would have been reasonably sure of that before just now, Greg’s reaction to Mycroft’s admission about the shooting had offered tangible proof. Dare he, then?

“I found it difficult to sleep last night,” said Mycroft. He looked down at his almost empty cup, swirling the dregs of tea around the pale china. “My mind is conditioned to ask what if, to consider possible scenarios. It is difficult to turn it off, even when,” he swallowed, “even when I am considering scenarios that are…” Mycroft trailed off, unable to finish his sentence.

“A bit not good?” tried Greg. The simple language, the sheer understatement of it made his lip twitch, and Mycroft nodded. “You’ve had experience with the Black Dog, too,” said Greg.

“I am familiar with the term,” admitted Mycroft. “Although my own failings lead more towards panic attacks than depression.” Saying the words was frightening at a visceral level – the pounding heart and altered breathing was not an arousal response now, and he fought to keep everything under control.

“Hey,” said Greg, taking the teacup from Mycroft’s shaking hands. He took both Mycroft’s hands in his own, the firm pressure grounding Mycroft somewhat. “It’s not a failing when something is frightening, or overwhelming. It’s not that you’re doing a bad job, or there’s something wrong with you. I mean,” he corrected himself, “there’s something wrong, but it’s not a defect, Mycroft, and it’s certainly not your fault.” He sounded so insistent, Mycroft thought. He shrugged, wanting to acknowledge Greg’s words even as his mind rejected them. His imperfections were as much a part of him as his physical body, and the voices in his head, weaker though they had become, had been present since his earliest memories, reinforcing his weaknesses, reminding him when he forgot. Greg was still speaking. “When I say there’s something wrong, Mycroft, it’s chemical. It’s the same as having diabetes, or an allergy.”

“Physiological,” murmured Mycroft automatically.

“I don’t know what that means,” said Greg, his tone still earnest, “but you’re probably right, you usually are. Your body’s not working the way it should. That’s not something you did, or deserve,” the word made Mycroft’s breath stutter, it cut so close to his personal truth, “it’s just…it is what it is.” One hand moved up to cup Mycroft’s cheek now, and Mycroft was startled to feel how gentle Greg was. “Knowing you, you’ve found some coping mechanisms, ways to help prevent them. Also knowing you, you did it by yourself.” Greg ducked his head, tiling Mycroft’s chin upwards so their eyes met. “Yeah?” prompted Greg, and Mycroft nodded almost imperceptibly. Greg’s determined gaze softened until his eyes were like warm chocolate, empathy and affection and support bleeding together and meeting Mycroft’s fearful gaze. “You don’t have to do it alone anymore,” whispered Greg. “Not if you don’t want to.”

Mycroft took a shuddering breath, closing his eyes. It was too much, the intimacy of the moment,
the offer Greg was making. It was more than I’m here for you, more than I can help you. It was I see you and I accept you, I see you and I still want you, I see you and I’m not leaving. In his adult life nobody had ever made such a statement, overt or implied. While his parents were nice and bland and loving, they had never understood their reticent son. Mycroft struggled with social interactions, mastering the rules without understanding why people would talk to people they found dull. He’d crafted his mask early, but while it protected him it also isolated him. When Mycroft had allowed himself to relax just a little at the wedding, Greg had accepted the sliver he’d seen of Mycroft, accepted it and shown him it was worthy of admiration and affection and desire. And now, beyond that, Mycroft had revealed some of the hidden defects he held close and Greg had embraced those too, seeing them only as parts of him to be cared for rather than weaknesses of which to be ashamed.

Taking a deep breath, he covered Greg’s hand with his own, eyes still closed. He felt Greg move closer, their foreheads touching, breath humidifying the air between them.

“You almost died,” whispered Greg. “I saw you get shot, Mycroft. I thought…” his words broke off, and his indrawn breath was almost painful in its rasp.

“He was going to shoot you” whispered Mycroft his reply, the fear still in his voice as the moment looped in his head, the intent on Haroldson’s face, the hatred. “I couldn’t let it…I couldn’t let that happen.”

They were dancing around blatant declarations of their feelings, Mycroft knew, but he could feel Greg’s emotion vibrating in the air between them, charging his skin where the air brushed delicately past. If he could feel it, Greg certainly could. Mycroft had the sudden need to feel Greg pressed against him, to reaffirm the life that had so nearly slipped away from him. He leaned forward, catching Greg by surprise as he pressed their lips together, taking advantage of Greg’s indrawn breath to trace the shape of his lips, pressing for entry. Mycroft wanted to taste Greg, to explore him. He felt as though he had to do it now, felt a desperation to experience it now, lest the opportunity never be available again. In the back of his mind, Mycroft knew it was a classic survivor mentality, but he didn’t care. No more waiting, he thought to himself.

“No more waiting,” breathed Greg, and Mycroft realised he’d spoken aloud. Standing up, he pulled Greg to him without dislodging their kiss, wincing a little as his over enthusiastic effort pulled at the bruise on his chest.

Greg pulled back. “I want to see it,” he said, tugging at Mycroft’s lapels. The robe opened, allowing him to slip buttons out down Mycroft’s pyjama jacket. When the fabric parted, Mycroft closed his eyes again, partly out of embarrassment (when was the last time someone had seen him so clinically without a shirt?), partly because he’d dreamed of this for so long it ached. Greg’s fingers were warm and so gentle as they re-examined the wound. His indrawn breath at the dark, angry welt was sharp and angry, yet the kisses he pressed to Mycroft’s skin around it, never touching the discoloured skin, were tender and careful.

Monday night had been desperate, rushed and frenetic in its pace. This was reverential, slow and worshipful. Mycroft didn’t have a name for what he felt for Greg – it was somewhere along the affection branch of the linguistic tree, but he needed Mycroft to know, and this seemed like the best way. To show him, really show him, how much he had come to mean and how the very idea of Greg being ripped from his life had filled him with despair. Even in those few heartbeats between seeing Haroldson level the gun at Greg and hearing the bullet explode out of the barrel, Mycroft had felt the Black Dog Greg mentioned not just nipping at his heels but devouring his heart. The intensity of it had frightened him then, and still did – had he ever felt that way about anyone? – but he was determined to explored it, deal with it. No more hiding or ignoring, he was
Pulling back, Greg looked at Mycroft, a searching look, watching the emotions flicker over his face, which he strove to keep open. A single finger reached up and traced the shape of Mycroft’s jaw, watching the tiny shivers as they swept through Mycroft at his touch. Mycroft wondered what Greg was feeling right now. He had sounded not quite accusatory earlier, but quiet, almost desperate perhaps? As though he was begging Mycroft to explain that he had no choice in stepping between Haroldson and his target. No choice if the alternative was Greg gone for good. Did he want to hear the reasons? An apology? Mycroft did not know.

“You must have been dressed in that vest before we left the house,” said Greg quietly, his finger still moving over the planes of Mycroft’s face.

“I was,” agreed Mycroft shakily.

Mycroft’s iron resolve, his ability to control his body, was something about which he was particularly proud. This slow exploration was doing what many professional politicians had tried and failed to do – it was cracking his walls, weakening his resolve not to move as Greg ran his single finger over Mycroft’s face.

“I was,” he repeated, eyes locked on Greg’s calm brown ones. “I had spoken to Sherlock that night. He had informed me of his plan, of the information he had already collected about Haroldson. Together with the intelligence I had been able to gather, it was enough for an arrest, though the conviction would require more. An arrest, though, would take him off the streets.” He drew a shaky breath as Greg’s finger slid behind his ear, then started trailing down his neck, leaving a path of ice and fire as it went. “The chances were high that Haroldson would make an attempt on your life, particularly if you appeared to be unarmed and unguarded.” Mortified, Mycroft felt his throat thicken, the words more difficult. “I wanted to tell you. I wanted you to wear the vest, but I feared that if he had planned something and he knew you suspected, he would bide his time or hire someone unknown to us.”

“You wanted to protect me,” murmured Greg, his eyes now following his finger as it traced the outline of Mycroft’s collarbone.

“I did. I do,” confirmed Mycroft. “I would do it again. The vest and the…and the rest.”

“The dramatic stepping in front of a bullet to save my life.” said Greg, a slight smile tugging at his lips.

“If you must phrase it so,” replied Mycroft.

“I must,” said Greg, then repeated himself, the words taking on a different meaning. “I must.” The single finger was wandering down Mycroft’s pectoral muscle now, and he could feel his nipple pulling tight in anticipation. When Greg’s finger swirled around it before pressing firmly, Mycroft felt his eyes widen, a spark of arousal shooting to his already engorged cock. He saw the smile flicker again across Greg’s face, changing to a more intentional smirk as he pinched at the nipple, teasing it out before smoothing over again.

“Oh,” breathed Mycroft. That was exquisite, he thought, swallowing hard. His eyes had drifted closed, but they flew open when he felt the wet roughness of Greg’s tongue lick deliberately over the same nipple. The warmth followed by a stream of cool air felt incredible, tightening the bud almost painfully, making his cock throb as it anticipated similar treatment, perhaps. Greg repeated his action, then on the other side, each time making Mycroft gasp anew. Mycroft opened his eyes to find his hands on Greg’s shoulders, fingers digging into the flesh.
“Sorry,” he said, smoothing the pads of his fingers over the red marks he’d left there.

“Mycroft,” said Greg, standing up again so they were nose to nose, “I think we should go back to bed.” The look in his eyes was new, Mycroft thought, trying to catalogue it and coming up empty. His mind offered hungry-soft-affectionate-determined-reserved but none completely encompassed the expression. Nodding, Mycroft allowed his fingers to be enmeshed with Greg’s, as Greg lead him upstairs to his own bedroom. His breathing was quite steady, but it hid the pounding heart of a nervous man. Of all their sexual encounters, only the shower in Kinsale had been truly intentional; otherwise they had been half asleep or desperately scrabbling. This was deliberate, and he could tell that Greg had a plan of sorts. Would he ask Mycroft, or simply carry on with it? Mycroft would give Greg whatever he wanted, whatever he needed right now, as long as it involved the two of them being very, very close together. Mycroft wanted to be near Greg, to be touching him, assuring himself that Greg was alive; whatever specifics that involved could be up to Greg. Mycroft would give him anything he desired.

Greg had stopped just inside the door of the bedroom, Mycroft standing behind, their arms linking them.

“Mycroft,” said Greg, his face not visible.

“Yes?” he replied, voice calmer than he felt.

“I want to explore you.” Mycroft felt a thrill run through him at those words, a complex multitude of emotion. Excitement, nervousness, fear of being seen, of being touched, of ridicule (stop that, stop), panic at his own lack of experience, relief and astonishment that Greg would say those words to him, and mean them.

“Yes,” replied Mycroft simply. He could not deny Greg, he had already admitted it to himself. And in Greg’s exploration would be affirmation for them both. He disentangled their fingers and slipped his robe and open pyjama jacket off, allowing them to pool on the floor; by the time Greg had turned, Mycroft had tucked shaking thumbs into the waistbands of his pyjama trousers and pants, dropping them to the floor too. He could feel his face flaming, body shaking, erection waning as he forced himself to stand still under Greg’s gaze. With every ounce of willpower, Mycroft met Greg’s gaze. Greg wasn’t ogling him, neither had he taken one brief glance and run screaming; instead he was looking into Mycroft’s eyes, aware of his nudity and the cost of it. Mycroft waited, not knowing what to do next, waiting for Greg to make his move.

Greg stepped forward, so close Mycroft could feel the disturbance of the air though not one brush of solid matter had occurred. “I will cherish you,” whispered Greg, his lips brushing Mycroft’s with a tenderness Mycroft marvelled was intended for him. His hand came up again, touching Mycroft’s neck, cupping the back of it to draw him into a deeper kiss. Mycroft moaned as their tongues met, his lips stuttering at the mortifying sound.

“I’ve told you before,” breathed Greg, “I want to hear you. I want to know how you sound when I touch you. Please.” Mycroft kissed him again in response, fingernails digging into his palms to prevent himself reaching out for Greg. He didn’t know if that was something Greg wanted, part of the plan; much as he wanted to touch, he wanted this to be what Greg needed. His own needs could wait. Greg’s fingers, curled around the back of his neck, splayed out and dragged across his shoulder, thumb stroking the line of his collarbone. Who would ever have thought a collarbone would be an erogenous zone? And yet here he was, moaning as Greg’s thumb gently caressed the thin skin. Mycroft could feel his cock plumping out again, filling as sparks from his mouth and collarbone shot south, pulling blood there until he was hard again, bobbing and twitching between their bodies.
When Greg’s hand left his body for a moment, Mycroft’s eyes opened, disoriented. He saw Greg had managed to undo his robe with one hand, shucking it off, needing to pull his arm through the sleeve to completely discard it. He was wearing nothing under it, and Mycroft could see immediately that they were equally aroused – Greg’s cock stood as hard as Mycroft’s, flushed pink and bobbing as they touched. Deliberately, Greg raised Mycroft’s chin, locking their eyes as he took one step forward. The first slide of velvet skin was wonderful, Mycroft decided, his eyes closing and head falling back. Their cocks had slipped past each other until their hips met, and now there was a myriad of body planes against which to rub; stomachs and hips and rough pubic hair. Mycroft met Greg’s aborted thrusts with several of his own; he did not plan to, his body moved instinctively. Clutching at Greg’s shoulders, Mycroft gasped again. This time the sound was lost in a long deep groan from Greg, his own fingers digging into Mycroft’s hips as their bodies met.

“Come on,” said Greg, walking them over to the bed until Mycroft fell backwards onto the soft surface. He landed hands and knees, hovering above Mycroft; his cock now hung down, pulled by gravity to brush against Mycroft’s upstanding one. Ignoring it as far as possible, Greg leaned down and kissed Mycroft again, grinning as Mycroft arched his spine, straining for the friction he’d briefly felt. Before Mycroft could get too involved in the kissing, Greg’s mouth slid sideways, trailing across his cheek to his ear. It was an incredible exploration of teeth, tongue and lips that had Mycroft writhing; his hands still clutched Greg, but it was far more ‘holding on for dear life’ than ‘also exploring’. That magical mouth sucked and nipped a line down his neck, hitting spots Mycroft did not even know were all that sensitive, leaving him gasping. At his shoulder, Greg paused.

“Freckles,” he muttered, a breathless huff of laughter coming from Mycroft.

“You are obsessed,” breathed Mycroft as Greg’s tongue traced a complicated pattern across his skin. He assumed it was a trail over his freckles, but it felt as though Greg wanted to taste each centimetre of his skin. The idea was absurd, except that he was here and it was happening and it was remarkable. Greg’s exploration continued, teasing nipples as before, counting ribs with fingers and tongue; sharp hip bones were kissed, birthmark outlined with a finger as though a lost treasure. Greg examined the length of both of his legs, down and up in an agony of hot, open kisses; on neither trip did he place one of those where Mycroft now wanted him so desperately. It was both frustrating and astonishing that Greg could be so content to kiss and lick his skin without touching his genitals; wasn’t that the point of sexual exploration, to find the places that improved the sex? That idea was being rapidly rewritten as Mycroft assigned erogenous zones to almost every part of his body. As it appeared, Greg considered all the parts of Mycroft worthy of attention. The idea was so foreign that Mycroft could not even fathom it; he set it aside for examination later. Right now, Greg was lifting him insistently, prompting him to turn over onto his stomach, knees drawn up. Mycroft did so automatically, his trust in Greg outweighing the inherently vulnerable position. He felt exposed, open but not exploited. Greg had demonstrated his commitment to getting to know all of Mycroft in as literal a sense as was possible. When Greg’s hand slid down his spine, counting the vertebrae, Mycroft sighed. His touch was warm and light as though introducing Mycroft’s skin to his own, ensuring they were familiar with each other. When Greg reached his arse, Mycroft expected him to stop. After all, he’d more or less ignored Mycroft’s groin when he was on his back.

