"You fear becoming the plaything of a powerful man."

Greg Lestrade might have risen to the rank of Detective Inspector, but he's still just an East End boy at heart. That's why this arrangement with Mycroft Holmes, power incarnate, is starting to feel so weird—if only Mycroft weren't so hard to resist.

When family tragedy and a murder in the East End start stirring up the shadows of the past, Greg could lose the chance at happiness he's waited twenty years for.

But is there hope for two souls from such very different worlds?

After a good while of shipping from afar, this story marks my first proper foray into Mystrade. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did writing it.

Before we begin, please note that this story isn't compliant with the third or fourth series - a few details might have strayed over, but not general story lines. Imagine it set in an alternative third series, if you will. The archive warning of Graphic Violence relates largely to a criminal investigation run by Greg, commencing in chapter twelve. The victim is an original character. Warnings are also in place for mentions of past domestic abuse, homophobia and an abusive father/son relationship.
I should warn you as well about the 'Greg Has A Cute Niece' cliche, my proclivity towards bad language, and a highly probable chance of London geography fuck-ups.

If you missed it, this story is rated as Explicit with graphic scenes of sex.

Do let me know what you think! And thank you so much for reading. Your clicks mean the whole world to me. I had a feeling I was going to love being a Mystrade writer. I just didn't realise how much.

My thanks go to Angel and to Avid, who together beta-read the final chapters for me - and to everyone who followed along its progress as it grew.
By the time that Lestrade admitted defeat, snapped shut his laptop and called it a night, the staff car park was deserted except for two vehicles - his own, and a black stretch limo.

He clocked the unfamiliar car as soon as he stepped off the stairs. It was an Audi Q7: a thing of beauty to behold, sleek as a supermodel and probably of a similar price.

Averting his eyes, lest he make his beloved BMW jealous, he proceeded towards his car with a single-minded focus on home, a hot shower, and something cold from the fridge.

As he passed it, the door of the Audi cracked open. The driver - white gloves and peaked hat - stepped out.

"Inspector Lestrade, sir?"

Lestrade stopped. He hoped this wasn't someone's expensive idea of a prank. "... yeah?"

The driver opened the door of the limo with a snap.

"I'm to take you to The Beaumont, sir - if you'd like to step inside."

"The Beaumont?" Lestrade wasn't sure he'd heard correctly. "That's in - Mayfair, isn't it?"

"It is, sir. Please step inside."

Lestrade was slowly adding two and two, coming to the conclusion of four.

He wasn't sure if he had the strength for this tonight. There was a six-pack of Strongbow in the fridge with his name on it, and the promise of eight hours' sleep for once. Such luxuries weren't to be given up lightly.

The driver, with a level of insight that Lestrade wished his staff could manage, gave a brief incline of his black-capped head.

"There's a glass of champagne by your seat, sir."

Champagne - and likely to be worth more than he'd earned this whole month. It was cheese in a trap, Lestrade thought, and he was the mouse.

It had been a long bloody day.

On the one hand, there was his quiet flat in Marylebone - small, but that meant it didn't take long to clean. Not that he'd cleaned it in a while, of course. He had an Indian ready meal somewhere at the back of the freezer, and a boxset he'd been meaning to catch up on. He'd get to spend a blissful twelve hours not looking at other human beings.

But on the other hand...

He knew he was being manipulated - and it was so transparent he should feel insulted. But it had been a long day, and his resistance was weak. In truth, he'd probably swap one of his fingers for a glass of champagne right now.

And it was a pretty car.
Telling himself this was the easy option - that this individual was probably well-trained in the art of not taking no for an answer - Lestrade handed over his briefcase, slung his coat over his arm, and got into the car. The interior was almost as elegant as the outside - blacked-out windows, leather seats and a flat screen TV. The door closed with a clunk behind him. A minute later, they set off.

As they made their way through central London, Lestrade did his best impression of someone used to this sort of thing.

He drank his champagne as they passed Westminster and Big Ben, St James's Park and the Wellington Arch, trying not to be aware of his somewhat rugged reflection in the window. It had been a hell of a week; he'd slept in his clothes last night. They sat in traffic alongside Hyde Park for a while, and he casually checked his phone. No messages. Of course not, he thought.

After twenty minutes the car peeled itself off into a quiet garden square, where The Beaumont stood as a monument to the elegance of the 1920s. Its grand white facade was spotlight from below; the many windows above were softly illuminating the London darkness. Three flags - Britain, America and England - stirred in the mildest of breezes as Lestrade exited the car.

He looked up at the hotel's frontage, immediately uneasy.

This place was high-society... even by the usual standards.

The driver bowed, returned to him his coat and briefcase, then drove away into the night. He watched the car go with a slight feeling of trepidation. It was too late to change his mind now.

The doorman gave a short bow as Lestrade approached.

"Good evening, sir… welcome to The Beaumont."

The grand entrance doors were pulled open before him. Within, the lobby was warm, filled with light and with rich, beautiful people, all superbly-dressed, laughing in small groups as they waited for their dinner reservations or their cars. The black-and-white marble floor was polished to perfection, gleaming in the lamplight; the wood-panelled walls boasted artworks that probably should have been in a gallery somewhere.

Lestrade felt instantly, unbearably inadequate. He almost wondered if he should reach for his ID, just in case he was about to be asked to leave. That was the joy of a badge saying 'Detective Inspector'. You were, in theory, allowed to be almost anywhere.

He approached the front desk, uncertain. The young woman looked up from her computer screen with as bright a smile as any could be found in London.

"Good evening, sir. Do you have a reservation with us?"

"Erm - I'm not sure, to be honest. Shall we go for 'maybe'?"

She was completely unfazed; her smile only brightened. "'Maybe' is fine by me, sir. Is there a name I should look for?"

He wondered how easy this had been made for him.

"Yeah… okay, let's try 'Lestrade' as our starter for ten. Then I'll start racking my brains."

She tapped away at the computer, scanning through the records it showed her.
"Ah - yes. We have a booking for 'Lestrade'.” Her eyes caught some detail on the screen and widened slightly. "Oh! The Roosevelt Suite, sir. Forgive me. Let me have someone take your bag and show you up at once."

"Sorry - did you say 'suite'?"

"The Roosevelt is our presidential suite, sir. You have most of the fifth floor to yourself."

A porter had appeared, as if by magic. He bowed and took Lestrade's bag and coat for him, as a second porter arrived to show him the way.

"Have a wonderful stay with us, inspector," said the receptionist. "Please don't hesitate to ask if there's anything you need."

Lestrade was starting to think he must have fallen asleep at his desk. There was a good chance he would wake up any moment, with the day's reports and a Starbucks lid stuck to his face. He followed his personal team of porters out of the lobby and into a waiting lift, where the topmost button was reverently pressed with a gloved finger for him. It lit up in gold - 'ROOSEVELT SUITE'. The lift began to rise.

As the door to the suite was opened, and he caught sight of lacquer panelling, silk curtains and parquet timber floors, he experienced a serious spike of concern.

This place was palatial. The room itself had its own bloody lobby, complete with bronze sculptures of Olympian athletes. The lamps probably cost more to insure than his car. Over the past few months, he'd gotten used to hotels - to drivers in white gloves, and to wine with a three-digit price tag. But this was a whole other level.

He didn't know how it could be a mistake - but if it was, it would be well outside of his personal finances to correct. He decided it was best to check now.

"Uh - listen," he said, catching one of the porters, who was about to place his coat inside an antique wardrobe. "This is… great. Really, it is. I'm just a bit confused. I wasn't… well, expecting to be here…"

"That's quite alright, inspector. Please make yourself at home. Your associate will be joining you shortly." The porter inclined his head. "I understand that the meal is be served in the dining room upon his arrival."

"The - ?"

"The dining room, sir. Do follow me."

It's got its own dining room, Lestrade thought - so the room's occupants didn't have to eat with the foreign royals, wealthy ambassadors, tech CEOs and other plebs milling about downstairs.

The dining room transpired to be bigger than his flat. It had a great octagonal mirror, seating for eight, a handmade art-deco style rug and a chandelier glittering overhead.

A servant was laying out place settings for two - silvery cutlery, linen napkins.

"Would you care to change for dinner, inspector?" asked the porter. He politely failed to notice Lestrade's open mouth.

"Oh, I - haven't really got anything with me, to be honest... best stick to my skivvies..."
"Don't worry, sir. A selection of your suits are through in the master bedroom. Do follow me."

Of course they are, Lestrade thought. How stupid of me to forget that my clothes can fly. Sure enough, upon opening the wardrobe in the enormous master bedroom - complete with private terrace, and unparalleled views over central London - he found no less than four of his suits ready and waiting for him - including one that had been crumpled on his bedroom floor this morning, ready to go to the dry cleaners.

It had been freshly cleaned and pressed.

It smelt like an expensive car showroom now - like actors in aftershave adverts probably smelled.

Lestrade fingered the sleeve carefully, trying to decide at what point all of this counted as an invasion of privacy.

Wherever that point lay, he suspected they were well past it.

It occurred to him that these four suits had been selected with great care from the many he owned. Someone had studied his wardrobe, piece-by-piece - rejecting this option, contemplating that option - and chosen these four as their favourites. He could imagine the impassive blue-grey eyes working their way through, making their decision.

He chose the first one in the wardrobe - navy blue, with a white shirt.

He turned to find the porter still waiting there, and experienced a stab of panic that this was the kind of hotel where the staff helped you dress.

"Is there a - shower?" he asked, with a quirk of one eyebrow. "I should probably freshen up a bit… long day."

"Of course, sir. Just through the dressing room there."

The dressing room. There was probably a shampooing room, a rinsing room, a towel-dry room and a deodorant room too. At least he could now be sure it wasn't a dream - he didn't have the imagination to come up with this.

"Great. Thanks. I'll... be alright from here on out, I think."

"Very good, sir," the porter said. He bowed, turned, and left.

Alone at last, Lestrade made his way through the dressing room. How many angles does one person need to see themselves from? he thought, ignoring his widely-reflected scowl in the mirrors all around. If he was going to be here, he might as well get clean.

The bathroom was an unsurprising masterpiece of grey marble and chrome, with old time photos in black-and-white frames everywhere. Lestrade had never felt judged by wallpaper before. He felt almost guilty kicking out of his M&S work trousers and casting his tie over the door, like he'd just checked into a Travelodge and couldn't wait to wreck the place.

He showered, bewildered by the thing's ability to massage out the knots in his shoulders. The physics seemed impossible. There were toiletries already to hand - not his own, he was glad to see. The thought of someone rooting through his grimy bathroom in search of products made his stomach tug. Luckily, there wasn't a half-empty bottle of L'Oreal For Men in sight. Instead, a range of something called 'Farragamo' greeted his blinking, water-drenched eyes.
Their orange bottles did not match the grey marble decor.

Lestrade deduced, with a reluctant twinge of self-satisfaction, that these were not toiletries supplied by the hotel. They were somebody else's - brought here, on purpose, for their personal use.

It seemed like the Holmes brothers were rubbing off on him.

One of them in particular, he thought.

Stop it, Greg. We're not lowering ourselves to that level. He lathered up the shampoo and worked it through his hair, smelling something vaguely familiar - a scent like lemon and olives. There was a shower gel too, and a soap.

Beside the mirror, he found the matching shaving cream and a brush. He studied himself bare-chested in the mirror, wrapped only in a plush white towel as he examined his jaw with one-hand. Two days of stubble, a week of bad sleep, and his chin felt like sandpaper.

He supposed he had time. There was no sign of anybody joining him yet, after all - even though it was now past nine.

He dried himself, shaved, and then dressed in the bedroom, purposely ignoring the special dressing room.

Now ready for dinner, he appraised himself in the wardrobe's mirrored doors. His suit hadn't looked this sharp since the day he bought it - crisp, pressed edges; not a coffee stain or a Pot Noodle splatter in sight.

It made him feel strangely uneasy.

Again he imagined those blue-grey eyes considering the suit. He imagined the order given: "This one, too. Have it pressed, will you?"

He met his own eyes in the mirror, regarding himself with cynicism.

Even now, dressed to the nines, freshly-shaved and ensconced in the most opulent surroundings that London could provide, the East End boy remained. It was in the lines around his eyes; it was in the downturned corners of his mouth. He felt like a kid dressed up for a play - and this was his own bloody suit.

It was this room, he thought. It was The Beaumont. Mayfair.

This was… something else.

He gave himself his best shot at a reassuring smile. It didn't quite work.

He wondered how it had come to this.

It was a long story, he thought - one he didn't even quite believe himself. It had just sort of unfolded, one meeting and then the next. Now here he was - the presidential suite of a Mayfair hotel.

He didn't know if he liked it.

All he could think of was his fridge back home and the six-pack of Strongbow he'd been missing all day.
They probably didn't serve Strongbow here. They probably didn't serve cider full-stop. This was clearly a gin-and-tonic sort of establishment - tiny drinks served in tiny glasses with an olive, and classical jazz in the background. A request for Strongbow, a bag of pork scratchings and twenty Rothmans probably wouldn't go down too well.

He left the bedroom, casting his eyes around the rest of the empty suite. There was still no sign of his - … of anyone else.

He wondered what he was supposed to do now.

What did rich people *do* all day in these fancy rooms?

Lounge around, he supposed - admiring themselves in the endless mirrors. There was an impressive wall-mounted TV above the fireplace. He spent five minutes on a hunt for the remote, then gave up. *Why don't they keep it on the arm of the sofa,* he thought, *like normal people?* There were books - glossy, untouched volumes on architecture, photography and cinema, bought not for reading, but for their spines to match the decor and to fit well in the cabinets. He almost wanted to get one out and bend the pages, just to be bad.

Everything was *so clean.* Everything was perfect. If he threw the cushions from the sofas around, he bet that someone would rearrange them to precision within an hour.

He was starting to locate the source of his unease. It left him feeling like a dowager duchess's bored Shih Tzu.

With nothing else to do, he returned to the bathroom, retrieved his cigarettes from the crumpled pocket of his trousers, and took them out to the terrace.

There he sat for a while, smoking, doing his best not to think. The entirety of London was spread out below him - a billion tiny lights, winking in the dark.

Twenty minutes passed.

It crossed his mind that he could always leave. He then wondered why this hadn't dawned on him earlier.

It was this place, he decided after further reflection: the wealth that came oozing out of every surface; the bed that presidents had slept in; the crystal fruit bowl from which rock stars had selected a banana. All of it came together to warn him, discreetly, that this was not the domain of *his type.* His opinions were not of importance here. He was to obey - to get in the car, to dress for dinner, to put on the clothes that had been picked, and to be ready for whenever the actual maker of decisions arrived.

Three months, now.

Three months of drivers sent to fetch him, after work or in the small hours; three months of hotel rooms; three months of next mornings, the bed empty beside him, a driver waiting outside.

*How the fuck did this happen?* he thought, blowing smoke to the moon.

More importantly, why had he let it continue?

It hadn't been The Beaumont until now, he thought. He'd not been left waiting for an hour in an empty room until now.
Another twenty minutes passed.

By the time he finally heard movement through in the suite, and the room's second occupant arrived with another entourage of porters, he was quietly angry. He stubbed out the last of his sixth cigarette. For badness he lit another one, listening as he did to the imperious tones audible through the open terrace doors.

"Yes, yes - thank you. Tell them we're ready for them to serve. He is here, isn't he?"

"He is, Mr Holmes."

"And has he had the chance to change?"

Lestrade almost laughed, cupping his new cigarette against the mild night's breeze. A chance to change. God knew he'd had plenty.

"Yes, Mr Holmes. I believe he's out on the terrace."

"Good. Tell him I'm here, will you? I daresay he's as ready to eat as I am..."

Lestrade put his feet up on the pristine white cushion of the chair opposite, closing his eyes for that first drag of cigarette. There was nothing so satisfying as an angry smoke. It made him feel fifteen again - fifteen and free, without a clue of what life could do to you.

He tried sliding the lighter away into his jacket, then remembered this jacket had different pockets. He frowned, holding the cigarette between his lips as he patted himself down for pockets.

"Inspector Lestrade?" came the cautious inquiry through the open doors.

"Yep?" he said, as he found the lighter.

"Mr Holmes is here now. He wonders if you're ready to eat."

"Actually, I'm good thanks... I had an orange kitkat outta the vending machine about three days ago." His cigarette now lit, Lestrade slid the lighter back his trouser pocket. He sat back and ejected a column of smoke into the night air. "Tell him just to stick mine in a Chinese takeaway box, will you? I'll nuke it tomorrow for my lunch."

"S-Sir?" came the faltering voice.

He knew he shouldn't torment the guy. The poor bastard was just doing his job - just obeying orders, like everybody else here.

He squared the edge off his tone.

"I'm - fine out here," he said. He took another drag on his cigarette. "Tell Mr Holmes I'll finish my smoke, then I'm off."

He heard the nervous porter head back through the bedroom.

A minute later, there came a discussion from somewhere inside - a low voice, full of apology, painfully discreet. Lestrade only caught one line of the response. "He said what, excuse me?" - and then more apologies, more fretful explanation. Lestrade knocked the ash off his cigarette onto the glass table top, waiting.

At last, he heard footsteps entering the bedroom.
A shadow fell through the open doors behind him. It was thrown long across the terrace by the low light of the lamps - a tall silhouette, upright, with the angular shoulders that he now knew well.

He continued to smoke, unmoved.

"I understand that you're not hungry," came the clipped rebuke.

Lestrade let his head tip back against the chair. He blew another smoke plume into the night.

This was going to be difficult, he thought.
"Starving, actually," Lestrade admitted, flicking the cigarette between his fingers. "Have been since eight."

The incredulity from the terrace doors only angered him more. "Then do come and eat... the food is ready. I don't intend to see it go cold."

There was a pause. A note of placation softened the clipped tones.

"I had Irish sirloin brought over."

*Steak*, Lestrade thought.

Of course it was steak. The straightest food there was, for the straightest-acting man in London.

All the same, the thought of it caused an immediate spike of hunger in his stomach. It was true that he was starving. He'd wolfed down a cheese sandwich at eleven this morning, and nothing since then. His stomach cared far more about steak than about his dignity.

But they couldn't keep on this way.

He shut his eyes, trying to ignore that thought of proper sirloin - to ignore the voice and the presence so close by - to ignore the brief flash that came to his mind of the king-sized bed just through the terrace doors, and the perfectly smooth white pillows that topped it, and how Mycroft's head might look thrown back against them.

In the second before he could cave, a flicker of anger shattered the vision.

He stubbed out his half-finished cigarette on the table. They had better get this over with.

"What am I doing here?" he asked.

Mycroft audibly drew in a breath. It was not quite a sigh - a pre-sigh only, not yet the full-blown variant.

He stepped out onto the terrace. The pad of his leather loafers was as quiet and clipped as his voice.

"In the fewest possible words, I have had a *horrendous* day. Have you been following the American elections?"

Lestrade's brow furrowed. "No."

"Well, by professional obligation, I have - much to my displeasure. And from all of my sources, it looks like the wretched man is actually going to win. I didn't think it was possible."

Lestrade didn't care about politics. He'd never met a politician who made his life easier, only ever harder. They were, as his dad had always said, all the same.

"Right," he said. "And what am I doing here?"

Mycroft appeared before him on the terrace - grey waistcoat, white shirt, a lavender-coloured silk tie knotted to precision.
He looked as clean, cool and well-dressed as if he'd just left the house. Lestrade, one hour into a suit, had managed to crease it under the arms and make it smell of cigarettes. There was not a mark on Mycroft's clothing - not a wrinkle.

Lestrade ignored the responsive thump of his heart. He ignored, too, the keen and very primal urge to sully that pristine countenance. It was like looking at a field of fresh snow, he thought. He had to be the one to disrupt it, to agitate it, to mark it. This was where all the trouble had begun.

But tonight, he was determined to stay angry.

He wouldn't be beaten down this time.

Mycroft did not look impressed. There was a hardened edge to his stare, and a slight lift to his chin. It did nothing to damage Lestrade's resolve.

"You are here," Mycroft explained, with visible patience, "because I had a terrible day. I was rather hoping you could help me correct that."

Lestrade set his jaw, tugging the pack of cigarettes from his pocket.

"This is a booty call. That's what this it."

He jammed one between his lips, angry, searching his pockets for the lighter as he muttered around the cigarette. "It's an ultra-rich, ultra-screwed-up booty call."

"A - a what , excuse me?"

"Most people just send a text, you know that? Instead I get… booty-kidnapped. Brought here, washed and told to wait nicely, like a toy poodle, until you're ready to make use of me. Do you know how long I've been sitting here?"

"In a penthouse suite," Mycroft said, with a slight flare of his eyes. "In a five-star hotel."

Lestrade snorted, lighting the cigarette. "So you put me on a velvet cushion, Mycroft. I'm still a fucking poodle."

Mycroft pressed two fingers at the bridge of his nose, muttering to himself to have patience.

"We are not doing this in front of the staff," he said, shortly. "Come inside and eat. I've had a ridiculously long day."

"I was up at five AM," Lestrade snarled. "By seven, I was comparing photos of rape victims' injuries, trying to spot a pattern in wounds made by a broken bottle. Don't talk to me about long days."

"What precisely is the matter with you?"

"I don't appreciate being summoned at your pleasure," Lestrade snapped. "That's what the matter is. I don't like being - brought here, kept here… all this. All the bullshit. Presidential suite. My suits in the wardrobe."

He took a furious drag on the cigarette, turning his face away across the terrace.

"This is getting - weird. That's the matter."

Mycroft's expression was unreadable. "Define 'weird'."
"Define it, huh?" Lestrade thought for a second, flicking ash off his cigarette. "Fine. Head down a floor, knock on the door of any other suite, and you'll probably find a Russian blonde in a basque, doing exactly what I've been doing for an hour. Waiting around for some rich prick to - …"

He dragged hard on his cigarette; it didn't quite cover the shake in his hand.

"I'm not your mistress," he muttered.

Mycroft finally sighed. He put a hand to his temple.

"Give me strength. I try to do something nice…" He struck the thought away with his hand. "No-one on this planet, to my knowledge, has ever referred to you as my 'mistress' - except for you, in this moment, right now. All I want is to relax and have dinner."

Lestrade's eyebrows lifted. "That's all you want, is it?"

Mycroft's expression hardened.

"What has caused this sudden resistance?" he demanded. "It's unfathomable. Are you telling me you'd prefer to be smuggled in the side entrance of The Marriott?"

Lestrade faltered. The Marriott, off Westminster Bridge - one of the first times. That had been wild. He'd been collected from the pavement one lunch-time, halfway back from the coffee shop with a flat white and a panini in a bag. Mycroft had slammed him up against the back of the door - ripped three buttons off his shirt.

That had been the first 'Greg', if he remembered. Gasped into a bunched-up pillow, Mycroft's knuckles white.

He'd not been able to look anyone in the eye that afternoon.

*This is the problem*, he thought, returning to the present with a bump. *This is exactly the problem.* He opened his eyes to find Mycroft, angry, standing by the balcony and awaiting his response.

It took him a while to formulate one, gathering the words together in his mouth.

"I'm not a lap dog," he managed.

Mycroft frowned, bewildered. "I know."

"I'm not an escort."

"I know."

"I've scared you," he remarked.

Greg did not reply. He tossed the cigarette over the balcony. He was suddenly aware that he was cold, and didn't know when he'd become that way.

"How much are you planning on tipping the staff?" he asked.
"Handsomely," Mycroft assured him. "Though, if you believe that you and I are the most scandalous couple ever to share this suite, you would be wrong."

"We're not a couple," Greg said, wearily.

He wished he had something to drink.

"And I don't care about other people's scandals… my own are enough, thanks."

How had it come to this? An affair, the papers would call it. A sordid, gay affair - with Mycroft Holmes, brother of the famous Sherlock. Reporters would track down Cindy.

He could see her on the front page of The Mirror now. "I always knew," she'd say. (She didn't.) "I was nothing but good to Greg." (She wasn't.)

He pushed back a handful of his hair, exhausted. Just an East End boy, he thought.

Mycroft was regarding him with something awfully like concern. His brow was still gently creased.

"I didn't intend to - overwhelm you," he said, carefully. "Perhaps I forgot that the circles in which I move are not necessarily normal."

"You think?"

A flicker of humour crossed the pale face.

"You shouldn't take this as an attempt to… assert any kind of possession over you," he said. "Sincerely, I only wished to have dinner. To talk. To - enjoy your company. Forgive a misguided attempt to spoil you."

Greg drew in a long breath.

"Just - ring me in future, will you? And at least let me bring a bottle."

"Agreed," Mycroft said. He paused, then raised an eyebrow. "'Some rich prick'?" he remarked.

Greg felt a touch of colour rise in his face. "I didn't - necessarily mean you."

A tentative voice came from the distant door of the bedroom.

"Mr Holmes…?"

Mycroft rolled his eyes. He looked exhausted, Greg realised. There was a weariness to his movements, a lethargy about his eyes as he reached up to rub them.

"We're on our way, thank you," Mycroft called.

He approached Greg's chair, wearily; he extended a hand.

"No-one knows you are here," he promised. "No-one has any knowledge of your business. Your right to privacy is my foremost concern. Now... for the sake of my sanity... come and eat."

Greg hesitated for a moment more. He didn't like letting go of anger.

Then Mycroft smiled - so slight it almost wasn't there.
"Please," he conceded.

Greg had never heard that word from him outside of a bed.

He'd had a long day, he thought. He didn't want to spend any more of it fighting.

He reached up, saying nothing, and took Mycroft's hand.

Mycroft visibly relaxed; their fingers twined together. For a short while they stood quietly together in the terrace, letting flared nerves soothe, as London sparkled and festered below them.

"You chose the navy suit," Mycroft noted, at last, as Greg got to his feet.

"Did I choose right?" Greg asked as they stepped into the bedroom.

Mycroft closed the doors behind them. "Is it wrong that I have a fondness for certain items in your wardrobe?"

"No," Greg admitted. He rubbed the side of his neck. "Sorry. I'll - try to relax a bit more. It's just been a long day… a long week."