This was different, though. Greg massaged his glutes, pressing the muscles hard, thumbs sweeping down into his crevice, temptingly close to his entrance and further, stroking down his perineum to push behind his balls. A loud groan wrenched itself from Mycroft’s throat and he was glad his face was pressed into the duvet. For all Greg’s assurance he wanted to hear Mycroft, the desperate vocalisations sounded crass to his own ears. He could not stop himself, though, when Greg’s hands swept up and over his hips, making way for a warm wet kiss right on his perineum. Greg kissed and laved at the skin until it was wet and Mycroft was gasping; his balls were tight, the thrumming
arousal already beginning to draw inwards in preparation for the explosion of orgasm. Mycroft felt his thighs trembling as the mouth explored lower, tongue licking at the underside of his balls, probing the soft skin. It tickled and tingled, making him shudder and gasp. Greg’s hands returned to his hips, pulling back until Mycroft was even further exposed. Mycroft did not know why until he felt that gentle tongue, alternatively soft and hard, meander its way up, crossing his perineum towards

The very idea of what Greg was doing, or about to do, sent Mycroft over the edge. The ground dropped from beneath him as his orgasm tore through, hips pumping as he spurted hot and thick across the duvet, body shaking with the effort of not collapsing, of wringing every last drop possible. When he was finished, his mind white and fuzzy, Mycroft almost fell right onto the duvet until a rough voice spoke, an arm grabbing him firmly around the middle.

‘No you don’t, not right into the mess.’ Greg sounded amused and on edge. It took more than a few ragged breaths for Mycroft to remember that Greg had barely been touched.

“Oh, let me…” began Mycroft, reaching for Greg and his surprisingly hard erection. His hand-eye coordination was still wonky, what with the mind blowing orgasm of his own, and he missed, hand flopping ineffectually onto Greg’s thigh.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got this,” said Greg, wrapping one hand around himself, growling as he looked at Mycroft.

“Can’t I…” Mycroft trailed off, unsure he could play a role in this. Was he even necessary at this point?

“Talk to me,” said Greg, hand moving over his cock, his hips pushing him up into the tight ring of his fist.

“About…us?” asked Mycroft.

“About you. Me. Whatever you like really,” Greg told him, panting as he spoke.

Mycroft stared for two point four seconds, in which his brain deliberated the following.

*Considering he spent the last significant period of time pleasuring/exploring me, Greg is remarkably close to his own orgasm. Best conclusion is that he found the experience of giving pleasure as sexually gratifying as receiving. Interesting. He rejected the offer to bring him to orgasm, though to be fair that wasn’t a great display of stamina or coordination. And yet he wants to hear my voice. Deduction: there is an element of my voice which he finds pleasing, arousing even. He specifically requested it as an aid to his masturbatory efforts, therefore it is arousing. Generally, male attractiveness is considered higher for those with more masculine traits, including but not limited to a deeper voice and dominant personality, though Greg seems to lean towards himself as the more dominant partner. Conclusion: descriptions of his prowess as a lover with a lower vocal range will be most pleasing to him. The use of colloquialisms would be advised.*

Mycroft cleared his throat, rolling his head towards Greg, body still heavy with exhaustion. “I’ve never come so hard,” he began, watching Greg’s breath catch at the statement. Fascinating. “You didn’t even touch my cock. I could feel your tongue working its way towards my arsehole. Were you going to lick me there? That’s what made me come, Greg. The idea of your tongue pressing into my body, licking me open, perhaps making me ready for your cock…” he stopped as Greg, who had been breathing faster and moaning increasingly loud gave one hoarse shout and came hard, shooting come up his own chest and arms. His body bucked, as Mycroft’s had, fist tight on his cock as the shocks pulled come out of his body. When the last spasm had subsided, Greg
relaxed, the tense muscles relaxing, his face soft once again. Without opening his eyes, he spoke.

“What the fuck was that?” he asked hoarsely.

“I beg your pardon?” replied Mycroft, taken aback by the crass question.

“Don’t give me that.” Greg’s voice was amused, light and not at all angry or accusatory, Mycroft’s brain informed him. He seemed to be almost teasing. “You just told me the idea of me rimming you made you come, Mycroft – what is your middle name? – Mycroft Bloody Holmes.”

He turned to Mycroft, grinning through a slack mouth, eyes bright and affectionate. “There’s no turning back from that.” Mycroft could feel his face burning with shame. He had done exactly what Greg had said. He had used those words, had indeed been so aroused by the idea, that filthy dark idea, that…Mycroft closed his eyes. This was supposed to be life affirming, bringing them closer, and here he was, speaking so crudely to Greg.

“My apologies,” murmured Mycroft, clawing desperately for some shred of dignity and pride. He waited for Greg to – hold on, what was he doing? Rolling closer, throwing one heavy arm and leg over Mycroft. “What are you doing?” asked Mycroft, confused.

“I was teasing, Mycroft,” said Greg, nuzzling his nose into the corner of Mycroft’s jaw. “What I meant was I cannot believe such a sexy, filthy brain lies behind those suits. Well, you know what I mean. Impossible anatomy but you get me. You just talked dirty to me while I came and I loved it.”

Mycroft opened his eyes, blinking at the side of Greg’s face, all he could see from this angle. “You did?” Mycroft couldn’t help but ask. The evidence thereof was currently being smeared into his side, but he suspected any man of Greg’s age could masturbate to satisfaction fairly efficiently. Was he really a determining factor?

“IA asked you to, remember?” Greg told him.

“So you…I mean, I barely touched you,” said Mycroft. This whole conversation was mortifying but if it had to happen, he might as well gather as much data as possible. He could examine Greg’s words and his own observations later.

“But I touched you. All. Over,” said Greg, the last words growled into Mycroft’s throat. “I told you I wanted to, and I did.” There was satisfaction in his voice, Mycroft was surprised to hear.

“And that was enough?” Mycroft wanted to know.

“More than enough. I had to stop myself rutting against the sheets. God, the sounds you made, Mycroft, and your body shaking as you came…” Greg groaned again, and Mycroft blinked up at the ceiling. When there was no reply, Greg raised his head, propping it on one elbow as he looked at Mycroft’s face.

“Making you groan, touching you, tasting you was one of the most erotic experiences of my whole life,” Greg told him seriously. Mycroft raised one eyebrow but said nothing. What on earth was the correct response to that? Greg went on, his voice softening as he studied Mycroft’s expression, “I needed you. This. Us. I needed to, I dunno, make sure you were you and I was me and that we were alright. Alive.” Greg looked embarrassed at his lack of vocabulary.

“You wanted to reassure yourself that I was whole and unharmed,” Mycroft paraphrased.

“Yes. Exactly,” replied Greg.
“Me too.” Mycroft told him. “I…with the possible exception of my brother, I have never been so frightened for another’s life as I was...then.” The admission was difficult but it was as close as he could come right now to a statement of his feelings for Greg. The last week had been difficult, even by his standards, the emotional toll taking more out of him that he had anticipated. Perhaps once things had settled down, he would be at leisure to examine the events and emotions of this time and prepare a declaration for Greg.

“Me too,” whispered Greg, echoing Mycroft. “I…as I said, you’re very important to me, Mycroft.” Mycroft heard the underlying emotion to the carefully crafted statement, and wondered if Greg was holding back, wary of Mycroft’s lack of commitment. There was no way to tell right now, so Mycroft simply accepted it, pressing a kiss to Greg’s silver hair.

“Alexander,” Mycroft told him. “My middle names are Siger Alexander, after my father and grandfather respectively.”

“Okay then.” Greg grinned. He stretched. “We should wash,” he said, peeling himself away from Mycroft. There was a definite sticky patch on each of them, plus the mess on the duvet. Though it was not yet entirely dark the day was drawing to a close, and Mycroft felt the pull of sleep again. Instead he sat up, eyes flicking to the discarded robes on the floor across the room. No more, he told himself, though he was sure Greg saw his red cheeks and deduced the reason.

“I’ll get the shower running,” said Greg, turning to walk to the bathroom without looking back. The considerate gesture gave Mycroft the confidence to resist the urge to dash to one of the robes and cover himself, despite their recent activity. Instead he waited until steam was billowing out of the bathroom door and speed walked across to join Greg in the shower. The humid air reminded him of their shower in Kinsale; he was surprised to feel his cock stir at the memory. Closing the door, Mycroft found himself face to face with Greg’s smiling eyes.

“Hi,” said Greg quietly.

“Hello,” replied Mycroft. He rested his hands on Greg’s upper arms, leaning in for a kiss; the spray of hot water over his head felt incredible. He ducked back, inhaling before returning for another kiss until he once again ran out of oxygen. Greg’s fingers wiped the water from his eyes and Mycroft felt the awkwardness and uncertainty of their conversation wash away with the water. As terrible as he felt he was at this, as many questions as he might have, this was a man who turned his back without comment, filled the bathroom with steam and waited. Greg Lestrade was a good, kind man, and Mycroft would just have to figure it out because hell would freeze over before he would let his own brain get in the way ever again.
“Alright?” said John, nodding at Greg as he slid onto the barstool. The barman pulled him a pint, the foam spilling over the side as it landed on the bar.

“Yeah,” replied Greg, touching the lip of his pint to John’s as it arrived. They each took an appreciative sip before speaking. “How’s things at your place?”

John rolled his eyes. “Sherlock’s loving his consulting detective status.” Greg chuckled, and John went on, “It’s paying pretty well though – I might be able to drop back to a day or two a week at the clinic.”

“So you’re both working on the cases, then?” asked Greg, raising his eyebrows.

John had been half hoping Greg would ask, not knowing how to bring it up. They had barely spoken in the last few weeks, what with Sherlock taking every case that rated a 6 or more, and Greg dealing with that awful case at work.

“Yeah,” replied John, looking down at his beer. “Things have been…different.”

“Good different, I assume,” said Greg, and the tone in his voice made John glance up at him. His smile was broad and knowing, and it made John chuckle.

“Yeah. Really good actually.”

“That’s great, mate. I’m happy for you,” said Greg, slapping John on the shoulder. “I’d offer my extensive Holmes related experience, but I really don’t have any idea what I’m doing, so I guess you’re on your own.”

John casually flipped him off, grinning at Greg’s shout of laughter. “I’ve figured it out this far, I reckon I’ll do okay.” They sat in silence for a few moments, John enjoying the lack of drama in their lives at the moment.

“So where are you and Mycroft at, then?” asked John eventually. He wasn’t sure where he and Greg stood on discussing their relationships – it had been an odd time after Kinsale, when John had known so much detail of Greg’s personal life and health, but now that the crisis had passed, were they still that close? He figured he would take his cue from Greg’s answer.

“We’re good,” replied Greg. “It’s weird, we see each other almost every day, even when I was working we did. I thought it would be a lot more casual, I guess. He was away a couple of weeks ago, and it was…” he shook his head, shooting a look at John as if to check if his disclosure was too much.

“Hard?” said John wryly.

John groaned at the double entendre. “Thanks for that. Can I assume Mycroft helped you with that when he got home, then? Or do I even want to know?”

Greg grinned and wiggled his eyebrows theatrically. After a moment his smile faded and he admitted quietly, “Actually we just...fell asleep together.” he traced a line on the condensation on his pint, self-conscious as he added, “I just wanted him close.”

John nodded. “I get it,” he replied. “Knowing they’re safe is more important with these two than for most people.” He watched Greg’s apprehension fade away, a relieved smile take its place. Okay, they were mates who talked about stuff, then. That was probably good, John could do with a friend like that.

“Speaking of which, I assume Mycroft’s okay after all that stuff last week?” asked John, signalling for new pints for them both.

“You mean the not at all dramatic moment he took a bullet for me?” said Greg dryly, watching as John grinned widely.

“They’re so understated,” said John.

“Yeah, well, the bruise is pretty dramatic,” said Greg. “It’s huge and taking ages to fade. He’s lucky it didn’t crack a rib, I reckon.”

“You told him he’s an idiot, right?” said John. Greg gave him a questioning look, so he elaborated, “They think they’re so smart, and if Mycroft is like Sherlock, he probably doesn’t really think it through when he makes the kind of plan that involves a ballistics vest.”

“Yeah, I pretty much did,” said Greg. Changing the subject abruptly, he said, “I called Sandy, actually. Glad I’d been talking to him before all this, made it easier to sort through everything.”

John was pleased to hear Greg had taken the initiative to call his therapist. “You’re still taking the meds, then?” John asked him.

“Yeah,” replied Greg. “Sandy reckons it’s a good idea for a while, especially with all this shit with Haroldson. There’ll be an internal investigation, of course, plus with the new job and everything,” Greg shrugged. “It’s not exactly going to be a typical six months or so.”

“You sound good, mate,” John told him. “Far cry from October, right?”

“Yeah,” huffed Greg, remembering the sad pile of misery he’d been when John had picked his lock to get into his flat.

“That reminds me, I still have your key,” said John, pulling out his keys. He went to return it, but before he could twist it from his keyring, Greg stopped him.

“Keep it,” he said. “No, not because I’m worried I’ll relapse,” he said, reading the concern on John’s face, “Just, it’s nice to know there’s someone out there who’d break in to make sure I’m okay.”

“Yeah, alright,” agreed John, pleased that he and Greg were still such good mates. “So, have you talked to Fiona lately?”

+++ It had been so long since Greg had taken holidays he’d almost forgotten what it was like to sleep
through the night without the possibility of his phone ringing. The extra energy he felt made it easy to be motivated to run more often, and he found himself relaxing into the slower rhythm of life. Mycroft worked a lot, of course, but Greg loved having the freedom to be available when Mycroft was, maximising their time together.

“What do you usually do for Christmas, Mycroft?” asked Greg. The question was out of the blue, the two of them having been previously enjoying a quiet afternoon together. Greg was reading one of the many novels Mycroft owned but had never read, while Mycroft worked at the dining room table. He had no idea why the question had come into his head, but it seemed important. There were less than two weeks until Christmas Day, and he and Mycroft had more or less spent every spare moment together recently. It was an unspoken understanding that if Mycroft was not required at work, he and Greg would be together.

“My mother generally insists on my presence at Musgrave Hall,” said Mycroft after a moment. “We will arrive Christmas Eve, in the morning, and depart some time after breakfast on the day after Boxing Day.” He blinked at Greg. “Why do you ask?”

“No reason,” replied Greg with a shrug. Truth be told, he had worked the last five years’ worth of Christmases, opting in so that others with young families (any families) could spend the time at home. This year, given his enforced absence, he had no idea what he would do. Volunteer somewhere? Sit at home? Knowing Mycroft would be out of town for three days over Christmas filled him with sadness. He would never presume to ask if he could come; he had no idea if Mycroft had ever brought someone home to meet his parents. Did they even know he was gay? He’d said ‘We’, so Greg assumed that included Sherlock, which automatically included John, too. Sherlock probably demanded John go, whether he wanted to or not, Greg thought, then reprimanded himself for the nasty thought.