"For both of us," said Mycroft. "I assure you."

As they stepped into the dining room, Greg was briefly dismayed to see three members of staff waiting to serve them. He didn't feel like making pained conversation with an audience.

Mycroft approached the head waiter, laying a discrete hand upon his arm.

"We'll serve ourselves, Richard. Would you ensure we're not disturbed?"

"Of course, Mr Holmes." The other two staff, as prompt and efficient as robots, exited the room. The head waiter gave a gracious final nod. "Good night, sir - inspector."

He, too, left.

Mycroft waited until the door into the suite had closed for good before drawing out a chair at the table.

"Take a seat," he said.

Relieved, Greg sat down. He could feel a knot of tension that he hadn't realised was there beginning to unwind in his chest.

As gentle hands laid upon his shoulders, the knot loosened further.

"What in heaven's name was that term you used?" Mycroft asked, as he began to knead his lover's shoulders. Greg's eyes rolled shut.

"What term?" he said. Mycroft's thumbs started working slow circles into the nape of his neck.

"I believe you described this evening as a 'boobie call'."

Greg fought a smile. "A booty call."

"Mm. I'm assuming this is some modern parlance with which I'm unfamiliar…?"

_How to explain_? Greg thought. His fingers flexed at the edge of the table as Mycroft's circles edged
their way down his back, turning each muscle they passed into a pool of molten warmth.

Mycroft smelt of the toiletries in the bathroom, he realised. Lemon and olives. He breathed it in, deep.

"Well… if you were a normal person - " he began.

"And not 'some rich prick', you mean?"

"Yeah - then instead of having a uniformed driver kidnap me from the staff car park, drive me across town and deposit me in a private suite, you'd have sent what we commoners call a 'text message' - "

Mycroft's thumbs dug deep into a sensitive spot on his spine. Greg arched, his intake of breath breaking into a low groan. He screwed up what remained of his resolve and continued.

" - offering me something known as 'Netflix and chill'..."

"Fascinating," Mycroft mused into his hair. "Do go on."

"I'd have then come round to your flat - maybe with Chinese food, maybe Indian…" Damn, those hands. Mycroft could play him like a Stradivarius, even clothed. He struggled to hang onto his train of thought. "... then we'd have eaten the food, together, on your sofa. And pretended to put something on to watch."

"This all sounds rather quaint," Mycroft murmured, leaning close to Greg's ear. His slender arms encircled his lover's torso from behind. "I had no idea the youth these days were so tame and old-fashioned."

"Well… I haven't gotten to the good bit yet."

Mycroft's mouth grazed his earlobe; the ensuing jolt of pleasure passed straight down Greg's body, making him twitch.

"So in brief..." Mycroft murmured, his voice low, "you were suggesting that I brought you here with intimate intentions."

Greg gripped the table edge a little harder.

"Myke - "

"I always loathed that nickname," Mycroft reflected. His tongue flashed across Greg's ear. "Until you used it."

Greg's stomach, apparently feeling ignored, let out a whine of hunger. Greg winced.

"Sorry."

"Not at all," Mycroft said, amused. "I'm more than capable of holding a thought." He let his lover go and moved gracefully over to the sideboard, where two plates waited beneath metal domes.

"You prefer it rare, don't you?"

Greg's chest tightened. Mycroft remembered how he liked his steak. He'd only ever mentioned it once.

"Rare…" he said. "Yeah. Thanks."
"I'm sorry that I wasn't here for when you arrived. I thought I'd finished for the day, so I sent Jameson to fetch you... but, as catastrophe so often does, it waited until the last moment to make itself known to me."

He placed down Greg's steak. It was an inch thick, cooked to perfection.

Greg felt a little guilt prickle between his ribs.

"I'm sorry I - …" He tried to put it into words; he couldn't. "This is nice. I mean it."

Mycroft took the seat opposite him, flicking out a napkin and tucking it deftly into his tie.

"Quite alright," he said. Bemusement lifted the corner of his mouth. "You do realise I would have to be married, for you to be my…"

Greg gave a fond grimace. "You're - never going to let me forget that, are you?"


Greg did so.

Mycroft watched him eat for a while, thinking. His eyes were soft.

"When you say 'weird'..." he said, at last.

Greg hesitated. He put down his fork. He chewed, and swallowed, giving himself a few extra seconds to figure out what he was going to say. He knew there wasn't much point lying to those eyes.

"It's - new for me," he said. "All this. I worry about - … I don't know, people finding out. Making assumptions. Three months seems like a - milestone, I guess. It's not just a - … I mean, it's continuing. This. " He hesitated, faltering over the rest.

Mycroft's eyes flashed. "Go on."

Greg supposed he deserved the honesty. "I - don't want to be a pastime," he said. "That's all."

Mycroft processed this for a moment.

"You fear becoming the plaything of a powerful man," he said.

Greg felt his heart thump uneasily in response. "Who would want that?" he muttered.

"You'd be surprised." At last, and with casual disinterest, Mycroft transferred the first piece of steak to his mouth. "Some people want nothing more."

"Don't say that to me."

"Must I point out that I'm not maintaining a list?"

"Yeah, that makes me feel better… thanks…"

Mycroft reached for the bottle of red wine awaiting them on the table. He uncorked it, pouring out two generous glasses. As he passed one to Greg, he said,
"I'm told communication is the key to success in all varieties of relationship. So - and with full respect paid to what you do not want - perhaps you should tell me what you do want."

Greg gazed down into his glass of wine. He drank, and tried to think.

It was an uneasy conclusion to come to - but he realised he didn't know. Perhaps, he thought, some part of him did know, and he just wasn't ready to say it.

Not ready by a long shot.

The truth was that there had been a long but shambolic parade of women over the years - all of them, he regretted, a little like Cindy. The former Mrs Lestrade had been the queen of all their race: fickle, gorgeous and catty as hell, mad about him until the ring was on.

There had only ever been two men.

Mycroft was one of them.

As he put down his glass, Greg found the other man watching him carefully across the table, those slate-grey eyes trained intently upon his face.

Words didn't work. He wished he could reply in images. He didn't have the language he needed. He wanted to show Mycroft this sight instead - his own penetrative gaze, and that unreadable expression, a force of calm and authority facing Greg across a dining table worth more than most people's cars.

He didn't know why he wanted it.

He just knew that he did.

He swallowed, though there was no food in his mouth.

"What - do you want?" he asked, by way of an answer.

Mycroft thought about the reply for some time. He swirled the last of his wine in its glass.

"You," he said at last.

He tossed back the wine in a single motion.

"Here, with me, when I have a horrendous day... I want to talk to you. I want to eat with you. I want you to take me to bed. When my schedule allows, I want to wake up with you in the morning. Given practice, and given time, I want you to think about me when I am not there. That is what I want."

Wow, Greg thought - and nothing else for a while. He swallowed again, a little harder, and took a long drink of his wine.

"That sounds... fine," he managed, at last.

Mycroft's eyebrow lifted.
"Does it sound fine?" Mycroft inquired. His eyes were cool and flint-like, searching. There was nothing Greg could keep from those eyes.

"It does," he said.

His wine glass was low already. He knew he shouldn't be knocking this stuff back like it was cheap Tesco plonk - the last thing he needed in the morning was a headache. But it was hard *not* to drink with Mycroft surveying him like that.

"I mean - yeah," he said. "Talking, good. Eating, good…"

Mycroft raised an eyebrow.

"... everything else," he finished, averting his eyes. "Good."

A small smile crossed Mycroft's mouth.

"If you're certain," he said.

Greg steeled himself. 'Certain' was a big word, he thought. He was certain enough, and that was something - for now.

"We're… fine, then," he said.

Mycroft reached for the wine bottle. "I believe so," he said, pleasantly. He passed the bottle across the table with a smile. Greg refilled his glass, offering silent thanks to whichever clever bastard had invented wine.

Mycroft held his own glass aloft, bemused.

"To 'having what we want',' he proposed.

Greg supposed he could drink to that. He raised his glass.

"To what we want," he said.

They drank together.

Two glasses later, Greg's back hit the bed with the force of a bull.

Before he could catch his breath, Mycroft was on top of him and kissing him like they were about to die, wrenching apart his tie in the search for shirt buttons.

"Myke..." he managed, gasping it against the other man's mouth. His tie was tugged loose, pulled free and cast across the room. Something toppled and smashed. "Myke - "

"Get these off," Mycroft seethed against his lips; kissed him, *hard*; and started pulling buttons apart with a desperation that made Greg's heart pound.

"Myke - *easy* - "

There came a tug and a snap as a button broke. Mycroft hissed. The other buttons, now warned,
came apart with more ease, and Mycroft hauled the shirt back past his shoulders, still kissing him in a fury. Greg struggled up onto his elbows to help. As the shirt caught at his biceps, the fabric twisted and bunched, pinning him in place. Mycroft shuddered; his hands raked Greg's bare chest and out onto his arms, following the lines of muscle with fervour, his fingers fine as porcelain and shaking as they kissed. Their tongues flashed, desperate. Greg felt his last scrap of doubt burn up and blow away, gone - ashes on the wind.

He drew his arms around Mycroft and pulled him closer.

Mycroft, with a weak groan, pushed him back down to the bed.

Greg watched, dark-eyed, his arms and shoulders tethered into place by his tangled shirt, as Mycroft knelt astride him and shed three layers of clothing in seconds. Jacket, waistcoat and tie were flung somewhere across the room; the collar was torn open, the shirt heaved up and cast over his head. It dishevelled Mycroft's hair into glorious auburn disarray. Myke then dropped the shirt, panting, to the floor with a flump. His pale chest heaved; his eyes were ablaze.

As he gazed down at Greg - who gazed back, still unable to believe on some level that this was happening - something reoccurred suddenly to Myke. Delight rippled across his face.

"My mistress?" he said.

Greg twisted some of the sheets in one hand. He swallowed. "You said you weren't going to tease me," he said.

Mycroft's eyes flashed.

"And I shan't," he said, reaching for Greg's belt.

Greg let his head drop back into the pillow. He closed his eyes, forcing himself to breathe as Mycroft made short work of his belt buckle, tugging the thing free from his waistband. It, too, was cast across the room. It hit the window with a bang, then slithered to the floor in a pile.

The second the fastening of his trousers came open, Mycroft's hands pushed their way ruthlessly inside.

Greg's vision whited.

"Fuck - Myke - ... " The hands that gripped him through his boxers were firm, assured; they knew exactly what they were doing. They knew exactly what he liked. As they started to stroke - slow, tight, a little rough - he gripped the sheets ever harder. "Christ -"

Mycroft leant low. He was warm - he smelt of talc and red wine and sweat, and something perfectly, indescribably *male*, something that made Greg feel drunk and high and in love all at once. It left him reeling. It made him dizzy. Myke's mouth was grazing his ear now, exploring him: the promise of a bite, a shiver of a sigh.

"I've wanted to feel this all day," Mycroft breathed, causing Greg's heart-rate to spike. Myke tugged at his boxers, working them down. Greg screwed his eyes tight shut. "I've - needed you... all day. Every minute of it."

He groaned, tight, as Myke's hands returned to his cock - wrapping right round him, fistig him lazily. He arched, arms still bound in his shirt.

"Myke - ..."
He felt Mike's smile curve against his neck. "Now there's a thought..." Myke bit gently at his throat, making him jerk. "You, restrained. Unable to move. Perhaps I'll bookmark that for future reference." He left Greg's throat - the brief disappointment vaporised as Myke descended his body, brushing kisses over his chest. He dragged Greg's trousers down, and the boxers too, ridding him of them as if they were a menace. They were tossed carelessly away from the bed. "Ties another night," Myke murmured, eased Greg's knees apart, and leant down towards his cock with a sigh. "God save me. You are magnificent."

As Myke's mouth surrounded him - taking him most of the way down in a single stroke - Greg let out a stream of obscenity, the memory of which in the light of day would make him wince. For now, he didn't care.

He didn't care about a thing.

He raked his hands through Mycroft's hair, tousling the sweat-dampened red into unruliness as Myke nuzzled into his groin, drawing him deep, laving his cock with the full length of his tongue. Nothing in the world felt like this. No wife, no girlfriend, had ever made him feel like this - ever made his heart lurch like this - ever made him so hard he couldn't think - ever made him feel worshipped like this. He panted, turning his desperate eyes down his own body to watch his chest heaving, shining with sweat. Past his navel, Myke was tending to his cock with nothing short of devotion. One pale hand had curled snug around his root. The other began to trace patterns on his inner thigh, soothing him - idling across his skin, with a tenderness that shallowed his breath.

He watched, pupils swollen, as Myke raised his head towards the pillows.

Their eyes met along the length of his chest, rising deep with each breath.

Myke's gaze gleamed - soft, full of need. Something was being said. Not with words, Greg thought - with more than that - a sentiment, unspoken, that next morning he would replay over and over in his mind, endlessly on repeat, as he watched those eyes meet and lock with his own, telling him, promising him.

The moment passed, borne away on the tide. Myke lowered his head once more. He returned to Greg's cock with full attention - sucking and stroking, easing with his tongue. Greg let go. He let his head rest back in the pillows, let the scent of fresh Egyptian cotton overwhelm him. For ten minutes he surrendered utterly, breathed, and raked every strand of Myke's hair onto end.

It would have been easy, he thought - all too easy - to lie here in the lamplight, weak, sprawled on a king-size bed with all of London glittering through the open drapes beside them - all too easy to let Myke's mouth and four glasses of wine coast him through.

But he didn't want it to end that soon. It might be weeks before he found himself here again - in Mycroft's bed, at Mycroft's mercy.

He wanted all of it.

He clawed himself, tooth and nail, back to some kind of rational thought, turning his hazy eyes back down the bed. Myke - wild, soft, his hair on end and showing no signs of stopping - had worked a desperate hand down inside his own trousers. He was stroking himself, steady and hard.

Greg repressed the immediate urge to come on the spot, with an iron-clad will he hadn't previously known he possessed.

"Myke…" He wasn't surprised to hear his voice shake. He reached down to cup his lover's cheek,
fingers trembling too. "Myke… come here."

Myke's eyes flashed up to his. His pupils were the size of coins.

"Come here," Greg said again, his voice gravelled, with a pointed look. "Or I will."

As Greg's cock slid free from his mouth, Myke closed his eyes and lashed his tongue across the head. Greg stiffened, clamping down on a groan.

"You want to come," Myke murmured.

All trace of Mycroft Holmes was gone: the suit, the tie, the hundred-pound hair cut.

There was only Myke now - Myke, who after bad days reached for him, and him alone; Myke, who wanted nothing more in this world than to rip him out of his clothes and forget the world with him; Myke, who sometimes looked at him and seemed to miss a breath.

"S'not the only thing I want," Greg managed, hoarse.

Myke's eyes darkened.

Greg watched, breathing slow, as Myke worked his way out of his trousers and left them crumpled at the end of the bed. With a last lick to Greg's cock, he crawled up to his lover's arms.

They kissed - and oh God, each kiss was like the first: that explosion of need and joy and despair, and everything that was good about the world, all at once, all in this one person - this person who wanted him - it was perfect. It was everything. He pulled Myke close, as close as they could go. *I'm gay*, his heart gasped. *I'm gay, and I'm happy. And that's okay.* Gently he rolled Myke over onto his back, kissing him, running his hands down the smooth, sweat-sheened planes of his body - no curves, no hips - just angles, and pale and freckled skin. Myke's breathless sighs were all he wanted in the world.

"Dear God..." Myke murmured against his lips. He eased his way to Myke's cock and curled his hands around it, fisting, stroking. Myke tightened. He let out something desperately like a whimper. "No - not - "

Greg's heart leapt. "You want me..." he hushed - growled it, breathed it, as he stroked his mouth across Mycroft's imploring gasp. "Want me inside you."

Shaking, Myke drove his fingers through Greg's hair.

"Yes," he whispered. Greg watched him swallow, watched his pupils swell. "I - … need you to fuck me."

That word - there was something about *that* word, in *that* tone, from Mycroft's mouth, that Greg would never, ever tire of.

Something in his expression must have showed it. Mycroft's face contorted, desperate, hands gripping hard in Greg's hair.

"Fuck me, Greg..." he gasped, shaking, his lips bitten from their kisses and his eyes drunken and wild, almost pagan in their intensity. "Don't make me fucking beg - ..."

Greg pushed their foreheads together, swallowing. He let one hand slide down Mycroft's side to his hips, easing just slightly beneath him - gripping there, gently - flexing his fingers into the pad of
Mycroft's arse. Mycroft's voice broke as he groaned.

Greg gazed at him across no more than an inch of space, watching his expression for every detail - drinking it in.

"Beg me," he whispered.

The foggy grey eyes sharpened at once. The most powerful man in London stared up at him, fierce, full of fire and defiance. Mycroft's cheeks flushed a deep and urgent pink against his pallor.

"Do it -!" Myke snarled. He pulled his legs around Greg, hard. "I need -"

"That was an order," Greg breathed, his eyes wild. "I didn't say order me." His heart was hammering like an express train. Every muscle he had was tensed. He would be playing this through his head all day tomorrow, he thought - frame by frame, word by word.

Mycroft ground their cocks together urgently, with a hiss; Greg withdrew his hips by cruel, precious inches.

The noise Myke made he would remember for the rest of his life.

"Beg," he rumbled - even as Mycroft called him something they could maybe discuss in the morning. "Beg, or I'll go watch TV."

Mycroft arched, seething. He craned his head to the bedside cabinet and reached up, scrabbling for the drawer handle.

Greg reached over, seized the hand, and pinned it hard against the cabinet.

"Beg for my cock," he breathed, earning himself a shudder. He gripped Myke's hand tight, brushing a kiss across the soft, open mouth below him - too gentle, too light. "Give in, Myke... we both know how this is gonna end."

"God... this is -..." Mycroft twisted beneath him, horny as hell and nearly as angry. He stared up into Greg's face, his eyes blazing with defiance and desperation in perfectly equal measure. "Cruel. Unnecessary."

Greg's eyes glittered, waiting. The hand he was holding captive flexed, just a little; Greg tightened his grip.


"Then ask nicely," he murmured. He wrapped his fingers tight with the hand he had pinned, enjoying the way it tremored in his grip. "Beg me, Myke. Plead for my prick."

Something broke in Myke's expression. His whole face tightened. "Please, Greg..."

"Please what?"

"You utter fucking -..." Mycroft's throat worked; his eyes opened - soft, vulnerable and shining in the lamplight. "Fuck me, Greg... please."

Greg dipped his head to Myke's perfectly pale throat, where the muscles were hard as marble, taut as bow-strings. He stroked his mouth over them, slowly. He loosened his grip on the captured
hand.

As he grazed his teeth over Myke's neck, he reached up to open the drawer.

"In here?" he murmured.

Myke's hands wrapped around his torso, gripping at his back. They were shaking. "Yes - ..." His fingers dug into Greg's shoulder blades. "Please, just - ... I need to feel - ..."

"I know." Greg lifted his eyes, rattling quickly through the bedside drawer - a pack of tissues, a small key, a bible. He pushed them aside. His hand closed at last on a small, discreet tube.

Mycroft watched with dilated pupils, desperate, as Greg unscrewed the tube.

"Please," he breathed, again.

Greg kissed him, slowly - kissed him until the body beneath him was unwinding again, breathing slow, soft and responsive and arching gently into his hands once more.

Then he reached down, easing his hand between Myke's thighs.

He remembered the first time they'd done this. God, what a shambles. He'd been scared he would hurt Myke, scared of what Myke would do if he did, but too desperate to let it stop things. Myke had reached down, guiding his hand. He still remembered the voice, tight and ragged against his neck: "Just - there - ..." He'd gotten better. Three months of better, now. He wasn't scared any longer.

Pink patches appeared on Mycroft's chest and throat as slowly they progressed from one finger, to two, and then finally three.

"Holy God," Myke whispered at last, his eyes molten and dark.

"Okay?"

Myke shuddered, wrapping one leg around his waist. "Just - ... please." His head fell back as he whispered. "Please, please - ... now. Just be inside me."

They took it slowly, carefully. All the same, it hurt. Greg saw it in the lines around Myke's eyes, the faint flutter of tension across his jaw. The moment he spotted it, he froze.

"Myke - ...

"Kiss me?" Mycroft whispered. His voice was tight.

They kissed - slow and soft; as gentle as dawn rain. After a minute, Myke swallowed as the discomfort began to ease. He began to breathe again, purposefully deep - he drew his thighs a little tighter round Greg's waist.

"I'm - quite fine," he said.

Greg nuzzled against his cheek. "Know you better than to believe that," he murmured.

Myke huffed, his grip easing on Greg's shoulders, even as his arms around him tightened. He took another slow breath. "Perhaps one more minute..."

Greg brushed a kiss against his jaw. "Take all the time you need." Myke's faint exultation made
him smile. His heart was beating slower now, deeper - this was something more. It always ended up as something more. "Couldn't bring myself to hurt you... not even if you asked."

Myke's eyelids flickered weakly as Greg leant down, tender lips browsing his throat.

"Greg..." he whispered, overwhelmed.

Greg closed his eyes, stroking Myke's neck with his tongue. He felt his lover slowly begin to relax beneath him.

As he did, he realised with a quiet bolt of clarity that his worries had been totally unfounded.

He wasn't a plaything.

There was only one powerful man in this bed.

And it wasn't Mycroft.

At the first bite, Myke gave a fervent shudder - then a sharp intake of breath.

"Greg - ..." There was more in it now: a need, Greg thought. A request. He was finished making Mycroft beg. Now he wanted to make him come.

"Now?" he soothed, drawing Myke's earlobe between his teeth.

"O-Oh God - … now."

Carefully he eased onwards - listening, watching, for any shadow of discomfort in Myke's face. Myke's hands tremored on his forearms, his expression indescribable - need, relief, contentment and fear all at once. The blue-grey eyes were almost black.

"Okay?" Greg husked against his lips.

Myke nodded, his focus foggy. A small smile crossed his mouth. "I - did say please."

Greg felt his heart expand. He gave a soft huff of laughter, grinned, and ran his hands slowly down Mycroft's sides - his lover, he thought. The man he was currently inside. Careful not to change that, he eased to sit up on the bed.

"You did," he conceded, wrapping his hands around the other man's hips. Myke's face flushed with a moment's confusion, and somehow even that was hot - then with the first thrust he dragged Myke closer, up onto his lap, and the whole world became stars for a second. Myke ground his head back against the sheets, swearing. "Good…?" Greg gasped.

The pale thighs locked hard around his waist.

"Good"," Myke groaned. He stretched up to grip the headboard, arching with the pleasure. His eyelashes fluttered. "No more games..." he begged. "Just - …"

Greg understood.

"Just us," he murmured.

Something soft - something quiet - passed over Mycroft's face. For a second, Greg wondered what it was.
Then Myke ground down against him, hard; and he stopped thinking entirely.

When Mycroft came, twenty minutes later, twisting against the sheets with a white-knuckled grip on the headboard and three new bite-marks on his neck, it was Greg’s name that he howled.

The security guard positioned on a fold-down chair outside their door paused over the latest edition of *Classic Cars*.

He then remembered how much he was paid, took a sip of coffee, and turned over the page.
Greg awoke the next morning to a coffee mug being set down on the bedside table. He rubbed his eyes, groggy, and squinted up through the half dark.

Mycroft was standing beside the bed, fully dressed.

Greg's heart sank.

"D'you have to?" he said.

"China," said Mycroft. It was a sentence all of its own.

"Right..." Greg shifted, exhausted, scrunching a hand backwards through his hair. His back felt like he'd been changing tires all night. He was too old to be doing this sort of thing. "D'you... have to bolt off right away?"

Mycroft's small smile was just visible through the darkness. He sat down on the edge of the bed, immaculately-dressed and groomed to perfection. He was hardly recognisable from the man who had groaned and begged beneath Greg last night - and then, not long after three AM, pushed him onto his back for round two.

"I don't need to leave immediately," he said. "I have a few minutes."

"Alright..." Greg pushed himself into a sitting position, wincing. "Jesus - "

"Ibruprofen?"

"Ibruprofen," he agreed. He took the coffee that was passed to him, never so glad to have a mug in his hands. "One of these days, you'll get to sleep in with me."

"Something for us to aim towards." Mycroft watched him take the first sip, his eyes bright but his smile sad. "I'm - rather reluctant to leave you, I must admit... 'though Duty's face is stern, her path is best: they sweetly sleep who die upon her breast'."

"Shakespeare...?"

"Henry Abbey... 'The Roman Sentinel'."

Greg sipped at his coffee with a hum. "Never met the guy."

Mycroft's eyes shone in the dark.

"You shall have to wear a different suit today," he murmured. "I've - sent your other for repair."

Greg grinned against the edge of the mug, saying nothing.

"Perhaps I should simply have the buttons replaced with velcro," Mycroft mused. "Might save on the tailor's bills."

"You could wait long enough for me to undo the buttons?" Greg suggested.

"An admirable goal," Mycroft remarked, "but unlikely to transpire." He watched Greg drink with an expression of quiet satisfaction. "You were - provocative last night."
"I've been called a few things before," Greg said. "Never 'provocative', though. That's new. Should I be proud?"

"That remains to be seen." Mycroft adjusted his Rolex, brushing a non-existent speck of dust off the spotless glass face. "I hope you realise I've never pleaded for a thing before."

"Don't worry," Greg said. "Secret's safe with me."

Mycroft's expression was unreadable; his eyes glinted. "I hope so."

Greg smirked, studying Myke over the rim of the mug.

With daylight less than an hour away, his Saville Row suit back in place and his hair restored to order, Mycroft had transformed once more into the epitome of the British diplomat - controlled, reserved, and beyond reproach of any kind. Not a thread was out of place. Not a speck was there to sully him. The collar of his shirt came up just high enough... just. Another half inch, and Mycroft would have been getting some very strange looks from the Chinese.

Swapping love bites, Greg thought - like they were teenagers. The thought of it curled low in his stomach, dark and rather heated: that beneath the faultless tailoring, beneath all the money and the influence and the power, Myke's freckled skin was blotched with red keepsakes from his East End bit-of-rough.