“Clearly there is something on your mind, Greg,” said Mycroft. Greg broke out of his reverie to realised that Mycroft had stood up and walked around the table without him noticing. “You have been frowning at the same page of that novel for three minutes without turning a page.”

Greg shrugged, annoyed to hear John’s voice float through his mind. Communicate. “I’ll miss you while you’re gone,” he said, risking a glance up at Mycroft. He saw hurt, then confusion, then a similar determination to his own.

“When I’m gone?” asked Mycroft, dropping down to sit beside Greg’s feet at the far end of the sofa. “Are you not planning on accompanying me?”

“Am I invited?” asked Greg, surprised that Mycroft had assumed he would be coming. Was it an automatic invitation, then?

“Of course,” replied Mycroft, a smile beginning as he realised their miscommunication. “Allow me to be clear: We, that is you and I, will arrive Christmas Eve, in the morning, and depart some time after breakfast on the day after Boxing Day.” The smile blossomed as Greg felt his shoulders relax. We means us, he thought with a kind of warm fuzzy explosion in his chest. “Is that acceptable?”

“Does your mother know I’m coming?” blurted Greg.

“Of course. I called her last week. She is delighted I am bringing someone home this year,” said Mycroft. He coughed and added, “I hope that isn’t too presumptuous, except that you generally work Christmas, however this year that won’t be possible.”

“Mycroft,” said Greg, pulling his legs under him so he could kneel and cup Mycroft’s face, “allow me to be clear. I am ecstatic you want me to come to Christmas. I am not upset that you arranged it
without asking, in fact I love that you assumed I would be there.” He kissed Mycroft, a tender moment of gratitude and intimacy.

+++  

“Dad!” Imogen’s face broke into a wide grin as she strode across the platform to Greg. He held out his arms and she wrapped her arms around him, squeezing hard.

“Oof! Keeping you strong over there, then,” said Greg, pulling back to look at his daughter. She looked happy, he thought, happy and tall. He could never reconcile his memories of a pint sized Gennie stamping one foot at him with this tall woman, long straw coloured hair falling over her shoulders.

“Of course, I’m still a mere intern,” she replied, slipping her hand into the crook of his elbow as they made their way to the tea rooms. By happy coincidence (or careful planning), the sisters’ trains were arriving at King’s Cross within an hour of each other. Greg and Imogen would have a coffee while waiting for Simone, then they would all make their way to Mycroft’s flat.

“Are you sure the boyf doesn’t mind us staying at his flat?” asked Imogen as they ordered their coffee.

Greg shot her a look. “Do not call him ‘the boyf’, please,” he said primly, ignoring her guffaw. They took their coffee to sit down. “He’s away until Monday morning, anyway, so we’ll have a couple of nights before he’s back, then a day to do something together before you have to go back.” He grinned at her over the table. “Thanks for coming over,” he said a little awkwardly.

“Oh Dad,” sighed Imogen, the elation dropping from her face. “You’ve had a big few months.” She hesitated. “Sim said she’d spoken to Fiona.”

Greg’s heart sank. Fiona would have given Imogen far more information than Greg was comfortable with. From the expression on her face, Fiona had told her how hard he’d found it immediately after Kinsale. There was a certain amount of embarrassment tinged with shame; he wanted his girls to see him as strong and capable, a now redundant throwback to a time when they looked to him for stability. While he knew intellectually that his breakdown would not be something they would judge, he still felt that twinge of discomfort at discussing it so casually.

“What did she say?” asked Greg, playing with a packet of sweetener.

“Fiona said you’d met someone at the wedding, but something had happened before you left Ireland and you’d taken it pretty hard.”

Greg shrugged. “True enough.”

“What happened, Dad?” asked Imogen. When Greg didn’t reply, he saw her backtrack. “I mean, you don’t have to tell me, but I was worried. I mean, you didn’t even mention it.”

Greg felt a wash of disappointment at himself. “Oh sweetheart, I’m sorry.” He scrubbed one hand over his head, wondering how to summarise the breadth of what had happened with Mycroft in and after Kinsale. “Mycroft is Sherlock’s brother,” he began, waiting for Imogen to digest that. “We’d met before the wedding, but usually it was something to do with Sherlock. Never socially.” He tore open the sweetener, watching it cascade into his cappuccino. “Neither of us knew anyone else, and we just kind of…clicked.” Greg sighed, the memories of those wondrous hours tinged with sadness at the next part of the saga. “There was a misunderstanding, and yes, I took it pretty hard.” He took a deep breath, forcing himself to look into his daughter’s eyes. “I took some time off work and John
– I’ve told you about John, Sherlock’s flatmate – finally made me see a therapist.” He studied his daughter’s face, seeing only empathy and a little sadness, not the derision he had feared. “Sandy’s been great. I’m taking some medication, and I’ve just now started back at work.”

Imogen nodded, digesting the whole story. “So, I guess I want to know now, how are you? Are things more settled now?”

Greg chuckled, thinking of all that had happened since he started back at work. “Not exactly settled,” he told her, filling in the details about Haroldson, the discovery of his duplicity and Mycroft’s subsequent shooting, then his instant promotion. “So they’re making me take some of my leave, I have quite a bit owing, but I’ll be going back as a DCI,” he concluded.

Imogen’s eyes had widened as the story progressed, and now she sat back, staring at her father. “Bloody hell, Dad. This year has been eventful, hasn’t it!”

Greg nodded. “I’m looking forward to a quiet one next year.”

“And you and Mycroft are obviously alright?” asked Imogen.

Greg felt a smile spread across his face at the mention of Mycroft. “Yeah,” he replied. “We’re good now.”

Imogen rolled her eyes. “No more of that face, if you please,” she said, pointing her spoon at him.

“What?” asked Greg blankly.

“That lovey-dovey face. Honestly, if you’re like that around each other it’s probably a good thing he’s not here.” Imogen went on.

“Oh, are you twelve years old again?” asked Greg, flushing and grinning at her.

“If you mean my level of revulsion at picturing my Dad getting it on, then yes,” she said firmly, a twinkle in her eye.

“Even with a man?” asked Greg, half-jokingly.

“I don’t care who he is, I’m just glad he makes you happy. I do not want to think about how he goes about it,” she said matter-of-factly, smirking as he flushed furiously.

“That’s enough out of you,” said Greg, looking at his watch. “We should make our way to Sim’s platform, she’ll be in soon.”

They made it with time to spare, and Greg’s heart expanded when he saw his younger daughter making her way up the platform. She looked different, he thought, tilting his head, but it was hard to see how, given the scarf, hat, gloves and coat into which she was bundled.

“Hi, Dad!” said Simone warmly, kissing his cheek before hugging her sister.

“C’mere,” Greg told her, pulling both his girls in for a simultaneous hug. He frowned when Simone pushed away, wincing. “What?”

“Four person hug is a little much right now,” she said, shooting a look at her sister. Imogen frowned, then her mouth formed an ‘O’ of surprise.

“Dad!” she breathed, looking at her sister’s cheeky smile. “Dad!”
“What?” asked Greg. *Four person hug...*

“Simone Ruth McShane,” he asked sternly, his eyes wide with shock and understanding, “are you telling me-”

“-US, DAD!”

“-sorry, Gennie, us, that you’re-”

“PREGNANT!?” shrieked Imogen, and when her sister smiled and nodded, she shrieked again, throwing her arms around Simone then letting her go immediately. “Oh, sorry, too tight, oh my God, how are you feeling? How far along are you? When are you due? I’m going to be an Auntie!” the thought made her tear up, which at least gave Greg an opening to speak.

“Really?” he asked quietly, pride and affection blooming in his heart as Simone nodded. “Oh, Sim, that’s wonderful. Congratulations,” he enveloped her in a careful hug.

“Ten weeks,” Simone told them as Greg took her suitcase. “The baby’s due in July.”

“I’m coming to visit,” said Imogen immediately. “Details to be confirmed, but Auntie Gennie will be there!”

“Oh my God, I’m going to be a *grand-père. Pépère,*” realised Greg, almost stopping in his surprise. His own grandfather had been French, and the affectionate term rolled automatically off his tongue.

“Pappy,” teased Imogen.


“You can be called anything you like, *mon cher papa,*” replied Simone.


+++ Later that night, Greg came downstairs, wanting a cup of tea before he turned in.

“Can’t sleep, sweetheart?” Greg asked quietly, finding Simone in the kitchen waiting for the kettle to boil. “I’ll have a cuppa if there’s one going.”

She smiled and took down another cup. “Of course.”

“It’s great having you here,” said Greg, the dark and quiet lending the usual intimacy to late night conversations.

“I’m so glad we could all be here together,” she replied. They made their tea together before leaning against the bench. “I’d love it if we could do it more often. Especially now,” she gestured to her belly.

“Yeah,” said Greg, smiling at the idea again. *A little baby.* “Maybe we can make a thing of it, like every year at the baby’s birthday or something.” The way her eyes lit up made him determined to follow through on it, and he made a note on the pad of paper near him, not trusting his brain to remember.
They fell into a comfortable silence, sipping at the hot tea, watching the steam spiral off the surface.

“Gennie and I talked before,” said Simone, studying her father. “I’m glad you and Mycroft worked it out. You look happier than I’ve seen you in a long time.”

Greg smiled at her. “I am happier than I have been in a long time.” He frowned. Somehow it was easier to have these conversations at night, in the hushed tones of a midnight heart-to-heart. “I think that’s a lot to do with Mycroft, but also Sandy, and I’m eating better, running more. Kind of everything is going better, I guess.”

“Sounds like it went pretty bad before it came good,” she said.

“Yeah,” admitted Greg. “Wasn’t anywhere to go but up, really.”

“I’d like to meet John,” Simone said suddenly. “He sounds like a good guy. A good friend to have.”

“He is,” Greg told her, touched that she wanted to meet his friend. “I’ll give him a call tomorrow.”

“Mycroft comes home the day after tomorrow, doesn’t he?” she asked.

“Yes,” answered Greg, smiling automatically at the idea. Too many days away, he thought.

“Gennie was right,” said Simone conversationally, “you do get all gooey when Mycroft’s name is mentioned.”

“Shut it, you,” retorted Greg affectionately.

“What’s he like?” asked Simone, sipping at her tea.

Greg struggled to find the right words. “When you first meet him he’s very reserved, very formal. But once you get to know him he’s funny and considerate and generous.” He hesitated. “His job is…important, but he can’t talk about it.” Simone raised her eyebrows, and Greg wondered how long until she and her sister were speculating on the exact nature of his job. “So he’s used to keeping secrets, and not telling people a lot. You’ll have to be patient with him, he takes things very literally sometimes. He doesn’t have a lot of family, even the three – sorry, four – of us might overwhelm him.” Simone nodded after all this, and Greg knew she was assimilating what he said. She’d always been the more considered child, thinking things through more than her sister. He knew she might come back with questions later, but for now would ruminate on his words.

“Well I’m for bed,” said Greg, taking his mug to the sink. “You too, soon I hope.”

“Yes, Dad,” said Simone, turning her face up for a kiss as Greg passed. “Goodnight.”

“’Night, love.”
Chapter 37

“No, you are not coming. I’ll meet him at the airport and we will meet you at the pub,” said Greg firmly, giving Imogen The Look. Out of service for a lot of years now but employed to great effect during her teenage years, it clearly meant, ‘there will be no further discussion on this’. The message had not been forgotten, and as soon as she turned her sulking back Greg’s features softened into a grin.

“You go, we’ll see you there.” Simone told him, kissing him then following her sister. Greg knew Imogen’s strop would only last a little while before she’d be back to her usual self. He checked for wallet-phone-ID-keys and hustled down the stairs, unable to stop himself speed walking over to the car. As the driver safely navigated the streets Greg wanted to tell him to step on it, as though his early arrival at the airport would expedite Mycroft’s plane landing. He was impatient; it had been three days since they had had any contact. This trip had been unusual, in that Mycroft had not been able to give Greg any details other than his approximate return time. It had been the closest they had come to a real argument.

Before Mycroft left…

“Anthea knows all the details, and is under strict instructions to contact you without delay if there is anything you need to know about.”

“And who decides if I need to know? What if you’re sick and there’s nothing they can do? What if you are dying and I couldn’t get there, would she decide I didn’t need to know because there was nothing I could do? What if you’re sick but not that sick, or if you get kidnapped but released again? How long will she sit on information before letting me know?” Greg ranted. He was surprised at the depth of his reaction to the news; Mycroft had been matter of fact when Greg had asked him about his trip.

“I can’t give you any details, Greg.”

“I thought you usually travelled in the open and met in the shadows,” said Greg, his florid statement drawing raised eyebrows.

“Essentially, yes, but this is such a delicate opportunity that I can’t be seen anywhere in the region at all, hence the secrecy.”

“So we won’t be able to contact each other at all.” Greg said flatly, the fear beginning to build in him. Mycroft had shaken his head. “Not even if you get sick?” When Mycroft had shaken his head again, something had released in Greg’s mind. He’d ranted about it for several moments, Mycroft standing impassive until he had blown out his frustration. With a shuddering sigh, Greg closed his eyes. Breathe. He drew another breath, then another, before opening his mouth again.

“The idea of you being off somewhere frightens me, Mycroft. Your work is unpredictable, sometimes dangerous, and I worry about you when you are gone.” Greg opened his eyes, looking at Mycroft. His face was still the blank mask he wore, so Greg continued. Communicate. “I am worried that something will happen to you and I won’t know about it. I am worried that Anthea will make another decision in your best interest without consideration of me. I feel that it is unfair that she knows more about your travel than I do. I know that not all these are reasonable but they are all valid.” Greg and Sandy had spent a lot of time talking about how he could share his
emotions without blame; he was using some of the sentence structures right now, hoping Mycroft could understand where he was coming from. As the silence stretched on, Greg felt a cold weight settle in his stomach. What was Mycroft thinking? Was he wondering if it would be better to cut Greg off altogether, to unburden himself from this unreasonable emotional mess?

“Greg,” said Mycroft, still standing halfway across the room from where Greg had stopped pacing, “If it was in my power to tell you where I was going, I would do so immediately.” Greg opened his mouth but Mycroft raised a hand. “Please.” He took a deep breath and Greg watched his face change, emotions visibly playing across it – frustration, sadness, apprehension, resignation. “Trips like this are rare. Fortunately they are almost always direct trips and are therefore very short.” He stopped again, then as Greg watched his shoulders slump. “If you would prefer…I would not blame you if…” Greg suddenly realised what Mycroft thought was happening. He thinks I’m breaking up with him over this. The irony of Greg finding it so ridiculous when Mycroft thought it after his own identical fear was lost on him. Without a further thought, Greg strode across the room, taking Mycroft’s face in his hands so they were looking right at each other. He felt Mycroft’s hands gripping his upper arms.