That was at the heart of it, really - all the joys they had, and all of the problems too.

He hated Mycroft's power.

He sometimes liked it, too.

He liked pulling it all off and strewing it across the bedroom floor, where it was revealed for what it was: trappings, and no more - clothes and a wristwatch and a banker's card.

"What on Earth are you thinking?" Mycroft asked, studying his expression with the greatest of interest. "You're in another world."

Greg smiled and looked away, taking another mouthful of coffee.

"Weekly expense reports," he said. "It's Thursday. Probably waiting for me in my in-tray already... what a lucky bastard I am."

Mycroft checked his watch with a doubtful smile, then emitted a sigh.

"I haven't much longer..."

Greg did his best to look unaffected. He swirled his coffee, wishing Scotland Yard had the budget to give them this stuff every morning. Whatever it was, it was better than Nescafé bulk-buy.

"Busy few weeks coming up...?" he asked.

"I rarely know from one day to the next." Mycroft regarded him casually, resting a hand on his leg beneath the sheets. "Opportunities often arise at short notice... if at all."

Greg returned his coffee to the bedside. He eased over onto his aching back, with another wince, and laid a hand over the one now rested on his thigh.

"Look," he said. "I'm - busy too. We both know what it's like. But... well, I can work with short
notice. Just - …"

Mycroft's eyebrows arched slightly, waiting.

" - … stop kidnapping me, will you?" Greg finished. "Just give me a call. Or text me... it's only so long before someone from the office notices me being bundled into a limo and coming back with a limp."

Mycroft smiled, smoothing down his cuff.

"I'm sure I can manage that," he said. "Where is your mobile?"

Greg frowned. "You've got my number already, haven't you? What's the problem?"

"Yes, I have your details... but I'll need to upgrade the security on your phone again if we're going to be in closer contact."

"You'll need to - … hang on - what did you say? Upgrade it again?"

Mycroft's brow contracted. "Yes," he said. "It's only been fitted with a few very basic measures so far. If you're serious about having a secure channel to me, I'll need to have some extra features installed."

Greg stared at him. He pushed the gentle hand away from his thigh.

"What are you telling me?" he demanded. The first flickers of anger were as jolting as cold water splashed in his face. "What do you mean, 'fitted with...'?"

Mycroft stared at him as if he were being slow. "It's a standard procedure," he said. "It applies to anyone I have regular social contact with."

"Nobody's fitted anything to my phone," Lestrade said. "It's just as it came outta the box."

Mycroft drew in a long, silent breath. His eyes did not leave Lestrade's face.

Lestrade's jaw set. "You - ! You've had my phone - "

"Did you notice it missing? No. It didn't cause you so much as a moment of inconvenience."

"That's not the point. You've - …" Lestrade put a hand to his head. He couldn't believe this. "What the fuck have you put on my phone? Am I being tracked?"

"You are aware," Mycroft said, sharp, "that my line of work brings me into close contact with vast networks of highly dangerous individuals, don't you?"

"Completely aware! And as it happens, you're talking to one right now!"

"For God's sake - there is nothing intrusive on your phone. All that has been added are a number of standard, basic security features that serve to protect your interests in the event of - "

"Oh no. No, no. Don't you bullshit me with politician-speak. I spend half my days decoding politician-speak, and I'm not taking it from you. You've got me bugged, haven't you? Are you monitoring my calls?"

"Do you think," Mycroft demanded, his eyes as cold and sharp as ice shards, "that in the wake of a woman like Irene Adler, there is a single Whitehall servant whose contacts aren't being monitored?"
She nearly brought the country to its knees. And for no other reason than officials haven't the sense to be wary of their bed partners - "

Lestrade took the blow as if it were a punch to the stomach. He reeled from it, unable to speak for several seconds. When he did, it was in a voice hard as rock.

"Are you suggesting - "

" - that no government official has ever been fooled by an apparently doting lover?" Mycroft inquired, snide.

That was it. Greg was done. He'd heard enough.

"Fuck off, Mycroft." He kicked back the sheets, ignoring the exasperated sigh, and pushed his way out of bed. "If you think that I've spent twenty years slaving as a cop just for a chance to screw you and sell your pillow-talk to the highest bidder, we're finished here."

He stormed through the darkened suite, too angry to care that he was naked. Furious, he tugged open the wardrobe in which his coat had been stored last night.

His coat was there.

His briefcase was not.

He turned, teeth gritted, to find an unimpressed Mycroft leaning in the doorway to the lounge. In one hand he had Greg's briefcase.

Greg squared his jaw.

"Give me that."

Mycroft held it out, unfazed. Greg jerked it from his hand and snapped open the clasps, searching through it quickly for his phone. Papers slipped free and scattered across the parquet floor.

"Whatever you've put on this - " he snapped, locating the phone at last and unlocking it with his thumbprint, " - and however long ago you did it, I don't care. Wipe it. Get rid of it."

Mycroft visibly bit the side of his tongue.

"This is not about you, Greg," he said. "It is about me. My security. I occupy a position of critical - "

Greg didn't want to hear it. "When exactly did you start bugging me?" he raged, shouting Mycroft down. "Three months ago, right? Probably had it all installed before you even laid a finger on me. That's enough time to figure out that I'm not some kind of fucking honey-trap. So wipe the crap off my phone, trust me, and treat me like a normal person, or you can forget it. You can fucking forget all of it."

Mycroft's pale face had set with anger.

"You," he intoned, sleek in his suit, and as cold as steel, "are over-reacting."

"You hacked into my phone! This is under-reacting!"

"For the love of God, most of the additional features prevent third parties from hacking into your phone! Their core primary function is to safeguard against digital attack. All that I'm proposing is
to upgrade you to an advanced level of those features, so that our communications have zero risk of being monitored."

"Oh, you mean, except by the boys in the office?"

Mycroft rolled his eyes, despairing. "With international terrorism as it is," he said, "the economy in ruins, and cyber-crime rife across the planet, do you genuinely believe that 'the boys in the office' are focussing on my text messages as their main priority?"

"I don't care," Greg snapped. He thrust the phone at Mycroft. "Get it wiped. Today."

"If you want me to contact you," Mycroft intoned, his eyes hard, "by any electronic means whatsoever, then these security enhancements are non-negotiable."

"Shame," Greg snarled. "So am I."

Mycroft's jaw tightened. He did not take the phone.

There was a long, bristling pause.

At last, Mycroft said, "You realise my safety could be compromised by your insistence."

Greg snorted. He wasn't thick enough for that to work - not by a long shot.

"You think terrorists are going to hack my phone?" he said. "Last night you promised me nobody knows about us. You said my privacy is your 'first priority'. So how would they know to come looking?"

Mycroft said nothing, his tongue still bitten. He seemed to be calculating something.

Greg held his ground.

"Put the security on your end," he snapped. "Not mine. I'm not backing down on this. And if you send another limo, I'll ignore it."

Mycroft considered the matter in furious silence for a moment more.

Then, at last, he took the phone.

He slid it inside the pocket of his waistcoat without a flicker of emotion, without a word.

"I am now late," he intoned, stiff. He turned away. "Call the front desk when you want breakfast. Jameson will pick you up at eight."

"Whatever." Greg pushed past him, returning to the bedroom to find his clothes. "Say hi to China for me."

Only when he heard the front door slam, and lock, did he realise Mycroft had gone.

He turned the shower as hot as he could bear, and stood in the spray for some time. Only the thought of being delivered to Scotland Yard by limo like a sixteen-year-old on Prom Night got him moving again. He dressed, still angry, in a suit he hadn't worn since Rachel's wedding eight years ago, scraped his papers off the floor into his briefcase and retrieved his coat, leaving the suite with a bang of the door not long after seven.

The security man stationed in the corridor looked up from his magazine with surprise.
"Inspector Lestrade, sir… we weren't expecting you to leave so - "


The guard stared at him, startled, saying nothing.

As the lift doors opened with a ping, and Greg stormed inside, he shouted back in parenthesis:

"I am not gay!"
Communicate

With no mobile anymore, the girl at The Beaumont's front desk kindly let him use the phone. Work dispatched a car to pick him up. He was gone long before eight, before Jameson and the limo could get anywhere near him.

He arrived in his office at half past seven - starving, annoyed and exhausted. The expense reports were sitting in his in-tray already, bundled inside the usual red folder with a post-it note from Donovan on top: "Happy Thursday." Lestrade cast his coat over the back of his office chair, sat down in it, and massaged his temples until the thudding had stopped.

"Arsehole, he thought. Upper-class, moneyed, snide piece of…"

"Fuck me, Greg... don't make me fucking beg."

There was a new girl in HR. She'd been making eyes at him all through her induction - Laura? he thought. Something like that. Lauren, maybe. He hadn't paid much attention. Perhaps he'd invite her for a drink at the weekend. Which pubs were close to Whitehall?

There came a knock on his office window. He lifted his head from his hands to find Donovan, surprised, peering at him through the slats. He beckoned her in.

"Yep?" he said, weary, reaching for the expense reports.

"You're in early," she said. She spotted the suit, blinking at its crisply-pressed perfection. "And looking dapper today, sir... Chief Super's not coming in, is he?"

"God, no. That's all I'd bloody need…" He waved a hand, searching for some lie. "Only one left in the wardrobe, that's all. Got to get to the cleaners at some point."

"Right," she said. She didn't believe him. "Coffee?"

"Please," he said.

She left.

Greg sat back in his chair, staring at the first page of the expense reports for some time, seeing not a word of it.

It was going to be another long day, he thought.

Not long after lunch, Donovan was back. She let herself into his office with a thick bundle of files in one hand and a familiar object in the other.

"Those aren't for me, are they?" he asked, gruff. "Not done with the last lot yet."

"Nope. This is for you, though." She held up the mobile. "Someone's just handed it in... said they found it lying on London Bridge. Did you even know you lost it?"

He made a feigned performance of checking his pockets, finishing with a 'who knew' huff.

"Right - thanks." He took the phone from her, frowning. "Who found it, out of interest?"
"Woman in a suit… pearls, perfume. Didn't get her name."

Mycroft had plenty of people, Greg thought. It could have been any of them.

He switched the phone out of sleep mode, keying in his passcode with resignation. It looked no
different, he thought - but then, it had looked no different before.

There was a text message waiting for him.

He registered the sender's name, turned off the phone and put it away in the drawer.

"Coffee?" Donovan said.

"Please."

By three o'clock, he'd broken the back of the expense reports. He told himself he'd earned a break.
He took his cigarettes and, out of habit, his phone, got a kitkat from the vending machine, told
Donovan he'd be half an hour, and went to sit across the road beside The Battle of Britain
memorial.

He looked out across The Thames for some time, smoking, watching the people go by. He ignored
the weight in his pocket. The kitkat cheered him up a bit.

When he had five minutes left, he steeled himself by lighting a fresh cigarette.

Then, with the cigarette held between his lips, and a distinct feeling of doom, he unlocked his
phone.

G -

His sister called him 'G'. He'd not called her in a while. He would, he thought - tonight - see if they
were free for the weekend. Maybe he'd offer to take Sarah and Toby to the zoo.

*Your tech team should be able to put your mind at ease.*
*Regards. M.*

'Regards'.

Greg dragged on his cigarette, examining that brutal little word with narrowed eyes.

That, he thought, was probably the closest Mycroft Holmes would ever come to telling someone to
fuck off. *That's where we're at now, is it? Fine.* 'Regards' was just great. He could deal with
regards. He wondered, too, what kind of regards New Laura (or possibly Lauren) in HR might be
convinced to have for him.

The phone buzzed in his hand. He watched, surprised, as another text came through beneath the
first.

*For the record, only ever acting in your best interests.*
*M.*

He typed his reply quickly, annoyed. *I'll decide those thanks. Regards G.* He flicked his cigarette
into The Thames and headed back up to the office.

Halfway up the stairs, his phone buzzed again.
"So unthinkable to you that I might care for your safety?"

M.

"Coffee?" Donovan asked as he passed her at the photocopier, typing into his phone with a scowl.

"Please." He shut the door with a snap, sat down in his chair, and hit send. *You know the problem? using "safety" as blatant excuse to spy on me. not actually normal behaviour. aren't you meant to be busy with china?*

It was a while before the reply came through.

*When you get in bed with a government official, you can leave 'normal' at the door. That also applies to getting in bed with a Holmes. I have finished China. Syria now.*

M.

Greg sat for a while, rubbing his forehead as he read and re-read the text.

He glanced at the expense reports. A few 'i's to dot, a few 't's to cross - that was all. He couldn't concentrate on reports right now.

A thought had lodged itself in his brain, and wouldn't leave.

Had Mycroft just gone ahead and packed this thing with every 'security feature' known to man? He wouldn't put it past him. Trust was in short supply after last night, and he wasn't willing to be made a fool of. If this thing was properly clean, he wanted a second opinion on the subject.

*Don't text me for a while,* he told Mycroft, and deleted their messages.

Computer Crime were a nice enough bunch of guys. They had a lot of posters on the wall that he didn't understand, and they wore sneakers in the office a bit too often for his liking. But with a favour to ask, he was willing to overlook those small problems.

The Head of CC was a bloke called Roy, who had never married and played Dungeons & Dragons at the weekend.

"You guys wouldn't do me a solid, would you?" Greg put his phone down on Roy's desk, sliding it across the polished wood. Roy picked it up, intrigued. "Slight concern I've got someone listening into my calls. Can you check this for me? Just - see if there's anything there that shouldn't be. Any software, or… I don't know. You guys are the experts."

"Not a problem," said Roy. "Might take a while. Couple of hours, maybe."

"S'fine." Lestrade smiled, just glad it wouldn't be weeks. "I'll - swing by when I leave."

"If you want to save me half an hour, you could let me know the passcode. You can always change it when I'm done."

"Oh - sure." Lestrade reached for a pad of post-it notes on Roy's desk. "D'you mind?"

"Not at all." Roy handed him a pen.

It had a miniature tardis on the end.

Greg clicked the tardis, frowned, and jotted down his niece's birthday - 17th July, 1707.
"Cheers." Roy took back the pen and the note. "Right - I'll crack on. Nobody in particular spying on you, is it? IRA? ISIS? KKK?"

Greg snorted. "No. Nobody that exciting."

"Just the government, huh?"

Coffee, Greg thought. Maybe another smoke. He left, thanking Roy again for his help.

Halfway back to the office, he turned a corner in the stairwell to find a blonde in a cream sweater and a pencil-skirt ascending towards him, balancing a stack of ringbinders against her ample breasts.

New-Laura-or-Maybe-Lauren from HR looked up, surprised to find someone on the stairs. Her face opened into a ruby-lipstick smile.

"Inspector Lestrade!" she said, delighted. "You're looking rather sharp today… how are you?"

After a moment's indecision he found a smile for her, pausing on the stairs. "Oh - fine, thanks. How are you settling in… Laura - right?"

She smiled, flustered. "Kelly."

"Kelly - right. Sorry. Terrible with names."

"No, no, it's not a problem! I'm still trying to get my head around everything… so many new faces to learn."

She beamed as she stepped off the stairs, hitching the folders up where they had slipped.

Greg dragged his eyes back to her face, clearing his throat.

"Well, I mean… if you're still getting to know people, you should come out for a drink on Friday. There's usually a few people in The Red Lion after work - just round the corner. I could help you put names to some faces."

"Oh wow, I'd love to - but I'm so sorry, I can't… me and Angie are heading off to The Lake District this weekend. We're going straight from work on Friday. Maybe next week, though?"

Lestrade faltered. "You and - ...?"

"Angie," she beamed. "My partner."

Of course, Lestrade thought. He smiled back at her, his face starting to ache with it. He wondered why life was so determined to torture him this week.

"No, that's - fine," he said. "That's great. The Lake District, huh? Heard it's nice."

"Oh, it's gorgeous. We got engaged up there, so it's kinda special… and the dogs love all the space..."

"Great. That's - great."

"Have you got weekend plans?" she asked him, bright.

"Ah - might take my niece and nephew to the zoo… see if their mum's forgiven me for last time."
He smiled, awkward. "Bought my niece a load of plastic animals. She's - not meant to have any more. Bedroom full of the things. Can't help myself."

"That's so cute." She gave him a little grin, squishing her nose up. "Well, you have a great time at the zoo... I'll take you up on those drinks one week."

"Sure," he said. "Hey, bring Angie along. Let her meet everyone."

"I will. See you soon."

She clicked off through the door to HR with a little wave, her high heels echoing behind her. Greg watched her go.

He returned to his office, where a cold cup of coffee awaited him on the desk.

He drained it with a grimace, loosened his tie, then dragged the expense reports back into the ring.

"Nothing."

Roy slid the phone back across the desk, still stuck with the note reading 1707.

"I got the team to give it a pretty thorough scrubbing," he said. "There's nothing obvious we can see. These things usually leave some fairly obvious clues, if you know what you're looking for… nothing we could spot."

He gave an amused little smile and leant across the desk, waggling his eyebrows.

"You may sleep soundly, inspector. This wall at least has no ears."

"Great." Greg pocketed the phone, not sure if he was relieved or disappointed. He suspected it was a mix of both. "Thanks for doing that, Roy. Puts my mind at ease."

"You had a couple of text messages, by the way."


"Good night, Lestrade. May it find you well."

"Sure. You, too. Have a good weekend."

Greg waited until he was in the car park, safe in the front seat of his beloved BMW before he checked his phone.

The first message was from Rachel.

Hey big bro hows life? You want to come over for tea this w/e? Favourite niece is missing you. Was maybe thinking about the aquarium sunday? What you think? Graham says sorry about arsenal. Going to put obit in the paper for you. Loads of love. xoxoxoxox

Greg smiled, gazing down at the message.

He didn't deserve his sister. Sometimes, the whole world felt dark - then he remembered it had Rachel in it, and he didn't feel so bad. As long as people like Rachel could be happy, could have a home and raise a family, and go to the aquarium on Sunday, he was doing his job right.
He didn't reply at once, telling himself he'd save the happier task for afterwards.

He flicked through to the other message.

*Did they find anything?*
*M.*

Greg frowned. He tried to think what there was to say. He switched on the radio as he gathered his thoughts together.

*No. you must have got it hidden it well. tell your intrusive surveillance department they earned their pay today. G.*

The reply came halfway home. He realised he hadn't responded to Rachel, and felt guilty.

He ignored the buzz of his phone, even as he sat in lights - the last thing he needed today was a conviction for driving and texting. It wasn't worth the risk.

As he let himself into his flat, a Waitrose bag and his phone in one hand, briefcase and keys in the other, he frowned and read the new message.

*When do you plan to stop punishing me for being protective of you? Do let me know. I'll mark it on my calendar.*
*M.*

"Don't sass me," Greg muttered at the phone, annoyed. He dumped his bags on the kitchen counter, fighting his way out of his coat. He threw it over the table. "Prick."

He tugged open the fridge to put his groceries away - and there they were, all six of them.

They'd been waiting for him patiently all this time.

His heart broke a little as he gazed in at them, illuminated in the fridge's ethereal golden glow. His face crumpled with relief.

"I missed you," he told the first can of Strongbow, as he loosened it from the plastic ring. He knew he should wait to have some dinner first. He couldn't. He cracked open the ring-pull, leaning against the open fridge door.

The hiss it made was almost as satisfying as one of Myke's - almost.

"Take me back, baby," he murmured, and took the first sip. "I've changed. I won't leave you again, I promise."

His phone buzzed in his pocket.

"Not you," he muttered, pulled open his tie, and went to get changed. The can of Strongbow came with him.

When he was safe in jeans and an old jumper, his suit discarded in a crumpled pile on the bedroom floor, he returned to the kitchen and got some carrots out to chop. As he did, he reluctantly checked his phone.

It was Rachel.

*Thoughts G? Sorry if you busy. xoxoxoxoxoxox*
Immediately feeling like an arsehole, he leant against the counter to reply. The carrots sat abandoned on the chopping board.

*Hey Rach. Sorry didn't reply, was driving. Just got in. What time should i get there for sunday? Should warn you i know fuck all about fishes, hope favourite niece won't have questions. Tell graham i'll put his own obit in the paper if he dares. G x*

As soon as he'd sent it, a reply arrived. He picked the phone up, startled.

It was Mycroft.

*I'm sorry you disagree with my methods.*

*M.*

Greg pushed his tongue into his cheek, thinking. His flat felt strangely quiet all around him. It wasn't usually like this.

He typed in a reply, reconsidered it, deleted it - then typed it in again and hit send.

*you mean you're sorry you were a twat? sorry you thought I was a spy? sorry you bugged my phone? say it and we'll talk.*

He laid his phone on top of the microwave, safe away from the dirty dishes and the gas hob.

A few messages arrived in the time it took to chop the carrots and an onion, open a pack of mince into a pan and start it browning. He read through them, finishing his cider as he did.

*Come round for ten G. We will all go on the tube. Bad news on the questions, sorry, she has loads of them already. Such as why do dolphins need to breathe but fishes dont? Will leave that one with you. looking forward to sunday. I'll make the picnic. xoxoxoxoxoxox*

It was something to do with gills… wasn't it? Sarah was six now. Somewhere she'd picked up the idea that her favourite (and only) Uncle Greg was the font of all knowledge in the universe.

He made a mental note to google dolphins, fishes, and what the fuck was going on there, then opened the next message.

There were three of them, sent a few minutes apart.

*You would be a terrible spy.*
*And I never bugged your phone. I was protecting your privacy, which seemed to be of grave importance to you last night. Make up your wretched mind.*

*M.*

*I am not a twat.*

*M.*

*I'm sorry.*

*M.*

The pan began to spit. Greg dropped his phone onto the counter, swearing as he scrabbled to turn down the heat. He borrowed the least dirty wooden spoon from Tuesday night's bolognase and gave it all a quick stir, checking for burned bits - not too bad. Nothing that a single, forty-three-year-old male divorcee's stomach couldn't handle.
At last, with the crushed can of cider tossed into the recycling, his shepherd's pie with mashed potato top crisping in the oven, and a knife and fork washed up ready, Greg dried his hands and collapsed onto the sofa.

He typed in the reply he'd been planning for fifteen minutes.

*why do dolphins breathe air while fish don't? my niece wants to know. She is six and I am very stupid.*

He could imagine Mycroft half a world away, sitting at a desk somewhere in Whitehall surrounded by maps and files and registers. He imagined him typing, eyes tired - but maybe happy - reaching for coffee.

*Tell her they are mammals - of the order Cetartiodactyla. They have lungs. More energy-efficient method of respiration than gills. Means they can maintain a higher metabolism, higher levels of activity. Also grow bigger (advantage against marine predators). Just one niece?*

* M.*

Greg scrolled through his phone, found a photo, and sent it - Sarah at the pantomime last Christmas, pleased as punch and waving from the stage next to Aladdin.

*Sarah, he typed. And a nephew too. Toby. can't talk yet, too young to think i am some kind of endless source of information. Going to aquarium sunday. god help me. so you are saying it is to help them do more jumping? G x*

*Eh. For such an early stage of the curriculum, yes. It is for purposes of jumping. Have you eaten? M.*

*Get round here. G x*

Greg paced the flat, watching his screen as he waited for a reply to arrive. Smoke started to drift from the kitchen. He scooped the burned shepherd's pie into the bin, opened all of the windows, and found a text had come through in the meantime.

*One hour, then all yours.*

*M x*
The doorbell rang not long after eight.

Greg opened the door to find Mycroft there in slacks and a knitted Argyle sweater, holding a white plastic bag full of takeaway cartons. He looked as regretful and uneasy as a Tory politician on a meet-and-greet in a fishfinger factory.

As the door opened, and they met eyes, there was a long and uncomfortable silence.

Greg did his best to suppress the thudding of his heart. It didn't quite work.

He glanced down at the plastic bag with concern.

"What's that?"

Mycroft squinted at one of the lids. "Something called a… 'chicken Jalfrezi'," he said. He checked Greg's expression, seeing if this met with approval. "I am here for Netflix and chill."

"Christ." Greg covered his face with a hand. It was almost too much. When did this become my life? he thought. Perhaps he'd just gone insane. "You're really not, mate. You're really, really not. Get in here."

He shut the door after Mycroft, took the takeaway bag from him and carried it through to the kitchen, saying as he did,

"Make yourself at home… sorry the place is a state."

He started looking for plates. As he emptied the bag out onto the counter, hoping Mycroft knew what he was doing with curry, he looked round to find the other man hovering uncertainly in his kitchen. He looked scared half to death, studying the drawings on the fridge in alarm.

"It's their dog," he explained, unwrapping naan breads. "Boofle. He's a cocker spaniel. Sarah named him."

"Of course he is," Mycroft said, examining the crayon monstrosity in amazement. "How could I not see that?"

"Probably the three extra legs," Greg ventured. "Or the rocket pack."

"Yes, they're… unusual features in a cocker spaniel, I must say." Mycroft hesitated, visibly searching for something nice to say. "She's quite the innovative eye."

"She's quite the something," Greg cracked open a carton to find what looked like a lamb pasanda. He found himself pleasantly surprised. "How's Syria?" he asked. "Sorted it all out yet?"

Mycroft didn't reply. Greg doled out pilau rice onto plates until the silence became too much for him, and he glanced round.

Mycroft was still watching him hesitantly from over by the fridge.

Greg raised an eyebrow.

"Relax," he said. "You won't catch anything."
Mycroft looked shocked. "I wasn't for one moment - "

"I'm joking, I'm joking… bachelor pad humour. I'm used to hearing it, that's all..." Greg reached for a clean spoon for the jalfrezi. "The old house was pretty nice, but… divorce," he shrugged. "Cindy decided we'd split half and half. She'd have the nice stuff, and I could have the old shit. She's still got my laptop - loads of photos of Sarah on it. And there's not a lot to rent in London on a police salary, even DI level… so..."

He rapped the spoon against the edge of the plate, encouraging the last of the sauce onto the rice.

"It's - nice," Mycroft said behind him. "Quiet."