“I am not breaking up with you, Mycroft Siger Alexander Holmes,” growled Greg. “I am worried about you and I will miss you and I am pissed that Anthea gets to know and I don’t but I am. Not. Leaving. You.” He kissed Mycroft then, hard, a mess of teeth and tongues and lips, Mycroft’s hands gripping his shirt. When the kiss finally broke, they were both gasping, covering the half sobs Greg suspected were coming from Mycroft.

“I’m sorry,” whispered Mycroft, his voice breaking. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry for all of it…”

“Mycroft.” Greg tried to speak in short declarative sentences, hoping his message would be clear, not lost in the complexities of language and emotion. “I do not blame you. I know my feelings about some of it are unreasonable. I just want you to know. I don’t want…I don’t want us to misunderstand each other again, especially with you getting on a plane to parts unknown.”

His unspoken fear that Mycroft would not return was evidently not lost on Mycroft, who swallowed and whispered, “It is unlikely to be dangerous. A meeting with an important person in private, but not someone considered a threat to me personally. There would be no benefit in my death.” Hearing him talk about it so casually was both bizarre and chilling, Greg thought. He appreciated that Mycroft was trying to reassure him.

“Are you sure they couldn’t send someone else?” asked Greg wistfully, knowing the answer.

“Unfortunately not in this case,” replied Mycroft. He turned his head from where he’d been resting it on Greg’s shoulder, seeking the comfort of a soft press of lips to lips. “I’ll come back to you,” he whispered, the words feeling like a promise.

“Anthea’s going to send a car so I can meet you at the airport, right?” asked Greg. He thought there was a reasonable chance Mycroft would say it wasn’t possible, but it was worth a chance to be able to see Mycroft an hour earlier.

“Certainly,” smiled Mycroft, kissing Greg again, soft and reassuring as he could.

“Can I…would you mind if I stayed here?” asked Greg tentatively.

Mycroft’s face softened further and he murmured, “Not at all. I’ll arrange the security.” After a moment, he said, “Why don’t you have the girls stay here? You’ll be able to spend far more time together if you’re all under the same roof. I can arrange it with their hotels.”
“Really? That would be great. Thank you,” said Greg finally, resolving not to complain again. They’d had it out and the issue was resolved as much as it could be. Neither was happy, but both were accepting. Sandy and John would be proud of us, he thought wryly.

And now...

Greg came back to the present – he’d lost himself in the memory of that awful conversation, right after he’d returned from the pub after drinks with John. They’d held each other all night that night, the last before Mycroft had left, and Greg had barely held back the words, ‘I love you’ as Mycroft had departed. He wanted to say it, had recognised it for a while now – but something held him back, and he had regretted it every moment of every day Mycroft had been gone. As he stepped out of the car at the airport, Anthea joined him, motioning him to stop.

“He’ll meet us here,” she said. She had driven them; apparently even the driving pool wasn’t to know he was out of the country. Greg nodded, deciding to stand with her rather than retreat to the car. His stilted behaviour towards her had thawed significantly when his encrypted phone had buzzed twelve hours after Mycroft had left with a message.

Act II, scene ii, 195. Unknown number.

He had stared for a long moment before his heart leapt and he dropped his phone, trembling fingers finally searching the text of Hamlet via Google until he stared at the words ‘Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t.’ It could only be a message from Mycroft via Anthea. Greg had felt tears of relief and gratitude and love prickle at his eyes. When the same message arrived precisely every six hours for the duration of Mycroft’s absence, he realised Mycroft had ensured Greg would at least know he was alive. Trust him to find a way around the rules, Greg thought, reading each identical message again and again as he thought about Mycroft.

And now he was here. Passing his suitcase and suit bag to Anthea, Mycroft stepped past Greg into the car, leaving the door open for Greg to shut behind him. Greg didn’t even check the privacy screen was up before he simply settled on Mycroft’s lap, straddling his legs as he kissed his mouth, groaning at the familiar taste and smell and feel of Mycroft’s hands on his back, his hips. Greg savoured it all, loving that Mycroft was also close to frantic, both trying to get closer that practically possible in the back seat of a car.

When the kissing abated, Greg reluctantly sat back, thumbs stroking Mycroft’s cheeks. “Hello,” he said, still biting back ‘I love you.’

“Hello,” replied Mycroft. “Did you get my messages?”

Greg grinned, pressing kisses all over Mycroft’s mouth, from corner to corner. “Of course I did, you brilliant man. It was perfect, perfect. Thank you.” He leaned back, eyes feasting on Mycroft, drawing in the wonder of this man, and the gentle astonishment radiating from him. Evidently there was still some part of him that didn’t believe that Greg was really interested; that he might be turned by someone else in Mycroft’s absence. “I missed you so much,” whispered Greg. “So much.”

“As did I,” replied Mycroft. “I am so sorry-“
“No more apologies, Mycroft,” said Greg firmly. “We’ve had that conversation.” He kissed Mycroft again, partly so he couldn’t reply, partly because he could.

“We’re going straight to lunch with your daughters, correct?” asked Mycroft, hands running restlessly up and down Greg’s back.

“Yes, then to Love’s Labors’ Lost at the Noel Coward Theatre.” confirmed Greg, mouth pressed to Mycroft’s neck.

Mycroft groaned in frustration. “That’s at least five hours, Greg.”

“I know. Not ideal. But Simone’s leaving tomorrow afternoon, Imogen in the morning, so this was really the only chance we’d have to go out together,” explained Greg. Mycroft knew this already, but it didn’t hurt to remind him.

“Too long,” murmured Mycroft. With a sudden suspicion, Greg ran his hand down Mycroft’s chest and found a very insistent bulge in his trousers.

“I wouldn’t say it was too long,” quipped Greg, pressing his palm into the length of cock straining against Mycroft’s suit.

“Terrible joke, Gregoire,” managed Mycroft, gasping and bucking.

“Wow, you’re really…” Greg trailed off, watching Mycroft buck into his hand through his trousers.

“Didn’t…do anything while I…was away,” explained Mycroft, still gasping at Greg’s hand.

“You didn’t wank even once?” asked Greg in astonishment. Christ, he’d been at it every day, which had been an improvement on his pre-Mycroft usual.

“No,” replied Mycroft. With a great effort he tilted his head back up and looked right at Greg, hooded eyes intense. “I wanted you to see me come.”

Greg groaned at that, pressing harder against Mycroft’s groin. “Well we can certainly do something about that,” he murmured, slipping down to kneel in the footwell. Without preamble, he opened Mycroft’s button and flies, thanking Mycroft’s tailor for cutting his trousers slim enough so a belt wasn’t necessary. Greg reached into Mycroft’s pants and drew out his cock, throbbing with need, already wet from their little foreplay. Greg looked up at Mycroft, then very deliberately stuck his tongue out, licking at the head of his cock, swiping the beads of pre-come into his mouth. Mycroft moaned, and Greg wondered vaguely how soundproof the privacy screen was. Too late now, he thought, taking the base of Mycroft’s cock in one hand while he closed his mouth over it. Greg was going for quick and effective here, rather than a flourish of technique; there would be time for that later. For now he went with a hard rhythm, hand and mouth moving as one; he could feel Mycroft shifting, his cock pulsing slightly as he moved closer to the edge.

As Mycroft started breathing, ‘yes, Greg, oh, oh, yes…” Greg turned so he could look up, meeting the mesmerised eyes above. He held the gaze as his other hand pressed under the elastic of Mycroft’s pants, caressing Mycroft’s balls as he bucked hard. It was enough, the pulsing increasing, balls tightening as Mycroft came hard, pulsing down Greg’s waiting throat. He barely made a sound. Greg would have grinned if his mouth had not been full – that boded well for tonight, when both his daughters would be staying with them. He doubted he’d be able to keep his hands from Mycroft’s skin tonight, once they were in bed together, caressing and reassuring that each was real, instead of the teasing dreams that marked their separation.
Greg tucked Mycroft away when he was done, zipping up his flies before rising and sitting next to Mycroft.

“Welcome home,” said Greg wryly, and they both chuckled, Mycroft still a little breathless.

“Are you…I mean…” stumbled Mycroft, falling silent. Greg still found it endearing how embarrassed Mycroft could be when it came to talking about sex.

“I had a very enjoyable shower this morning, so I’m good,” replied Greg, though he leaned in and added, “for now, at least.”

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“I know it’s late Dad, but we want to do presents now.” Imogen said as they lingered in the entrance of Mycroft’s flat. The Shakespeare had been excellent, lunch and then dinner conversation easy as Mycroft and the girls charmed each other. Mycroft had put all his considerable skill into the evening and had enjoyed himself despite his initial reservations. The girls actually seemed to like him, and they were easy companions, quick-witted like their father. Watching Greg light up with pleasure at their company had made Mycroft smile on more than one occasion – the quickening of his heart had become the norm as Greg’s white teeth flashed as laughed. Now as they stood in the vestibule, Greg acqiesced, as Mycroft knew he would; the girls had him wrapped around their little fingers, and all three of them knew it. Rolling his eyes, Greg nodded at Imogen. They all moved into the sitting room, Greg taking his gifts from under the small tree while Imogen raced upstairs to collect the offerings from the sisters.

She returned with a small pile and passed them out – gifts for the girls from each other, to and from Greg, and to Mycroft’s immense surprise, two small gifts for him.

“For me?” he asked in surprise, despite the labels on each bearing his name.

“Merry Christmas.” Simone smiled at him while Imogen badgered Greg to open his gift faster. Mycroft did not outwardly react to Greg’s gift at first, a mug emblazoned with the words, “What’s all this then?” and a bobby’s hat.

“Bad mugs at Christmas is kind of a tradition,” explained Greg, grinning at the girls.

“Ah,” Mycroft murmured. That explained the collection at Greg’s flat, then. One of the packages in his hands was the same approximate size and shape; he wondered if he had been included in this dubious tradition.

“Open yours, Mycroft,” prompted Imogen, and he did as he was bidden, revealing a heavy mug bearing the outline of a man with alarmingly bad teeth and heavy glasses. Greg burst into laughter at it, but Mycroft did not recognise the image.

“Greg?” asked he, searching for support.

“This is Austin Powers,” Greg told him, the girls joining in for the chorus of, “International Man of Mystery!”

“Right.” said Mycroft. “Is he meant to be a spy?”

“Yes,” confirmed Greg, hugging him. Before he let go, Greg whispered, “this means they like you, you know.” Mycroft nodded automatically, though he was a little overwhelmed now that he understood the meaning behind the gift. They like me.
The men watched as the sisters opened their presents to each other – books and jewellery each appeared delighted to receive.

“What exactly did you tell them I do?” murmured Mycroft, but Greg just grinned.

“Thank you,” Mycroft said to each of the girls as they turned back to the men. “Very thoughtful.” He placed his mug carefully on the side table, watching as Greg insisted each of his daughters opened one of their gifts from him next. Imogen squealed at a pair of improbably small garments (“for my dogs”, she explained), and they both sighed over the equally small garments intended for Simone’s baby.

“Couldn’t resist,” admitted Greg, face flushing with pleasure at Simone’s fierce hug. Mycroft smiled at the lovely interaction. Greg had been worried it was too much too soon, but Simone clearly loved the tiny outfits.

“Round two!” called Imogen, indicating Greg to go first. He opened an envelope, frowning at the text before looking at Mycroft knowingly.

“Was there something?” asked Mycroft, allowing a small smile to show on his face.

“Collusion, I’d say,” said Greg, thanking his girls for the barista course and supply of excellent coffee intended for the forthcoming new office coffee machine. They insisted he open the last present, which contained the newest novel by his favourite author; he vowed to read in before he returned to work, though he’d have to catch up on the previous books in the series, it had been awhile since he’d read for pleasure.

“Thank you, I love it.” Greg told them, handing them another parcel each.

“No, you next, Mycroft,” said Imogen. He opened the paper, finding a documentary about one of his favourite early film producers. They must have perused his collection while he was gone, Mycroft realised.

“Thank you,” said Mycroft sincerely.

“Okay, us!” Simone told her sister. They tore at the paper, revealing annual passes to local theatre companies in their respective cities. “Wow, thanks Dad!”

“Something to keep you out of trouble,” said Greg, obviously pleased they liked the gifts.

“And this is from me, a small token to take home,” Mycroft told them, bringing out three beautifully wrapped gifts, one for each of the Lestrades. They all looked at him in surprise before accepting the parcels, opening them quickly. Mycroft watched as they shook the t-shirts out, reading and comparing the text.

“How on earth did you do this?” Imogen asked, her eyes wide as she looked at her “Keep Calm, I’m la tatie” shirt. Simone’s said “Keep Calm, I’m la maman” and Greg’s “Keep Calm, I’m le grand-père”. Mycroft simply smiled, pleased his little subterfuge had played out.

“I believe there’s one more, Simone,” Mycroft pointed out. She pulled out a baby t-shirt, bearing the words “Keep Calm, I’m le bébé”. The girls squealed over the tiny garment before looking back at Mycroft.

“Go on, tell them,” said Greg. “I’ll never hear the end of it tomorrow otherwise.”

Mycroft shrugged. “Your father indicated that he liked that style in a previous conversation. Today
while we were eating I determined that you might all appreciate one as a family keepsake. I made a request that my assistant arrange them to be delivered here, and so here they are.”

“You had these sourced today? In the last, like, ten hours?” asked Simone. Imogen was looking equally amazed.

“No,” interjected Greg, grinning proudly at Mycroft. “He had them made.” He showed them the inside of the shirts – no labels or tags. “He had them made today.”

“But…” it was the first time Mycroft had seen Imogen lost for words, which for some reason made warm pleasure wash through his bones.

“Thank you,” said Simone, kissing his cheek. She indicated her sister. “When she regains the power of speech I think she’ll thank you too.”

Imogen nodded vigorously, causing all of them to break into laughter, cracking the atmosphere that threatened to descend into emotional awkwardness.

“Well, I’m heading for bed,” said Simone, pulling her sister up. She indicated the mess. “We’ll collect all this in the morning. My train leaves at ten, remember Dad.”

“Of course. Meet you here for breakfast.” said Greg, kissing her and enveloping her in a huge hug. “Thank you for my presents.”

“No problem, Dad. Merry Christmas,” she said, taking Imogen, who had recovered enough to thank Mycroft and kiss her father.

When the girls were gone, Mycroft stood looking at the discarded wrapping paper, then at Greg. Their eyes met and without a word they each stepped forward into the kiss, slow and sensuous, bodies aligned as they pressed together. Mycroft sighed. He had missed this desperately, and knowing that Greg had been assured of his safety did not diminish his sense of loss. He wanted to know the minutiae of Greg’s day, the small moments that made each day unique. If he had to be honest he was also worried about Greg, about how he would cope with the first incommunicado after their separation following Kinsale. There was nothing he could do about this trip, it was essential that he go in person and in secrecy, but he hated every moment of it. Standing here wrapped in Greg’s arms was coming home, and he revelled in the almost overwhelming mass of sensations. Mycroft wondered vaguely how to categorise his emotional attachment to Greg. He had never experienced such a connection, such a longing to be close to someone else both physically and emotionally. It was possible he was beyond fondness or affection; it seemed too emotional to be simply lust. Even in his own mind, Mycroft knew he was avoiding the L-word. It was not something with which he had personal experience, however there seemed to be no other explanation. For now, though, he wanted to be closer to Greg, to reacquaint himself with every centimetre of Greg’s skin.