Greg snorted. "Until Mrs Downstairs' baby gets going," he said. He transferred hot samosas quickly from brown paper bag to plates, licking his fingers as they burnt. "Or Mr Upstairs and his two-in-the-morning porn... man's an addict. Suppose we all need a hobby."

"Greg," Mycroft said, quiet.

Greg said nothing, tearing naan breads into smaller pieces.

The hands came gently out of nowhere, resting themselves in the middle of his back. He stopped tearing. He put the naans down and closed his eyes, letting himself feel for just a second.

Arms looped carefully around his waist from behind; Mycroft's chin settled on his shoulder.

He let out a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding all day. Slowly he laid one arm over Myke's.

They stood for a while in the quiet, thinking together. Myke spoke at last into his neck - hiding the words there, safe.

"Genuinely, I - wished to protect you. By the methods that I know."

"M'a big boy," Greg muttered. "I can look after myself, Myke. I mean it."

"You do not know the manner of people that I know," Mycroft said. "You don't realise what human individuals will do to each other if given the chance."

Greg pulled a face. "What division d'you think I'm in? Arts and antiques?"

Mycroft gave a silent sigh; it was not frustration. It was merely emotion. His arms tightened a little around Greg's waist, possessive.

"Two disagreements in two days," he remarked.

"Jesus, was that only yesterday?" This week was only getting longer and longer, Greg thought. He wrapped his fingers with Myke's, slowly. "Are we going to go for the hat-trick?"

"Please let's not."

"Fine. Let's go eat... see if we can make it a few hours within ripping chunks from each other, huh?"

Mycroft placed a single kiss on his shoulder. "Agreed." He let Greg go, more than a little reluctant. "Let me carry something."
They sat together on the sofa, making their way through the food. Mycroft didn't seem to notice the mess. Greg found himself surprised; he'd thought he would. As time went on, Mycroft was unwinding more and more, easing into this strange environment in which he found himself.

"Your brother's children?" he asked, as he offered Greg the final samosa.

"You sure you don't want it?"

"Yes, of course."

"Thanks. Sister's kids... Rachel. Married Graham about eight years ago, been over in Croydon ever since."

"Your niece looks like you."

Greg smiled, pleased. "You think so?"

"She has your nose." Mycroft rested his head on the back of the sofa, considering Greg with a faint smile. "Are your parents living?"

Greg hesitated, gathering together a spoonful of food. He covered his pause with eating.

"Still got Dad," he said, at last, putting the spoon down. "Lost Mum ten years ago. Breast cancer."

"I'm sorry."

"Not your fault. Dad's heart's on its last now. Couple of years, the doctor's said... fags and fry-ups. Curse of the working class." He dusted his hands off on his jeans, not meeting Mycroft's eyes. "He still hasn't forgiven me for Cindy."

"Did he not like...?"

"Mm? Oh - no. He's not forgiven me for divorcing her. He thought she was spot-on - 'top bird', he said. Told me I wouldn't see her like again in my life. I told him the problem was all the other blokes seeing her 'like', again and again and again. He still said I was an idiot."

Mycroft contemplated this for a while, pensive.

"She seems a woman of poor judgement," he concluded, at last.

Greg reached for the last shard of poppadom.

"Better off without her," he said, as he chewed. It had been his mantra for two years now. At first, he hadn't really believed it. In time, it had become the truest thing he knew. "My sister didn't like Cindy."

"No?"

"Nope. I guess women have better instincts for these things. My mum was the same. She knew the make of someone from the get-go."

"And your niece, too," Mycroft said, raising an eyebrow.

"God, yeah. Six going on sixty-six. Spitting image of her mum, too." He reached for his phone, wiping a few crumbs off his hands onto his jeans. "Here..."
He flicked through his photos until he came to one of Rachel at her wedding reception - beaming in the hotel ballroom in her fancy white frock, her nails covered in diamante crystals. Greg himself stood beside her, the proudest person in the room.

He handed over the phone. Mycroft's eyes widened in delight and he laughed.

"Of course that's your sister," he remarked, as he admired her. Greg felt his heart lifting at the sight. He wondered briefly what Rachel would have thought of Myke - it saddened him to think he would never know.

"You're very alike..." Mycroft murmured, fond. He handed the phone back. "Younger, is she?"

"Steady. Only by a few years."

"I simply note that we are both elder brothers."

"I guess so." Greg stretched back on the sofa, placing his feet up on the coffee table in unapologetically mismatched socks. "Mine's - probably less trouble than yours, all things considered..."

"Let's not go there, shall we?"

"Yeah, let's not."

There was a silence between them, not uncomfortable. Greg let his eyes close for a moment. It was good to be at home, in his jeans and a jumper, at peace. He felt Mycroft shift beside him on the sofa; a hand rested on his arm.

"And now we… pretend to put something on to watch?" Mycroft checked.

Greg snorted, unable to repress a smile. He did not open his eyes.

"We are not having sex tonight," he said. "You can forget it right now. You committed a major felony against me. I'm not rewarding that sort of behaviour."

Mycroft's head rested on his shoulder, gently; an arm laid across his chest.

"Then what shall we do?" he asked.

Greg opened one eye, looking down at him in amusement. Mycroft gazed back - blue-grey on deep brown. Greg put an arm around Mycroft, drawing him nearer. With the other hand he reached for the remote.

It was eleven before Greg knew it. Mycroft had been dozing the last hour against his shoulder, peaceful as falling snow; Greg hadn't the heart to move him.

Finally, as the TV station gave up for the night and a rerun of Friends began, Greg leant down and placed a kiss on the other man's head.

"Oi," he murmured. "Eleven o'clock."

Mycroft stirred, heaving a quiet sigh. "Must it be?"

"Yep. C'mon… world needs us again in the morning. Bad guys to round up. National interests to defend. Civilisation will topple without us." He brushed his fingertips through the soft auburn hair,
breathing in Mycroft's scent for a moment. "Want me to call you a taxi?"

Mycroft said nothing for a while, not lifting his head. "I'm - not sure I want to be alone."

Greg didn't want to admit he'd hoped it. "Stay the night?" he murmured.

"Please."

"'S'fine. You're not borrowing my toothbrush, though. Need to maintain some romance and glamour between us... 'specially now you've seen my flat..."

He let Myke go, sitting up on the sofa - his back, ignored for several hours, rewarded him with a twinge of pain that sucked the breath from his lungs.

"Christ -"

"What? What's wrong?"

"Just my... Jesus, my back. I'm getting painkillers. Bedroom's through there - bathroom on the left - get bedded down. I won't be long."

_I need a place to keep ibuprofen_, he thought, as he hunted through kitchen drawers. A box, maybe - somewhere in the bathroom, easily accessible, right there when he needed it. Every time he was in pain, he forced himself to hunt through the flat for painkillers. He told himself he would go out on his lunch tomorrow, buy a box, and bring it home.

He finally found a packet in with the teatowels. ("Of course," he muttered to himself, as he popped two from the foil into his hand. "Of course they're in with the tea towels.")

His pain now, in theory, killed, he locked the front door; checked it twice, as was his habit; turned out the living room light, and headed through into the bedroom.

Myke was already in bed.

He was bare-chested in the glow of the bedside lamp, his love bites now visible in all their glory. He looked as natural against Greg's grey-striped Argos pillows as if he slept there every night. His clothes were folded neatly on a chair in the corner.

As Greg entered the room he looked up, his hair tousled and his eyes at peace.

Greg looked back. He felt his heart go quiet.

_I'm gay_, he thought.

Mycroft shifted a little, giving him a half-smile. "Am I on the wrong side?"

"No," Greg said. He wondered what the strange note he heard in his own voice was. "You stay right there. You're fine."

"How is your back?" Mycroft asked, as he pulled the jumper up over his head. He tossed it onto the chair with Mycroft's clothes.

"It's forty-three," Greg murmured, as he sat on the edge of the bed. A yawn stretched his mouth wide. "Along with the rest of me..."

As he began to undo the buttons on his shirt, Mycroft stirred quietly behind him in the bed. The
mattress rocked a little.

"Wait," Mycroft said - as he moved to kneel behind Greg, putting his chin on his shoulder. "Here."

He reached under Greg's arms and around, starting to undo the buttons.

Greg couldn't help but smile, watching as each one was eased carefully and methodically apart.

"M'impressed," he said, earning himself a low, tired chuckle.

"There's a first time for everything." Mycroft placed a kiss on his neck as the last button came undone, then reached up to ease back the fabric from his shoulders. "Hanger?"

"Floor," Greg murmured. He shrugged his shoulders back, helping Mycroft slide it down his forearms and off. The shirt was cast quietly into a corner.

Mycroft's arms drew around his bare chest from behind, slow.

Greg's eyes fell shut, listening to his own heart beating deeply in the darkness.

"You're sweet to want to protect me," he murmured. "It's - …" There was no word, he realised.

Mycroft's hand came to rest over his heart, pale fingers splayed.

"'I myself must mix with action, " he said, "lest I wither in despair'."

Greg hesitated. "Shakespeare?"

"'Locksley Hall'. Tennyson."

Greg had never met him, either. He put his hand over Mycroft's. "What - makes you despair?" he asked.

"The things that I know," Mycroft said. He threaded their fingers together. "The shadows whose faces I have seen... waiting out there in the dark. Watching for weakness. The eyes that never close."

Greg was silent for a while, thinking.

Mycroft sat with him in the quiet, listening to him think.

"You know what the Chief Super said to me once?" Greg said at last. "Just before you and I were introduced - first time we met."

"Tell me."

"He said: you're about to meet Mycroft Holmes. He's the most dangerous man in England. So don't show me up Lestrade, or I'll have you bumped down to Traffic for the rest of your days."

Mycroft said nothing, trailing some pattern across his chest.

"Was he right?" Greg asked the silence.

It held for a moment more - knowing, deep.

"Yes," Mycroft said, at last. "Of course he was."
Greg processed this; his gaze lost itself somewhere in the wardrobe door. Mycroft's mouth brushed lightly at his neck.

It would be fine, he thought. They just had to keep it a secret - at all costs, if necessary.

Nobody could know.

Then nobody could hurt them.

Mycroft's hands were moving gently down his stomach now, brushing the fastening of his jeans. He fought a smile as the button was slowly undone.

"I meant it," he warned, even as Mycroft lowered his zip. "Not tonight."

"Can I at least undress my lover for bed?"

"We're not - …" Greg stopped, pushing the thought away. He got to his feet. The bed creaked gently with the loss of his weight.

He pulled off his jeans and boxers, dropped them to the floor, and turned out the light.

Mycroft's arms came around him as he climbed beneath the covers. They burrowed together, closer. Myke's hands brushed over the stubble on his jaw, cradling his face. In the perfect quiet of the darkness, they kissed.

Mycroft's skin was smooth under his hands - touchable - his body soft and bare, radiating a human warmth that made Greg's pulse-rate slow, made his breathing deepen. As he stroked the smooth back, Myke eased a little nearer to him and their kiss slowed, softening - the first flicker of tongues. Greg felt his stomach tighten. There was something about Mycroft's mouth - something yielding - that made him want to penetrate it over and over, kiss him until he came. He nudged Myke gently onto his back and leant over him in the dark, feeling his lover's body stir beneath him, responding with restrained pleasure to the protective brush of his hands.

It was growing harder to pretend that his restriction was still in place.

As he pressed Mycroft slowly into the pillows, easing his tongue between his lover's pliant lips, Myke seemed to suppress a shiver. Greg at once made it his personal mission to release it.

He pushed closer, inwardly lamenting his own lack of resolve, and eased his hardening cock against Mycroft's stomach. Mycroft made some small, breathless sound into his mouth. He shifted beneath Greg to pull their bodies tighter, closer; their cocks slid together, slow, inducing a mutual shudder. It felt good. Greg did it again, slower this time. Mycroft's eyelids flickered as he groaned.

Sleepy, restless, they rocked like this for quite some time. It was perfect, Greg thought - just this way: the steady, gentle push of skin against skin, infinitely slow, feeling each other grow harder as the kisses deepened, as Mycroft's hands gripped more restlessly at his lower back. It was everything he wanted. Myke was becoming less and less capable of holding in his moans. The first gasped "Greg - " was a marvel in itself. Immediately he wanted more of them.

Durex Glide - and plenty of it - did the trick.

"Oh..." Myke stiffened as their cocks slid more slickly together. Greg stroked a kiss over the biggest of the bites on his throat. He thought briefly about topping them up; but there was no need. He knew they would last.
"Just like this?" he husked.

"Just like this..." Mycroft's hands flexed against his hips. "Don't change a thing - ..."

They would be taking things slow far more often from now on, Greg decided. He reached up, bracing one hand against the wall. Myke swore softly, tipped his head back into the pillows and wrapped one leg up around him, settling their bodies closer still.

They ground together, slow and hard, until Myke's chest was heaving and his eyes had lost all of their focus.

"I could watch you like this all night," Greg breathed after some time, gazing down at his lover's enraptured face. His voice came out rough, as soft as black velvet.

Myke emitted a sound somewhere between a laugh, a moan and a sob.

"I - ..." He swallowed, dragging in a lungful of much-needed air. "- ... will not be lasting all night - n-not at this rate - ..."