“Bed?” murmured Mycroft into Greg’s neck, where he’d been nuzzling.

“Mmmm,” hummed Greg in agreement. Mycroft hesitated when he turned and stepped on some paper, but Greg tugged at his hand. “Leave it.”

Mycroft followed Greg upstairs to their bedroom (their, interesting use of plural possessive pronoun), closing the door. “I just want to hold you,” said Mycroft quietly.

He stepped in to kiss Greg, adding, “I’ll just be a moment,” as he moved into the bathroom. After a lightning set of ablutions, Mycroft returned, touching Greg on the shoulder as he passed. He turned
down the sheets, pleased they had been changed that day, smooth and smelling clean.

“Alright?” asked Greg, leaning in the doorway.

“Waiting for you,” replied Mycroft quietly.

Greg nodded understanding, already pushing off his shoes. They stripped quickly, Mycroft’s suit laid over the back of a chair with trembling hands. When they came together in the cool sheets, both sighed as skin slid across familiar skin, the arrangement of arms and legs as comforting as the contact. Mycroft reached his head up to kiss Greg, affirming their affection. He was tired, but the idea of sleeping through these moments was absurd. One of Greg’s hands was sweeping long slow lines down his back, raising goosebumps as it went. Mycroft shivered a little, smiling against Greg’s mouth as his arms tightened reflexively.

“Alright?” asked Greg again.

“Mmmmm,” replied Mycroft. He opened his mouth and closed it again, his brain suddenly reeling. With no consideration, his mouth had been about to form the words, ‘I love you,’ as naturally as it had kissed Greg. He felt himself tense up, mind racing, pushing perilously close to out of control as he tried to accustom himself to this new certainty. He loved Greg. Loved him.

Pushing back, Mycroft rolled onto his back, eyes closed, breathing deeply, concentrating on keeping the breaths even and controlled.

“Mycroft?” asked Greg. Even through his increasing panic, Mycroft’s brain offered him the best response.

“Denmark,” Mycroft managed in between breaths. He could not tell how Greg reacted to it, only that he did not speak, but did not leave; the bed was entirely still as he fought with his body. Calm down. Greg holds you in high regard too. You have excellent self-control. Exercise it now; there is no need to make any declaration without confirmation. This does not change any aspect of your relationship, it is simply a label by which you can identify your emotion. Greg would accept your assertion even if he did not reciprocate. Reconcile yourself with it. Accept it. It does not weaken you or lessen you.

Mycroft’s internal monologue slowly pulled him back, his heart and breathing evening out as he talked himself down. He would wait for Greg to take the emotional lead, ensuring his declaration would be reciprocated when he did make himself clear. Opening his eyes, Mycroft looked at the ceiling. He could see Greg sitting on the bed next to him, watching.

“Denmark?” asked Greg.

“Yes,” whispered Mycroft. Please don’t ask me to explain.

“Do you want to talk about it?” When Mycroft hesitated, his mind saying yes and no, Greg added softly, “You’re allowed to say no.”

“I…I can’t,” whispered Mycroft again, feeling drained by the effort of controlling his panic. “Can you hold me again please?” Greg immediately lay down against Mycroft, one arm and one leg wrapping around the long pale body. Mycroft closed his eyes, still lying supine, though his eyes closed with the gentle touch of Greg’s body against his. He could feel the light tension in Greg’s body as well as his own – was there something between them? It felt as though each was now waiting for the other to say something, do something. Much as he might want to, Mycroft simply could not bring himself to believe that Greg would feel so deeply without proof. The voice in his
head, quieter for so long, was gaining volume again, reminding Mycroft why he was unworthy of being loved. For all the reasons his rational brain came up with, building a wall to defend against the nasty intruder, the insidious voice brought forth more, reminding Mycroft of his weaknesses and foibles. Long after he felt Greg relax into sleep, Mycroft’s mind struggled. Finally, still locked in a war with himself, sleep overtook his uneasy mind.
Chapter 38

Greg awoke, wrapped around Mycroft, though in a way they normally did not sleep. Why was he—oh. Mycroft had had a panic attack, or very nearly. Greg did not move, instead thinking through the events of last night. The present exchange had gone very well, the girls loving their gifts and surprising him with his own. He’d loved watching Mycroft as he explained who Austin Powers was, as Mycroft realised what the gift actually meant— that the girls approved of him. What Greg also realised was they must have done their shopping before meeting Mycroft, which was a big thing in itself. The biggest surprise gift, though had been reserved for Mycroft’s devious mind. Greg remembered seeing the ‘Keep Calm and Trust the Government’ mug somewhere, teasing Mycroft about buying it; Mycroft had definitively refused to drink from it. It didn’t surprise Greg that Mycroft had remembered, or that he had arranged to have t-shirts printed at short notice; watching Imogen scramble for words had been entertaining though. Their first experience of Mycroft the ‘minor government official’, he thought to himself.

But then, when they’d finally made it to bed, naked bodies pressed together in communion, Mycroft had almost said something, but stopped. Greg wondered if he was about to say, ‘I love you’; it would have been the natural continuation of their short exchange. That had been the moment Mycroft had started hyperventilating, then struggling to control himself; his rigid body and closed eyes had frightened Greg (was he having a stroke? A fit?) until the strangled word, ‘Denmark’ had made itself heard. *I’m freaking out*, Greg translated. Okay. At least he knew there was something non-medical causing this. Uncertain what Mycroft would want, Greg simply sat and waited, his mind turning over the possibility of Mycroft declaring his love. Greg wanted it, he realised; his own recognition of his own affection growing beyond that label was still new, and he was wary of being the first to say the words. What if he frightened Mycroft off? It would be better to let Mycroft take the lead, to allow him to speak when he was ready. Greg knew it didn’t change anything real between them. He could be patient.

Right now, he glanced at his watch, realising he’d have to get up to take Simone to the train station.

“Mycrof,” he murmured, shaking the man’s shoulder gently. “Time to get up.” Mycroft groaned in denial, turning his head towards Greg. Well that was something, Greg thought. Still seeking comfort instead of turning away.

“Nooooo,” whined Mycroft, and Greg chuckled at the childish response.

“Come on, if you want to come and see Simone off, we’ve both got to get up now,” Greg told him, kissing the stubbled cheek before unwinding himself.

“Alright,” grumbled Mycroft. “You were all warm.”

“You can be too if you join me in the shower.” Mycroft made an interested sound. Greg added casually, “With the water on you could wash me very, very thoroughly.” The auburn head raised at that, a questioning expression on the sleepy face. Greg bent down until their heads were almost touching. “I can be very quiet,” he added, stepping back with a smug smile as Mycroft scrambled to get out of bed as fast as possible.

+++ With a smile, Greg waved as Imogen’s train departed, feeling Mycroft’s hand slip into his as the smile slid from his face. He sighed, still staring down the tracks to where the train had disappeared.
from view. “I miss them already,” he admitted. When Mycroft squeezed his fingers in sympathy, Greg turned and smiled at him, allowing the pleased surprise to show on his face. “I didn’t think you’d go in for public displays,” he murmured.

“I don’t,” replied Mycroft. “I hardly think this counts, though.”

Greg grinned at him. “You know,” he said, eyes narrowing on purpose, “now that they’re gone, we have your flat to ourselves again.”

“We do,” replied Mycroft. Greg allowed his smile to become a smirk until Mycroft’s expression told him the subtext had been understood.

“And I think,” continued Greg, his thumb rubbing over the back of Mycroft’s hand, “I have some ideas for how we could spend the rest of this afternoon.”

Mycroft’s smile was immediate and almost as knowing as Greg’s. “Excellent.” Without further conversation, he turned, tugging a laughing Greg towards where their car waited.

The trip home was torturous, despite their mutual satisfaction in the shower that morning. Traffic was terrible, even by London standards, and the tension between the two of them was palpable by the time Mycroft let them into his flat. As soon as the door closed, Mycroft pressed Greg back against it, nose running under the line of Greg’s chin. “I missed you while I was away,” whispered Mycroft, licking his way down Greg’s neck, fingers undoing buttons to allow better access to the top of his chest.

Greg groaned, “I had plans, Mycroft,” as Mycroft’s teeth scraped along his collarbone.

“You’re not the only one,” replied Mycroft. He pulled back, locking smoldering eyes on Greg. “Do you remember that night I came before you could rim me?” Greg saw the flush at Mycroft’s own explicit words, and his own body responded to the memory.

“Of course I do,” said Greg. “That was one of the hottest experiences of my life, Mycroft.”

“I washed very thoroughly this morning. I want you to do it again,” said Mycroft, watching as Greg’s eyes closed and he felt a groan rip out of his throat. Just when he thought he might come in his pants at the sound of Mycroft’s dark filthy voice, that voice added quietly but precisely, “and then I want you inside me.”

Greg felt his eyes fly open. “You do?” he asked, astonished. They’d never really discussed the options, sex wise, but given that Mycroft had never initiated any anal play, and appeared to have never been on the receiving end based on their one foray into it, Greg assumed he wasn’t interested, so he hadn’t brought it up again. His cock, hard already, throbbed at the idea of being inside Mycroft.

“I do,” said Mycroft in answer to his question.

Greg swallowed hard. “Okay,” he found himself saying. “Have you ever done that before?” Awkward as these conversations could be, it was essential they knew where each other stood.

“No,” answered Mycroft.

“Do you have supplies?” asked Greg. “Condoms and lube, I mean.”

“Yes.”
Another hard swallow at the mental image of Mycroft and condoms and lube. “Okay, then,” he said, smiling intimately at Mycroft. “Bed?”

“Oh yes,” breathed Mycroft, and Greg had no choice but to kiss him hard, grinding their bodies together. Gasping, they stumbled upstairs together, breathless as they burst into the bedroom.

When they’d righted themselves, standing next to the bed, Greg put his hands on Mycroft’s shoulders. “I’m going to undress you,” he said, slipping the jacket off his shoulders.

“Please…” started Mycroft, then hesitated.

“What?” asked Greg immediately taking his hands off Mycroft’s shoulders.

“Would you please hang up my suit,” asked Mycroft, obviously embarrassed about the very non sexual request at this moment.

“Of course, you gorgeous man,” grinned Greg, beginning with the jacket, then accessories. Cufflinks, tie pin, sleeve garters. Each was laid carefully on the bedside table or hung on the specified hanger. When Greg had finished with the waistcoat and tie, hanging them as Mycroft directed, he grinned again. “Now the really fun part,” he murmured, reaching for the buttons of Mycroft’s shirt. He lingered over each, enjoying the gradual revelation of auburn chest hair and pale skin. “Freckles,” he murmured again, fingers caressing the growing section of exposed skin. He felt Mycroft tense as he reached the lower buttons, fingers sweeping across his abdomen. “Stop it, you’re gorgeous,” Greg murmured, to a huff of disbelief from Mycroft.

“’Humph,’ yourself,” retorted Greg, tugging the shirttails free and running his hands inside and up Mycroft’s ribs, exposing his whole chest. Greg’s hands were gentle, covering every centimetre of skin. The bruise was slowly fading, but he was careful nevertheless. He lowered his head, licking at one nipple, sucking it into his mouth as Mycroft gasped, grabbing at Greg’s hair. Greg half expected to be pulled away, but Mycroft held him there, groaning as Greg’s teeth ghosted over the hard nub.

“Teeth are a bit of a thing, aren’t they?” murmured Greg.

“Apparently,” gasped Mycroft.

Greg grinned, pushing Mycroft’s shirt off his shoulders and onto the floor. When Mycroft made to pick it up, Greg stopped him. “You only said to hang the suit,” he said. “I like the idea of crumpling your attire, Mr. Holmes.” Mycroft considered then acquiesced, now standing in only his suit trousers. Greg quickly shucked his own jacket and shirt, pressing his chest to Mycroft’s, grey hair and red brushing together, making both men groan, two sets of hips kicking forward. Their erections slid past each other, and Greg felt Mycroft clutching at him.

“Might be best to lie down,” muttered Greg into his temple, and they shuffled back until Mycroft’s knees hit the bed. Greg made short work of their flies, but when Mycroft reached for his pants, Greg stopped him. “Plans, remember?” He guided Mycroft back to lie on the bed, Greg kneeling on the soft carpet between Mycroft’s knees. His nose was pressed into Mycroft’s hip, the tantalising tent of his pants almost brushing Greg’s cheek. He nosed along the hipbone until his cheek brushed the head of Mycroft’s cock through his pants. Greg grinned and repeated the action, allowing the hard plane of his cheekbone to rub against the length and down to the softness of Mycroft’s balls, still encased in the silk boxer-briefs. He turned, nuzzling into the soft tissue, nose pressing in, feeling the warm heady smell of Mycroft surround him. Greg moaned, the knowledge he was responsible for the slight kick on Mycroft’s hips and the trembling of the thighs surrounding him cranking up his own arousal.
Greg lifted his chin, licking wetly at the silk over Mycroft’s right testicle, moistening the fabric so it stuck, allowing him to draw it into his mouth. Mycroft groaned, arching up until Greg released, planting wet kisses up the length of his cock until the fabric was soaked, pressing against Mycroft’s skin. There was already a considerable wet patch over the head, where Greg could see he’d been leaking. He pressed his mouth over the spot, sucking the taste of Mycroft into his mouth, running his lips over the soft skin, knowing the full stimulation was deadened a little by the fabric in between.

“Please, Greg…” came the strangled whine, and Greg grinned to himself. So easy, he thought smugly, pulling up so he could see Mycroft’s face. He was red, hair mussed where he’d been running his hands through it, eyes half closed, mouth opened. Greg ignored his own throb of arousal at the sight. This was about Mycroft, at least for the moment.

“Gorgeous,” murmured Greg, kissing Mycroft’s stomach as his thumbs hooked into the waistband of his pants and trousers together, tugging them over the straining erection and down his thighs. When his cock sprang free, Greg felt his mouth moisten, the saliva coming unbidden as he saw how deep red Mycroft was. Gotta be careful if this is going to happen, he thought, fighting between his own desire to push Mycroft to orgasm, and just how far Mycroft would want to be pushed. Best get on with it, Greg decided. He slid his hands up Mycroft’s body, pressing his lips to Mycroft’s before saying, “turn over, gorgeous.” Mycroft nodded, squirming out of his pants and climbing fully onto the bed, assuming the same position as Greg had shown him last time. Greg gripped the base of his own cock, forestalling a possible orgasm at the sight of Mycroft, forehead on forearms, trembling legs spread, holding his bare arse in the air. Greg could see his cock hanging down, thick and full. As he watched a drop of come drip slowly from the tip of Mycroft’s cock to the bedsheets, Greg gritted his teeth. This could be over pretty soon, he thought wryly to himself. Taking a deep breath, he knelt on the bed, hands rubbing over Mycroft’s raised arse.

“Lube?” he asked, opening the drawer indicated by Mycroft’s loosely waving hand. He found the tube and some condoms. Taking the small tube Greg put it where he could reach it, before concentrating on massaging Mycroft’s arse again, long soothing sweeps of his palms, slowing his breathing, giving Mycroft a chance to recover, too. When they were both breathing more calmly, Greg shuffled back, bending down to kiss the base of Mycroft’s spine.

“You ready?” he asked, pressing kisses across the swell of arse in front of his nose.

“Yes,” came the immediate reply, breathed into the air like a prayer.

Greg turned his attention further down, circling his thumbs over the pale skin, skirting closer without teasing too much. Neither of them would cope with that. He kissed down the slope until his lips hovered over the trembling hole his thumbs had been circling. Extending his tongue, Greg licked a wide, wet circle around it, keeping the pressure firm. He pulled back, waiting for the whole body shudder to subside before replacing his mouth and starting to explore. He’d done this before, once or twice, and been on the receiving end a number of times from one particularly enthusiastic partner, but Mycroft was new at it, and the memories of his own experience were long in the past. He tried different ways of licking at the skin, swirling his tongue, pressing it hard and soft to the outer edge and then at the very centre (definitely the best response, a loud unedited moan that made his cock throb and leak). Slowly, Mycroft relaxed, the muscle loosening enough for Greg to work his tongue inside. It was incredible, he thought, how much pleasure you could take from something designed to give pleasure to someone else. Ruefully he recognised that Mycroft was getting quite close, too close to keep doing this and expect to complete the plan. He planted one final kiss while reaching for the lube. The snick of the tube opening was loud against the rhythm of their breathing; he saw Mycroft jerk at the noise, felt the rhythm stutter. Fingers slicked up, Greg pushed lightly at Mycroft’s hip.
“Roll over,” he said. “I want to see you.” Mycroft obliged, limbs loose as he did so. Greg met his eyes, hooded and blurry with arousal, then planted kisses across his stomach as he settled between Mycroft’s knees. He kissed down to Mycroft’s groin, nose rustling against the curls as his hand slid behind Mycroft’s balls, pressing gently as he skidded past the perineum and further. Greg used his shoulder to get Mycroft to crook one leg up, allowing his hand to settle, fingertip stroking the same place his tongue had worked loose. He pressed in, finding it far easier than he remembered; Mycroft clenched then relaxed, bearing down as his body elongated, head thrown back as he groaned unabashedly. Greg worked slowly, one finger sliding and pressing, presently joined by a second; he was concentrating on the rhythm, making sure Mycroft was okay, so as to abort the orgasm now threatening his sanity. There would hopefully be other times where he could lose himself in Mycroft, the sheer volume of scents and sounds and twitches. Right now that would be a bit not good, he thought to himself.

“More?” asked Greg, his two fingers moving easily in and out of Mycroft now. The auburn man was gasping now, his body shaking with effort.

“I need…you.” Mycroft ground out. “Not going to last.”

“Are you sure?” asked Greg. As much as he wanted to slide his cock into Mycroft, hurting him was out of the question.

“Please,” whimpered Mycroft, “Please, Greg…”

Greg chewed his lip, then swore silently and reached for a condom. “You tell me to stop and I stop, okay?” he said, gritting his teeth at the friction of the condom rolling down himself. Lube, plenty of lube, he thought, also ignoring the perfunctory strokes to spread the lube up his throbbing shaft. And then finally, he leaned over Mycroft, looking into eyes now wide with anticipation and a little apprehension, Greg smiled what he hoped was reassuringly. He positioned himself, nestling his cock at Mycroft’s entrance, checking again before pressing against the muscle, seeking entry once more.

“Ohhhh….” groaned Mycroft, fingers clutching at Greg’s shoulder, head thrown back. It was the most beautiful sight Greg thought he’d ever seen; gripping the sheets in his fist, he pressed on, finally stopping when he could go no further. Counting to twenty in French had the benefit of giving Mycroft time to acclimatise and himself something to concentrate on that didn’t include the words hot, tight, warm, body, Mycroft, Mycroft, MYCROFT.

“Move, Greg,” said Mycroft, half plea, half command. Greg pulled out slowly, his hips shaking with the effort of control, before sliding back in, the friction and pressure gorgeous around his cock. Slow and steady they found a rhythm, sweat blooming on hot skin as the intimacy swirled around them, taking their emotion and warm breath, winding it into their own unique scent and atmosphere.

Mycroft was making more noise now, his hips moving as he pleaded with Greg, “faster, please, faster”. Before Greg could do it, he saw Mycroft’s fist wrap around his own cock, jerking it frantically in time with Greg. That frame of vision was the last straw; Greg’s hips lost their rhythm, pushing hard into Mycroft as he came, pressed deep inside, feeling the waves of Mycroft’s orgasm beginning as his started coming down, drawing out his own waves of pleasure as Mycroft pulsed around him. He closed his eyes, pressing his face into Mycroft’s neck as they both came down, the last waves receding from both their bodies. Shuddering, arms unsteady, Greg held the rim of the condom, pulling out carefully before he softened too much. He tied it off and dropped it onto the bedcovers before summarily collapsing onto Mycroft.

Now was the time he wanted to say those words again, but something held him back. Fear, he
acknowledged to himself, still breathing hard into Mycroft’s neck, it was fear. Conquering it seemed impossible, especially in this moment; the best he could do was to love Mycroft and hope he recognised it and had more courage than Greg. To that end, Greg kissed the neck below him, tasting the sweat, feeling the blood pumping in the veins. He slid his mouth up Mycroft’s neck, the tendons soft now after the tension of his orgasm so recently. The hair behind his ear was darker than usual, the sweat condensing the curls, making them stand out more.

“Hey,” murmured Greg, the vibrations of his lip touching Mycroft’s ear.

“Hello,” replied Mycroft.

“Shower?” asked Greg, still nuzzling and kissing and licking.

“Soon,” said Mycroft, shifting a little under Greg, who took the hint and rolled his weight to the side.

“Okay?” asked Greg, pausing in his little exploration of this micro-climate of Mycroft.

“Mmmm,” Mycroft hummed his confirmation.

“Good,” replied Greg, resuming normal programming, namely the kissing and loving.

+++ Half an hour or so later, and Mycroft finally felt ready to move. He was sore, of course, which was expected, but the rest of him was also deeply heavy, ready to sink into the mattress for all of time, he thought. He had had orgasms before, with Greg, even, but that was the single most intense experience of his life.

“Beg your pardon?” said Greg from beside him. Good grief, he hadn’t spoken aloud, had he?

“What did you say?” Mycroft hedged, but Greg was having none of it.

“No, what did you say?” Greg threw back at him. “I thought I heard you mutter, ‘single most intense experience of my life.’”

Mycroft closed his eyes in mortification, but nodded his head. No point denying what Greg had clearly heard. He braced for ridicule or dismissal.

“It was incredible,” said Greg softly, his face very close. “And I really want to kiss you but I should brush my teeth. Do you think you’re ready for a shower?”

Mycroft nodded, dragging his body up, self-conscious but too drained to do anything further than crossing his arms around his middle (the most offensive image, in his carefully considered opinion). Greg walked ahead, anyway, turning on the shower again, letting the stall fill with steam. With a sudden moment of crystal clarity, Mycroft saw that Greg did it on purpose, and the deduction followed seamlessly; he did it for Mycroft, who he knew worried about how he looked. It was tantalisingly close to a demonstration of love; dare he take the plunge? Mycroft stood in the doorway, arms covering his belly, watching a nonchalant Greg brush his teeth and rinse with mouthwash before turning to grin at Mycroft.

“Gissakiss?” he said, leaning in to press his mouth gently to Mycroft’s. He was tender and so careful, cupping Mycroft’s face before breaking their kiss and just holding Mycroft, their sated bodies pressed together in comfort.
“We’re quite sticky,” whispered Mycroft apologetically, and he felt Greg chuckle. They stepped apart and into the shower, where Greg continued his care, attending to every part of Mycroft’s body, washing his hair with soothing fingertips, cleaning the half dried sweat and come from his chest. Mycroft half closed his eyes, enjoying the ministrations, holding back the I love you that wavered on the end of his tongue. He could feel Greg’s love and care in his touch, and with all his heart, Mycroft Holmes, defender of Her Majesty’s Land and Honour, wished he had the courage to tell him so.
Mycroft had come home at 6pm sharp; a rarity worth commenting on, which Greg had when he’d looked up in surprise at Mycroft’s entrance. He’d been spending much of his free time at Mycroft’s, often staying over. Neither had mentioned it specifically; Mycroft worried he’d stop if it was brought up. On this one point, he ignored the advice of John Watson and kept mum.

“The emergency staff I have been mentoring have their first test, so I am technically on call, I believe the term is,” he told Greg, bending down for a kiss before shucking his gloves and coat, “but there is no reason I cannot do that from here.” He smiled at Greg, whose face had blossomed into a happy smile at the news.

“Let’s have a drink,” suggested Greg as Mycroft hung his coat and stowed his gloves and scarf. He poured Mycroft a Scotch and himself a beer, passing Mycroft’s over with a kiss to boot. They sat on the sofa as they usually did, Mycroft leaning against Greg, who was propped up in the corner, one leg running along the back of the couch. Mycroft’s hand rubbed absently at Greg’s calf, a habit he’d developed when they started to sit this way. He looked at the beer and finally asked a question that had been on his mind.

“Why don’t you drink Scotch?”

Mycroft could feel Greg shrug. “Just don’t, I suppose.”

After a short internal debate (do I pick him up on it or not?) Mycroft pressed, “It’s more than a casual selection, Greg. I have never seen you accept Scotch, even when it is the only drink on offer. And there was the evening I believe you likened it to rocket fuel.” He stopped, hoping he had not pushed too far. There just seemed to be a reason, a real reason, that Greg actively avoided drinking Scotch and Mycroft, try as he might, could not deduce it. He waited with bated breath, breathing shallowly as he waited for Greg to formulate his answer.

“My first girlfriend,” said Greg slowly, “never drank, ever. But she liked me better when I was drunk. I had no idea why. She liked to hang out, go to parties and start a drinking game then sit back and watch me get drunk.” He paused, sipping at his beer. “If you ever stooped low enough to drink it, you’d find out I don’t touch butterscotch schnapps or coconut rum either – those were the three drinks of choice, or at least what we could pinch from our parents.” Another pause, another pull at his beer. “As it turned out later, Carly liked me drunk because when her father had abused her he was always drunk. She associated ‘love’ Mycroft could hear the air quotes, “with a drunken man.” Mycroft was appalled. He felt Greg sigh shakily and reached around to draw Greg’s arms around him, holding his forearms tightly.

“I apologise. I would happily switch if you would prefer,” offered Mycroft quietly.

“No,” said Greg firmly. He squeezed Mycroft, kissing his neck until Mycroft turned, seeking out...
his mouth with his own. They kissed deeply, Greg’s tongue insistent against Mycroft’s. When the kiss broke, they rested their foreheads together, breathing hard.

“It tastes different on you,” whispered Greg. “Your chemistry changes it. Makes it yours.”

Mycroft nodded. “I understand.” He made a mental note never to offer Scotch, schnapps or coconut rum (best be safe, any rum) to Greg. He also needed to ensure there was a supply of beer in his regular grocery delivery.

They sat in contemplative silence for a while, sipping at their respective drinks until Greg sighed.

“They’ll be back again soon,” said Mycroft, knowing Greg was thinking about his daughters. “We talked about Easter, remember?”


“Most people want to know at least a bit about past relationships,” said Greg.

Mycroft nodded thoughtfully. “Does it help explain how you feel about aspects of your life? More importantly, do you want to tell me?” He turned his head, looking at Greg from the odd twisted angle. “Please don’t feel pressured to share any part of yourself just because social convention demands it.”

He could see Greg smile, just, as he said, “How did I know you’d explain it like that?”

Mycroft smiled. “Are you calling me predictable?”

“Never,” said Greg, kissing him softly. “Okay,” he said, putting down his beer bottle and looking thoughtful. “Here are the important points. Celia left when Imogen was eleven. Decided she didn’t want to be a parent. Fiona helped me figure out how to do it on my own. I still feel very protective of the girls.” Greg paused, thinking, then added soberly, “It changed the way I saw myself. I was a father first, but I was terrible at it, at least in the beginning. I didn’t have a lot of down time, and it made the Black Dog difficult to deal with.”

“You’re not used to seeking help with it,” murmured Mycroft, and Greg hummed confirmation.

“Alright,” said Mycroft after a while. “A summary of my one relationship, for your reference. He was older than I, and in retrospect, a terrible partner. I had been a…substantial teenager and was still very uncomfortable with my appearance. He made a point of pointing out the unsatisfactory areas on which I should work.”

“Can I take a guess that your stomach was on that list?” asked Greg wryly.

Mycroft nodded. “Indeed. Other than he, a number of encounters, mainly discreet professionals comprise my sexual history.”

“Well I’m glad that conversation is over,” Greg said, kissing the side of Mycroft’s head again. “Shall we order something in? I’m starving.”

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“I suppose I should congratulate you even though I taught you everything you know,” Greg greeted Sally, kissing her on the cheek and shaking her hand. She’d been the first person he spotted when he made his way into the function room, which was fortuitous because he’d been itching to see her. “Merry Christmas, while we’re at it.”

“You too, sir,” said Sally, beaming at him. “I still can’t believe it. All that studying paid off in the end.”

“Yeah, just don’t go and forget it all, right? Have you found out who your team’ll be?”

At Greg’s question, Mycroft squeezed his hand, indicating the drinks table. He moved off and Greg missed half her answer watching him move elegantly through the crowd.

“Sorry, what?” said Greg, turning back to see the smug grin on her face.

“You’ve got it bad, then,” she teased, before repeating, “I don’t know who I’ve got, though I’ve made a request or two. I think Parkmore wants to run it past you, actually, she might pull you in to look over the list tonight. I do know who I don’t have though.” She looked challengingly at him, crossing her arms.

“Anderson,” stated Greg immediately. Didn’t take two brain cells to realise the guy she’d kneed in the balls was not on her preferred list.

“He’ll be back on rotation, so we might get him sometimes,” Sally told him, smiling at Mycroft in greeting as he passed Greg a beer, “but mainly it’ll be O’Myra.”

“She’s good,” nodded Greg, privately quite pleased Sally had made the choice to distance herself from Anderson. “So if Anderson’s off your radar, who’ve you got your eye on, then?”

She gave him a Look, which he returned. “Okay, there’s a new barista at that place on Colchester Road, he’s given me his number twice. Might actually call him next time,” admitted Sally.

Greg grinned at her. “Go for it, DI Donovan.” She blushed at the unfamiliar title. “We’re going to circulate a bit, see you in a bit.” She nodded and they drifted away.

“You’re pleased she was offered the promotion,” noted Mycroft.

“Yeah, I am.” said Greg. He watched as Sherlock and John entered, stepping right into Sally’s path. Interested, he watched their interaction. Awkward as you could get, but Sally was obviously making an effort based on the deeply suspicious look on Sherlock’s face. “She’s a good copper. Impatient and too thin skinned, but she’ll toughen up.”

“I am pleased to see that,” Mycroft waved one hand in the direction of the brief conversation between Sally and his brother.

“She’s making an effort,” acknowledged Greg. “I don’t think things will ever be easy between them, but there’s a lot of water under that bridge.”

“Indeed,” murmured Mycroft. They moved around, then, talking to a lot of people Greg knew,
graciously accepting congratulations from them. He was surprised at how enthusiastic they were at his promotion, although some might be comparing him to Haroldson, which wasn’t much of an endorsement. But he saw all of Dimmock’s team as well as Dimmock himself, who seemed quite relieved to be rid of Haroldson.

“He’s in isolation, from what I’ve heard,” Dimmock told Greg. “Probably for the term of his sentence, which’ll be a long one.”

“Good.” said Greg shortly, not wanting to waste a second thinking about the man who tried to shoot him, and in the process tore Mycroft from him for several agonising heartbeats.

“Anyway, have you been following Arsenal?” asked Dimmock, changing the subject. They talked for awhile before Greg sought out John. Sherlock was beside him, looking bored and wired at the same time, coat collar turned up as he always did when he was uncomfortable.

“Heya,” Greg greeted them.

Sherlock ignored him, of course, but John grinned and said, “Alright?”

“Yeah,” replied Greg.

“Bit of a celebrity,” remarked John, indicating the room at large. “Everyone wants a piece of the new DCI.”

“Hope there’s enough of me to go around.” quipped Greg. Sherlock snorted at the weak joke and stalked off, looking for goodness knew what.

“Hey, what did Sally say?” asked Greg, taking the opportunity when Sherlock was gone.

John looked at him speculatively. “Did you talk to her?”

“No,” replied Greg honestly. “I mean, we talked, but not about Sherlock. Or you.”

“She wanted to bury the hatchet, basically,” summarised John. “Actually apologised to Sherlock, called him by his name and everything. She indicated that she’d be willing to have him to her crime scenes if he wanted to come.”

“Poor Sherlock,” replied Greg without thinking, then elaborated, “He’ll be torn between wanting to go and not wanting anything to do with Sally.” John nodded in agreement. “If it helps, tell him that Sally kneed Anderson in the balls and now he’s back on rotation. It’ll be O’Myra most of the time. She’s all love-struck like Molly so he’ll be able to do whatever he wants.”

John grinned at this. “I want to hear more about the Anderson thing at some point,” he said. “And I never did say congratulations, mate. Well done, you deserve it.”

“Thanks, John,” replied Greg, touched at his friend’s words. They talked a little about Christmas – John gave Greg the lowdown on the family home, Mummy and the rest, he’d been going for years already – before Sherlock reappeared.

“We’re going,” he announced. Greg stared, but John snorted, whispered something in Sherlock’s ear, then waited. Greg watched Sherlock’s face go curiously blank before he sighed and spoke again. “I’m ready to go if you are, John.” He then turned pointedly to Greg and said in a sing song voice, “Congratulations on your promotion.”

“Thanks, Sherlock,” said Greg, amused at the exchange. It seemed that John had Sherlock well in
“We’ll be off then,” said John. “See you at the house at Christmas.”

“Yeah,” replied Greg, watching John catch up with Sherlock, taking his hand so they could walk together. Despite the annoyed look he gave John, Sherlock slowed his stride to accommodate him. *Smitten*, Greg surmised, grinning.

“Is there something amusing?” asked Mycroft, returning from his conversation with Greg’s new colleague, DCI Barnaby.

“Your brother and John have finally got themselves sorted,” replied Greg.

“Ah,” Mycroft’s expression was complicated.

Greg slipped his fingers in between Mycroft’s longer one, earning a surprised look. “Okay?” asked Greg.

“Of course,” Mycroft replied. As he made to speak again, a woman approached them – Laura Parkmore, Greg’s boss, asking for a few moments of his time as Sally had predicted. He walked with her of course, looking over the names Sally and the other DI’s had requested for their teams. There would be some reshuffling, and he didn’t know everyone; he knew Sally and Dimmock though and trusted their judgement. She was happy enough with his decision, and the meeting took only the few minutes she had promised.

“Hate to leave your partner on his own,” she commented.

“Mycroft will be fine,” said Greg, his heart giving a flutter at the casual comment. “He’s a professional smooth talker.”

“He’s Sherlock’s brother, isn’t he?” she asked, and Greg nodded. “They don’t seem very alike,” she said.

Greg chuckled. “They are two peas in a pod,” he replied, “under the surface.”

“Well, you know them best, Greg,” his boss replied. “I must go. Merry Christmas. I look forward to seeing you in the New Year.”

“Thank you, I did receive the email.” replied Greg. “Merry Christmas.”

He found Mycroft who was, contrary to assurances, standing unobtrusively in a corner watching the festivities. Greg watched him for a moment before joining him.

“You were observing me,” said Mycroft immediately.

“Of course you saw me,” said Greg. “I was just marvelling that I could go over to that exceptional man and say, ‘take me home’, and it would happen.”

Mycroft flicked a look at him, speculative and a little apprehensive.

“What?” frowned Greg. He rewound his words. *Take me home*... “Oh. Well you know what I mean. Take me to your home.”

Mycroft waited a beat before saying, “It could be ours, if you desired.”

It took Greg a moment of studying the carefully indifferent expression and the words to realise
what Mycroft was proposing. “You’re asking me to move in with you?”

Mycroft blinked, and Greg could see that he wasn’t sure what Greg’s reaction meant. “Yes. You already spend most of your time there and it seems wasteful to maintain another property.”

It was Greg’s turn to blink, though his face soon broke into a grin. “I’m going to pretend you said something like, ‘I just need to know you’ll be there when I get home. I want to share every possible moment with you and I can’t stand the idea of you calling somewhere else home for a second longer.’”

As Mycroft’s nose turned up at the soppy phrasing, Greg laughed. “Of course the answer is yes, you practical man.” Without thinking, he pressed a kiss to Mycroft’s lips. When he pulled away, Mycroft had frozen, eyes wide as he looked at Greg. “Oh, shit,” muttered Greg, but when he looked around nobody was paying them any attention.

“So you’d prefer I gave emotional reasons instead of practical ones,” asked Mycroft.

Greg shrugged. “What you said makes sense too.”

“You know that despite your atrocious turns of phrase, I actually do feel that way,” said Mycroft.

Greg grinned again, resisting the urge to kiss Mycroft again. “In that case, take me home and have your way with me, or I’m quite likely to kiss you again right here.”

Mycroft grinned at him. “Of course, Gregoire.”
“Ready?” said Greg, as Mycroft made his way down the stairs.

“Of course,” said Mycroft, smiling at Greg. When the smile he received in return was less than beaming, he stepped in closer.

“They will be very happy to meet you,” said Mycroft softly. His hands settled on Greg’s waist.

“Just because you do, doesn’t mean they will,” said Greg, the tentative smile tempering what Mycroft could hear was a real fear.

“I will remind you that John will be there,” reminded Mycroft him. “An ally, if you will.”

“Are you not an ally?” asked Greg teasingly. His palms slid onto Mycroft’s biceps, eyes locking intensely on Mycroft’s.

“Another ally, then,” said Mycroft, his heart expanding as he saw the trust bloom in Greg’s face.

“Okay,” replied Greg. He leaned in, letting his forehead rest against Mycroft’s. “As long as I have you on my side.”

The atmosphere drew in on Mycroft and Greg, their world condensing to the sound of their breathing and the beating of their hearts. Their eyes met. Two smiles formed, tentative and yearning.

_I love you_, Greg thought. _I can’t say it first, but I do._

_I love you_, Mycroft thought. _I wish I could say it first._

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“Mycroft.”

Mycroft ignored the voice. It was the middle of the night, he must be dreaming.

“Mycroft.”

The voice was familiar, though…with a groan he rolled over, one eye opening to look at Greg. His eyebrow raised, asking the question so his mouth didn’t need to.

“It’s 12.01am,” Greg told him, struggling to keep the laughter out of his voice. “Christmas Day.”

“So?” answered Mycroft. He wanted to go back to sleep, preferably with Greg in his arms, but when he stretched out to find him, a large square box was there instead. “What?”
“Merry Christmas,” said Greg, the restrained satisfaction evident in his voice.

“Gregory, did you wake me to exchange presents at one minute past twelve?” asked Mycroft. He wanted to be exasperated but somehow it seemed more endearing than anything.

“Come on, wake up and open them!” said Greg, prodding him. Mycroft groaned and pulled himself up, glancing at the pile next to him. “Fine, if we’re doing this now,” he pointed a finger, “There are several wrapped items in that cupboard for you.” He shook his head at Greg’s excitement, waiting until they were both sitting on the bed, a pile of gifts before them.

“You first,” said Greg, and Mycroft agreed, tickled to see how excited Greg was at the giving of gifts. Mycroft picked up the first of what felt like two books. He opened it, looking at the familiar landmark emblazoned on the cover.

“Visitor’s guide to Kinsale,” read Mycroft. He looked at Greg, uncertain as to the tone of this gift. Greg shrugged. “Happened on it when I was looking for something else and it made me smile.” He looked at the aerial image of the Fort, smiling again as he said, “Most of the trip was actually really good. Maybe we could go back together, visit the Fort in the daytime.”

“Thank you,” said Mycroft sincerely, leaning over the piles of presents for a light kiss. He picked up the next, also a book, but Greg took it from him.

“Leave this one ‘til last,” he said, offering a smaller package instead.

Mycroft acquiesced, though he frowned when he felt the shape inside the package. Opening it revealed his suspicions to be correct – it was a folding umbrella. He looked at Greg in open exasperation this time, to see the sparkling eyes and laughing mouth.

“British Airlines assures me this could be taken on any of their flights without a problem,” said Greg, holding back the giggles with difficulty.

“And that,” said Mycroft dryly, though his mouth quirked dangerously close to a smile. He picked up the third package without comment, a small package. Once the paper was gone, a small box remained. He opened it to find an exquisite tie pin, silver with M.S.A.H engraved on it.

“Greg,” he said, taken aback at the thoughtful gift. “It’s lovely, thank you.”

“I thought you could wear it while you’re away. It will sit right near your heart. That way I’ll know you’re thinking of me,” said Greg, shrugging.

Mycroft stilled, the words sinking in. He looked at Greg until the dark brown eyes met his. “I think of you always when I’m away. Constantly,” he said earnestly.

Greg smiled, flushing with pleasure at the compliment. “Anyway, this is the last one,” he said, passing Mycroft the last gift, clearly a book.

Peeling back the tape revealed a beautifully bound copy of Hamlet.

“Greg,” breathed Mycroft, looking at the old book, running his finger down the leather spine. “This is beautiful.”

“It’s not a first edition or anything,” said Greg diffidently, “But the bookshop owner said it’s a good example of a Rackham illustrated edition.”
At his words, Mycroft opened the book, carefully examining the first illustration he found. His heart was beating fast – this was an expensive gift, but infinitely more importantly, it was thoughtful, considered. He could imagine Greg standing in a bookshop, listening to the advice of the owner, chewing on his lower lip as he considered the options. Thinking about Mycroft, about what he might like, something to make him happy.

Mycroft looked up at him, speechless. He opened his mouth, dismissed the words he had prepared (not effusive enough, too simple, not heartfelt enough) and closed it again. Greg’s worried expression relaxed, morphing into something pleased and relieved. He’d been worried it wasn’t enough, Mycroft realised. The disparity in their fortunes was something of which he was aware, though it did not bother him, but he knew Greg sometimes compared himself less than favourably. The care he had taken, the time and effort, they were what mattered. Mycroft knew he was still staring, eyes wide and mouth slack. Greg looked more and more pleased, his face flushing further under Mycroft’s scrutiny. There was no doubt any longer in his mind.

Suddenly, without preparation, Mycroft blurted, “I love you. Thank you.”

Greg’s eyes went wide, as did Mycroft’s; the words had been as much a surprise to him as to Greg. Part of him wanted to take the declaration back, but he knew it was right, it felt right to say the words. He hoped Greg understood, and judging by the expression of delight and affection, Mycroft thought he probably did.

“You’re welcome,” replied Greg, giving Mycroft’s hand a squeeze.

“Now mine,” said Mycroft, pressing the first into Greg’s hands. He watched as Greg tore off the paper, revealing a small envelope.

A single sheet of paper was opened and read, Mycroft holding his breath until Greg exclaimed, “You’re kidding me!”

Mycroft chuckled, the serendipity of their gifts finally revealed. “Yes, I have booked us several days in Kinsale for later next year,” he said. “I’ve heard there’s an excellent guidebook, actually.”

Greg laughed and kissed him affectionately, their rough chins scraping together as they overbalanced on the soft bed. He picked up the next, another envelope and opened it.

“It’s for work,” explained Mycroft. “You simply cannot go on drinking that revolting liquid they call coffee.”

“I am going to be the most popular guy in the office,” said Greg, examining the brochure for the fancy coffee machine. Mycroft went on to explain that it would be installed before Greg started back at work, ready for his first day as DCI.

“Thank you,” murmured Greg, tucking the brochure away. A small box was next, a beautiful pen engraved with DCI Lestrade and the year. “A memento, also for work, befitting a man of your stature,” said Mycroft, his speech slipping into the more formal as he became nervous.

When Greg’s brilliant smile spread, Mycroft relaxed. “This is brilliant, thank you.” he looked down, then grinned again. “I’ll be able to think of you while I’m doing paperwork. How romantic.” He picked up the last item, suspiciously book shaped.

Mycroft’s heart beat faster as he said to Greg, “You need these first.”

Greg frowned, taking the small bag and drawing out a pair of white cotton gloves.
“Put them on,” Mycroft urged, and Greg complied, frowning in confusion. He began opening the package, thankfully with more care than the others; When he found the soft silk, Greg’s gloved hands folded it back carefully, revealing the plain cream binding and gold lettering proclaiming, *Hamlet*. He looked up at Mycroft, mouth open in astonishment.

“It is not beautifully illustrated, as your gift to me,” Mycroft told Greg as he carefully turned the pages, “however the lettering has been hand-set, with title letters penned by hand. It is, admittedly, more for having than reading, but I felt it was appropriate nevertheless.”

Greg’s face was blank with astonishment, and Mycroft’s racing heart eased somewhat. He clearly appreciated the gift, and given his choice of tome for Mycroft, the meaning of the specific title was not lost on him.

“Mycroft,” whispered Greg, before closing the book and laying his gloved hand on the cover. “Bloody hell, I know why my gift made you tell me you love me.” He choked out a half laugh, half sob, leaning forward before stopping himself and placing the book carefully in the drawer of his bedside table. He removed his gloves, and Mycroft could see him taking the time to compose himself. When he was done, Greg crawled forward more or less into Mycroft’s lap. He cradled Mycroft’s face, something he did when he was overwhelmed with emotion, Mycroft had learned; he was a very tactile person.

“Thank you,” whispered Greg, dropping feather light kisses on Mycroft’s mouth. “I love you too, Mycroft Holmes.”

Mycroft wrapped his arms around Greg, pulling him closer, deepening the kiss until they were gasping for breath.

When Greg tried to roll over, pulling Mycroft down, Mycroft stopped him, answering the question in Greg’s eyes. “Wrapping paper,” he explained, looking at the paper strewn surface.

Greg smiled, relaxing. He dropped another quick kiss before gathering up the paper; Mycroft collected their gifts, placing them on the bookshelf before they met once again in the bed.

“Sleep?” asked Greg. His smile made Mycroft’s heart squeeze.

“For the best, given tomorrow. Today,” answered Mycroft. They moved toward each other, entangling in the centre of the bed. Mycroft reached one arm out and switched off the light. The last thing he heard before he drifted off to sleep was, “Love you, My.”

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The light through the open curtains was the muted light of a snow day, Greg could tell immediately, even with his eyes half closed. He turned and looked at the clock on the bedside table, pleased that it was not too late. Mummy had told them somewhere around 9 for breakfast; it was just gone 8, leaving them plenty of time to shower before heading downstairs. He decided on kissing as his chosen wake up method, beginning with light kisses down the side of Mycroft’s face. His nose wrinkled as he felt the light brushes, and Greg grinned to himself, continuing to work methodically over as much of Mycroft’s face as he could reach.

“Urgh, what are you doing?” mumbled Mycroft, eyes still closed.

“Merry Christmas!” said Greg in as cheery a tone as he could manage with his morning-hoarse voice.

“Go away,” groaned Mycroft, turning away and burying his head under the pillow.
“We have time to have showers and shave if we get up now,” said Greg, watching as Mycroft did exactly as he expected, sitting up and looking at him reproachfully.

“Low blow, Mr. Lestrade.”

“That’s Detective Chief Inspector to you,” Greg reprimanded him, still grinning.

“I’ll get started shaving shall I, given your apparent refusal to allow me to sleep,” grumbled Mycroft, pressing a kiss to Greg’s mouth before slipping out of bed.

“Not my fault,” Greg called after him, “blame Jesus, it’s His birthday!”

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“Good morning, Mrs. Holmes,” said Greg when he and Mycroft made it downstairs, comfortably inside the 9am breakfast time. Mycroft had informed Greg that when his mother said ‘around 9am for breakfast’ what she really meant was, ‘you should be seated and eating before 9am’, so Greg was pleased they would easily make it.

“Call me either Violet or Mummy, please dear,” she replied, turning her cheek up for a kiss.

“Merry Christmas, Mummy,” Mycroft greeted her as Greg spoke to Siger. Both men took plates, approaching the buffet together.

Greg helped himself to eggs with the works, smirking at Mycroft as he took the minimum of eggs, tomatoes and mushrooms. He eyed off the bacon for long enough that Greg put some on his plate without asking, an innocent look meeting Mycroft’s scowl. Greg knew he was too polite to remove it or leave it on his plate. Greg winked, taking his plate to the table before filling a cup with coffee.

“Did you sleep well, Greg?” asked Violet.

“Very well, thank you,” replied Greg, “though I woke Mycroft at midnight to exchange gifts and I’m not sure he’s forgiven me yet.” On cue, Mycroft scowled at him, though Greg also felt the press of his foot under the table. Not all that angry, then.

“Oh you exchanged gifts already,” exclaimed Violet. “You’ll have to bring them downstairs so we can see. We’ll open our presents after Church, Greg.”

“Of course,” replied Greg, not looking at Mycroft. He could feel the discomfort radiating from Mycroft, and turned the conversation to what he hoped was the safer topic of the history of the house. Siger brightened at this and began giving Greg a detailed history and genealogy of the Holmes family. As soon as they had finished eating, Siger insisted on taking Greg for a guided tour, pointing out architectural details of note. Only Violet’s insistence that they come and dress for Church saved him from climbing into the attics.

“Serves you right for asking him,” said Mycroft mock severely when Greg returned.

“It wasn’t that bad,” replied Greg. “And I’ve done it now, so next time he can take John.”

His abrupt departure from the breakfast table had coincided with Sherlock and John’s arrival defiantly late to the table. Greg hadn’t had a chance to talk to either of them, but he was astonished at the change in Sherlock. He’d only seen the detective a couple of times since John had confirmed they were together, and he looked more centred that Greg had ever seen him. Even at the Christmas party, Sherlock had seemed to gravitate to John, having an awareness of his relative location all evening, but in the brief greetings this morning Greg could almost feel him
concentrating on John. It was the same as when he used to come to crime scenes, Greg mused as he donned his coat and scarf.

“Allow me,” said Mycroft, tucking the ends of the scarf into Greg’s jacket. When he was done, his hands rested on Greg’s chest, and they smiled at each other, a stolen moment in the boot room while everyone else bustled around outside.

“Did you bring a scarf?” asked Greg, feeling a grin tugging at his mouth.

“Yes,” replied Mycroft, holding up his own.

“Pity,” said Greg. “I could have lent you mine.”

Mycroft smiled, making Greg’s heart flip over. “Then you’d be cold.”

“I came prepared,” said Greg, his smile widening as he took a spare scarf from his pocket. Mycroft stared for a moment before breaking into laughter. Greg tucked it away, leaning in to kiss Mycroft before he’d completely stopped laughing. “I love you,” murmured Greg in between kisses.

Mycroft caught his breath then wrapped his arms around Greg, and the light affectionate kisses turned heated, Mycroft’s lips parting as he sought out Greg’s taste, pressing closer, frustrated by the winter coats between them.

“Do you think I could collect my coat without having to witness such a display?” Sherlock’s voice came from behind them, his tone impatient but lacking the bite it might have six months ago.

“Depends,” replied Greg, “If you can find your things with your eyes closed, you won’t have to witness anything.”

Sherlock’s answering look was withering, but Greg didn’t pay it any mind, taking Mycroft’s hand and leading him out the door.

They walked to the tiny local Church as a group, talking about Christmases past and future. Greg mentioned his imminent grandparenthood, to Violet’s immense delight – “Oh, you must ask them to visit here, they’re all welcome at Christmas of course!” – which immediately made him wonder if Simone and Trent might perhaps make the trip one year for Christmas. Trent had as little family as Simone so it was possible... the idea stuck with him through the service, to which he listened with only one ear. On the return trip, the couples naturally separated, Sherlock and John striding ahead, Violet and Siger falling behind as they chatted to other locals, Greg and Mycroft wandering slowly in between.

“She would be thrilled, as you can see,” murmured Mycroft, reading Greg’s mind as usual.

“My son-in-law doesn’t have a lot of family, I think just his brother in Bristol,” replied Greg. He was getting used to Mycroft knowing his thoughts, and no longer commented on it. “They’re only in Edinburgh for his work. Maybe if we asked Trent’s brother too…” he looked at Mycroft, asking silently for his input.

“The more the merrier, Mummy would say,” Mycroft assured him. “She would love nothing more than a house full of guests, children in particular, at Christmas.”

Greg grinned, twisting to kiss Mycroft without breaking stride. It mostly worked, though he did stumble a little. “I’ll float the idea next time we speak,” he said. “Thank you.”

Mycroft shrugged. “I didn’t offer to host them.” Greg jostled him with his shoulder and Mycroft suppressed a smile. As Greg watched, though, the smile slid away and was replaced with
something pensive for a moment.

“Want to talk?” asked Greg carefully. Mycroft squeezed his hand, acknowledging the question, and they walked in reflective silence for ten minutes or so.

“You said, ‘I love you’ again, in the boot room,” began Mycroft.

“Yes.” Greg confirmed. He waited – there must be more, but Mycroft would not speak until he was sure of his words.

“I didn’t say it back.”

Greg thought back. “No, but you kissed me.” He thought, then said carefully, “You don’t have to say it back, you know.”

He felt Mycroft tense a little, then relax a lot. “Are you sure?”

Greg stopped, turning to face Mycroft, taking both his hands, though there were two sets of winter gloves involved. “Mycroft, I don’t tell you because I want you to have to say it. I tell you because I want you to know, and because I want you to know I was thinking about it particularly in that moment.” He could see Mycroft trying to assimilate what was clearly new information. “I’m not fishing. If you want to say it with words, I’d love to hear it. But when you kissed me, I felt it then. There are lots of ways of saying I love you.”

“I’m not…I don’t verbalise emotion easily,” Mycroft tried to explain, but Greg gently hushed him.

“I’m not asking you to change. You show me you love me all the time, without even realising it. You consider my comfort, you ask my opinion, you do things I like when they don’t benefit you.” Greg’s mouth softened. “You arranged for Anthea to send me the Hamlet quote when you were away.” Mycroft blushed at this, but Greg grinned at him. “Do you remember the first night you came to my flat with dinner?”

Mycroft frowned, not following the change in conversation. “Yes.”

“And you brought wine.”

Mycroft’s face cleared as he realised what Greg was saying. “I did.”

“You brought two kinds of wine and three kinds of tea, Mycroft. You’d thought about every possible scenario and tried to accommodate all of them. That’s the kind of thing I’m talking about. The words are nice to hear, when you want to say them. But I already know, too.” He kissed Mycroft, a quick press of cold lips before stepping back.

“You are immensely patient with me,” said Mycroft. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” said Greg happily. “Shall we continue? I think Violet said something about spiced cider when we get home.”
“Mycroft?” called Greg. The flat was dark, which was odd. They’d decided at the last minute that this, their first New Year’s Eve, required champagne, and Greg had volunteered to go to the corner shop to buy some.

“No,” he said, when Mycroft had reached for his phone, knowing he would ask Anthea or someone to do it. “It’s their New Year’s too. I’ll only be gone ten minutes.”

Mycroft had grumbled but agreed, and Greg had indeed been gone only ten minutes. He had returned with the least terrible champagne they had, which was still pretty average – ten PM on New Year’s was not the time you’d expect a corner shop to have a range of nice bubbles available. He’d avoided most of the revelers, turning a blind eye to all the jaywalking, a couple of flashers and more underage drinking that you could poke a stick at – even DCI’s get a night off, he reasoned as he let himself back inside.

Grinning to himself, Greg dropped his keys and wallet in the drawer in the entranceway before noticing the flat was dark. He was hoping to lure Mycroft up to their rarely used terrace, but this darkened space threw him off.

Blinking, he realised there was one point of light, at the bottom of the stairs. Clutching the bottle of champagne, he walked over to investigate. It was one of those stars you could buy for children’s bedrooms that glowed in the dark. It must have been left here recently – they only glowed for a few minutes after the lights went out.

Greg picked it up and turned it over, wondering. He could feel something stuck to the back. Using the torch on his phone, he read the tiny script.

_Do you believe in magic?_

Greg blinked a moment. Where had he heard that before? What was that supposed to mean? It was vaguely familiar, but he couldn’t place it. As he wondered, a text message came through.

_Turn off your torch. Follow._

It was from an unknown number, but given the content, it must be Mycroft. Greg’s heart beat faster. He did as he was told, stowing his phone in his pocket, blinking as his eyes accustomed to the dark again. Follow? Where was he supposed to…

“Oh.” Looking up the stairs, Greg could see more stars, just barely visible. He collected each as he went, wondering if there was a message on the back of each but not daring to turn on his torch again. As the stairs continued upwards, past their bedroom level towards the room, Greg frowned.
Had Mycroft deduced his plan? He was supposed to be the one…

Stepping out onto the landing, Greg stopped, mouth hanging open. This put his plan – a few fairy lights and rose petals – to shame. The entire terrace, tiny though it was, sparkled with pure white fairy lights. Hundreds of them wound their way up the pergola, winking at him against the darkness. The air was perfumed with roses, tiny white and red buds which sat in pots on every surface. Greg almost dropped the champagne as he looked around, taking in the transformed space. Usually it was minimalist and bare, but this was…

“Like a fairy tale,” he whispered, remembering the analogy they’d used for their first few days in Kinsale.

“In real life, this time,” added Mycroft, stepping out from the wall. Greg had not seen him, transfixed as he had been on the scene before him.

“How did you – I mean, Anthea was supposed to…” Greg trailed off. He’d contacted her a few days ago, asking that she help him out to get a few little things to make this space special for Mycroft. Greg had intended to bring Mycroft up here, a few fairly lights and rose petals to make it special at midnight.

“Anthea asked me to give you this,” said Mycroft, handing Greg an envelope. He ripped it open and read the message.

*My loyalty is to Mycroft, as you recall, and he asked me too. This is better, as I’m sure you agree. Happy New Year. Anthea.*

Greg looked up at him. “You asked Anthea to help you?”

Mycroft shrugged. “She’s very good.”

“Yes, she is,” agreed Greg, smiling as he tucked the card into his pocket. The champagne he dropped into the ice bucket placed on the small table, before he turned to look at Mycroft, standing patiently, waiting for him. He was dressed casually, for him; white shirt, the same deep green merino jumper he had worn that first day in Kinsale, dark trousers.

“I love that jumper,” murmured Greg. “It’s a great colour on you.”

“Thank you, Greg.” Mycroft smiled.

“Magic?” asked Greg.

“The Fort.” Mycroft replied, a flash of uncertainty in his eyes.

*The Fort. The first night. Do you believe in magic…In the dark, under the stars, Greg had whispered those words in Mycroft’s ear and the gates had opened.*

“Oh,” breathed Greg, feeling his eyes widen at the reference. It was perfect.

“Why the stars?” Greg he asked now, holding the small markers in his hand.

Mycroft cleared his throat and quoted, “Doubt thou the stars are fire, doubt thou the sun doth move; doubt truth to be a liar, but never doubt I love.”
“Hamlet,” they whispered together. Greg felt his heart expand at the trust this man extended to him every day by sharing so much of himself, making these overtures to invite Greg further into his life. And the Fort… that was a lifetime ago, before they had kissed, even, while their magic was still growing, winding around them both so that even the awful time back in London could not break their bond. Magic… Focussing once again, Greg saw Mycroft holding out his arms. As they embraced, music began to play, piped through the hidden speakers Greg was certain had not been here this morning.

“How did you do that?” he murmured, brushing his lips against Mycroft’s ear.


They swayed softly to the quiet piano. Greg was content to lose himself in the perfect moment – Mycroft, the roses, the end of one year and the promise of a new one so close. He sighed, the feeling of happiness becoming more familiar as he and Mycroft became stronger together. It didn’t lessen his appreciation for the sensation, the memory of the more difficult times still fresh enough that his gratitude was deep and real.

“I’ve bought you something,” murmured Mycroft, when the music faded. He gently stepped out of Greg’s embrace, taking his hand and leading him to the far side of the pergola. Two pots stood side by side, their rose bushes an ecstasy of tiny blooms. The stalks had been wound together at some point, making the two plants one so red and white blossoms flowered together.

“Most of these are hired,” admitted Mycroft, gesturing to the dozens of pots of roses strewn around the space. “This one is ours, though.”

“It’s ours?” asked Greg. He didn’t know a lot about flowers, but the idea of the two plants inextricably wound together made him smile. The symbolism was clear and made his heart beat faster. “I love it.” He turned to Mycroft. “I love you.”

Mycroft returned his smile, leaning in to kiss him softly. “Je t’aime aussi, Gregoire.”

“I hope this joint ownership doesn’t mean I’m going to have to take care of it,” teased Greg, looking at the plants. “I’m pretty rubbish at that kind of thing.”

“It will be a joint effort, Greg,” Mycroft replied, his tone making it clear he was not talking about the plants.

“Oh alright,” Greg smiled, “If you insist.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, that’s all folks. I just cannot believe that we’ve actually made it here, to the end of this eventful period in Mycroft and Greg’s lives. Deepest thanks to each and every person who has read along, hustled to catch up, waited between chapters, been understanding during the hiatus, and rejoiced when we started up again. I have loved every comment and tried to reply to each one. You bring warmth to me with every word. The biggest thanks need to go to Kara, without whom this story might have ended instead of going on hiatus - she’s MY conductor of light, patiently showing me the way forward as I flail around like a toddler on a sugar crash. She’s also a fairly brilliant
writer herself, so follow this link if you need some more Mystrade in your life. Blessings and peace to all of us in 2018. <3

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