"Then let me watch you come." Greg's hand flexed against the wall; he leant low, his shoulder muscles bulking, to brush his mouth over Myke's. "And watch it in my head all week."

"Holy God, your voice - ..."

"Come for me, Myke... show me. Let me see how it feels."

Mycroft quivered, his pupils huge. His fingers were digging into Greg's back now, hard.

"Close your eyes," Greg breathed - Myke did so, shivering. A slow kiss, long: those lips, compliant, yielding without resistance to his tongue. As they parted, he found his own eyes closed too. "Moan for me... don't hold it. Give me it."


By midnight, Greg counted three more 'fucks'; by four AM, six more.

Mycroft woke the next morning to a coffee mug being set down on the bedside table.

Greg was standing beside the bed, fully-dressed.

"You're not serious," Mycroft said, with a sigh.

Greg nodded, entirely serious.

"Why....?"

"China," said Greg.

Mycroft stared up at him in bewilderment.

After a second, Greg relented. "Alright," he admitted. "It's not China. Gang fight in Whitechapel. A fifteen-year-old's been stabbed - got the rest of them in custody. I have to go."

He reached out a closed hand.

And to Mycroft's surprise, he clicked a key onto the bedside next to the coffee mug. It had a
keyring attached from The London Dungeons - a jointed skeleton, now slumped into a pile of little plastic bones.

"Spare key," Lestrade explained. "Lock up as you leave, will you? Just drop it in my postbox downstairs."

He raised an eyebrow, sliding his hands into the pocket of his coat.

"Or," he said, "keep it."

As he reached the bedroom door, Mycroft's voice called him back.

"Greg."

Lestrade paused, looking back over one shoulder.

Mycroft was sitting up in bed. He had the keyring in his hand. He didn't say a word, marvelling over it, staring back at Greg in the door. His face was full of everything, Greg thought - hope - confusion - joy.

Greg gave a half-smile.

"I know what I said," he promised. He turned away. "Don't let your coffee go cold… Kenko Millicano. Only the best of service here."

As he stepped into the waiting squad car, he glanced up at the window on the fifth floor.

Mycroft was standing there, watching him leave. He was wearing Greg's shirt from the previous night.

He couldn't wave - not with Donovan waiting at the wheel.

He looked, instead. He held the watching eyes as long as he dared, then stepped into the car, slamming the door with perhaps a little too much force.

They peeled away from the kerb. Lestrade had never been so sorry to leave. Driving one-handed, Donovan handed him a coffee, a sandwich, and the folder of what they knew so far.

It was going to be another long day.
The problems started innocently enough, a month later.

Lestrade got into work as usual on the Monday morning. He checked his e-mails, had a coffee, took a number of tedious reports from other divisions, and came to the conclusion he would need an incentive to get through this day.

_Morning, _he texted. _Siam central tonight? my treat. citizen kane is on at nine x_

He'd never tried Thai food before Mycroft. Now, he was developing quite a taste for it.

The reply came half an hour later. It immediately shipwrecked his mood.

_Sounds blissful. Alas I have been called out of the country on urgent business. Going to be a few days._
_M xxx_

Greg text back at once, concerned.

_Out of the country? where the fuck are you? x_

_Beijing, _Mycroft replied. Greg had never hated a word so much in his life. _I'm sorry. No idea I would be leaving until the early hours of this morning. Emergency sixteen-hour flight... if all goes well, back home on Friday._

Greg stared down at the message, seeing within it the ruin of his entire week. He trailed his thumb across the screen, a little helpless. It was impossible not to be disappointed.

_And if it doesn't go well...? _he asked, not sure he wanted to hear the answer.

_Let's not contemplate that, _Mycroft replied after some time. _I am genuinely sorry._

_not your fault. Just come home in one piece okay? i owe you thai food._ Greg paused again, fixating for a while on how to finish. _We can still text right? x_

_If you promise to remember that I'm seven hours ahead of you, yes._
_Keep the country standing while I'm gone._
_M xxx_

Greg scrubbed his fingers through the hair on the back of his head, reading the message a few times over.

_Bring me back something nice_, he said, locked his phone, and put it away in a drawer.

He got a text on Wednesday as he let himself in from work, bad-tempered and thinking only of a shower and a Top Gear marathon.

_Are you home? _
_M xxx_

_Just, _he replied, as he tugged open the fridge and grimaced at the contents. He stopped and did a
A minute later, his phone began to shudder across the kitchen table. *Incoming Call - Mycroft Holmes.* Greg threw the fridge shut, snatched up the phone and answered.

"I can't sleep," Mycroft said at once. Greg's heart contracted. He sank into a chair before he knew what he was doing, drinking in the voice he'd not heard for five days. "I've been in meetings back-to-back since nine AM... I've dealt with more inept translators than there are stars in the sky. My head is spinning itself to pieces. Please. Relax me."

Greg's mouth answered before his brain could intervene. "Fuck, I miss you."

The laugh only made his heart beat harder. "I left England two days ago..."

"Feels longer," Greg said. He trailed his eyes across the table top, fiddling with his shirt collar as he smiled. "Where are you right now?"

"Some soulless hotel room... it's comfortable enough." Mycroft sighed. "If a little spartan. The bed somehow contrives to be inadequate in a hundred different ways... chief among those being that you are not in it."

Greg grinned, undoing the knot of his tie one-handed.

"I can't believe you're on the other side of the world right now. It's wrecking my head."

"I feel it," Mycroft said, tired. Greg listened to him stretch, trying to get comfortable against pillows that wouldn't cooperate. "Where are you?"

"Kitchen..." Greg loosened his top button, slowly pulling off his tie. "What can I cook from half an onion, three rashers of bacon, cream cheese and an out-of-date Muller Light yoghurt?"

"Gastric ruination?" Mycroft suggested. "Order something."

"No... I don't feel like it. Seems wrong without you."

"So be it. I fear you'll be rather hungry by Friday."

"Are you still planning to be back then?"

"Yes, if the universe is kind..." Mycroft sighed again, wistful and weary at once. "Keep the weekend free, will you?"

Greg had cleared his schedule days ago. He'd told work he was going to an event up in Sheffield, and couldn't be disturbed for anything short of a national crisis.

"I wish you were closer," he said, unsurprised by the tightness in his voice.

"As do I." Mycroft paused. For a few moments, they listened to each other breathe. "I would appreciate your company tonight. You have a remarkable talent for getting me off to sleep."

"Just keep thinking about coming home," Greg said. "We'll hole up at my place for the weekend... door locked. Phones off. It'll be perfect. I promise."

Mycroft made a quiet noise of frustration.

"Why am I now twice as awake as before...?"
Greg let his eyes close, rubbing his left shoulder with a saddened smile. He wished he was there. He knew that tone in Mycroft's voice - it killed him that he couldn't attend to it.

"Look after yourself," he advised, his voice soft. "Seeing as I can't."

Mycroft huffed. "Are you encouraging me towards self-pollution?"

"I'm encouraging you to relax," Greg said, "to take care of yourself, and to get off to sleep. Then it'll be tomorrow, and you'll be another day closer to home."

"I can't fault your logic," Mycroft conceded. "Please eat something between now and Friday. I will need you in peak condition."

Greg grinned, hoping that was a promise.

"Text me when you wake up," he said.

"No promises, I'm afraid... I have a breakfast meeting at seven-thirty, would you believe? As if the day is not riddled with enough meetings as it is. Now they're encroaching into breakfast time too."

"Well... text me when you can, then."

"I shall." Mycroft hesitated. "Good night."

"Night, Myke... sleep well."

The line went dead. Greg lowered the phone, gazing at the empty screen for a while as he replayed the conversation in his mind.

He dug a ready meal out of the freezer, ate it in front of the TV and fell asleep at half nine watching *Never Mind The Buzzcocks*. He woke up again at eleven, realised with a jolt that he needed to iron a shirt for tomorrow, and watched a few episodes of *Friends* as he whittled through the basket. He finally made it to the shower at quarter to one. As he washed himself, he thought about tomorrow's expense reports, and how he hoped they went quicker than last week. He could only make that joke about 'wasting police time' so often before it got old.

As he climbed into bed, ten minutes after one, he heard his phone vibrate.

He picked it up from the bedside table, squinting bleary-eyed at the screen.

*Good morning.*

*M xxx*

He grinned, typing in a quick reply. *You mean goodnight? x*

*I'm making economics small-talk over muesli, sad croissants and unrecognisable fruit. Please send an assassin. My estate will reimburse you.*

*M xxx*

A flicker of mischief, borne of the midnight hour, crossed Greg's mind.

He flicked through to his phone's camera, set it to a front-facing timer, and for good measure scuffed up his hair a little more. He settled back against the pillows and took the shot, testing both a grin and a smoulder.

The smoulder worked best, he thought.
Then, knowing Mycroft, anything with enough of his bare chest would have the desired effect.

He loaded up their texts, scrolled through for the photo, added it to the message, and hit send.

Five thousand and fifty five miles away, at the breakfast buffet at The Rosewood Beijing, Mycroft Holmes discreetly checked his new message beneath the table.

He quickly smothered his expression.

Excusing himself from conversation for a moment, he went to the buffet under guise of collecting more pastries. There, he swiftly googled the current UK legal definition of 'torture', copied the URL into a text, and hit send.

Greg's grin was almost as bright as his phone screen.

*Oh Myke,* he thought to himself. *You don't know the meaning of the word 'torture'.*

He debated with himself for a few moments, decided the repercussions would be entirely worth it, and pushed back the covers.

The next two photographs, Mycroft could just about handle. The third crossed lines of decency that had never previously been crossed in the history of the human race.

"Do *excuse* me once more," he interrupted, as sleekly as he could, to the large group of businessmen with whom he'd been sharing inadequate pastries for nearly an hour now. "I'm afraid I have a matter of some urgency to attend to… government business. Please forgive me."

His personal translator got to work, explaining to the blinking group of businessmen what had been said. Mycroft did not stick around to hear its completion. He quickly left the breakfast room, crossed the lobby, exited through a side door into a private garden and furiously pressed the 'call now' button on his phone, pacing under the smoker's shelter with an expression of granite-set disapproval.

It took Greg five rings to answer - an unacceptable number, given the situation.

"What in God's name are you trying to do to me?" Mycroft snapped at once. "I'm negotiating the economic future of our country, and you're - "

There was a strange crackle. He frowned.

"Greg."

"Hang on - " Greg's voice came faintly muffled over the line. "Just - putting you somewhere safe - "

"What are you - ? For the love of... " Mycroft covered his face with a hand, unsurprised to find his fingers shaking. "Now listen to me. As you are well aware, I'm more than open to a modest amount of fun and games. But if you think this is the kind of behaviour that - …"

Realisation suddenly dawned.

He faltered.
"Have you put me on hands-free?" he asked.

"Yep," Greg said. His voice was slightly hoarse. "Go ahead and keep lecturing me. I'm listening. I swear."

Mycroft's expression darkened as if a cloud had suddenly covered the sun.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

The intake of breath was answer enough. Mycroft seized the back of nearest bench in one hand and gripped it, hard. He loaded his voice with the deepest and most venomous tones it would take.

"I am going to give you three seconds to apologise to me, end this call, and swear that you will never, ever again -"

"They can spare you for five minutes…" Greg audibly swallowed, and gave a sigh. "This won't take long."

Having endured all three photographs and their fascinating narrative, Mycroft was in no doubt that was indeed the case. He pinched the bridge of his nose so hard that it hurt, begging any deity that still had some sway in the universe to give him strength.

"How can you do this to me?" he managed. He was forced to listen as Greg's breathing rate perceptibly accelerated. "I shan't be home until tomorrow. I will be in the air for sixteen hours. This is - barbarous, Greg. It is inhumane."

"What time's your flight?" Greg asked, his voice growing more strained.

It took Mycroft what felt like an epoch to remember. "Seven-thirty," he said, weak. "AM."

"So - you'll be here - …"

Mycroft massaged his temples. "Eight PM. Two eight-hour flights and a four hour connection in Dubai."

"S'fine. You can tell me off then," Greg said, and gave a groan. Mycroft bit down on the inside of his cheek hard enough to leave teeth-marks. "Oh fuck, Myke - … fuck, fuck…"

"I am going to make you sorry for this," Mycroft said, meaning every word of it. He could only listen, continents away, as Greg gasped, swore and unleashed a stream of blasphemy that went on for some time, broken with fragments of his name.

As it subsided, Mycroft found himself gripping the back of a bench so hard his fingers ached.

Greg gave a breathless laugh, sighing.

"Make me sorry," he begged over the phone. "Come home soon."

Mycroft opened his mouth to speak. He found he had no words, and closed it again. He cut the call with one firm press of the button.

There would be consequences for this, he thought.

Dire consequences.

They would be noting his absence at the table. You could never tell with these men if they were
delighted by you or mortally offended - you only found out a week later when the contracts arrived. He needed to return to the breakfast table, soon.

There was a fountain hidden somewhere among the paths. Mycroft listened to it for a moment, letting it soothe his ragged nerves. His thumb twitched on the blank phone screen.

Telling himself this was to confirm in his mind precisely how provocative Greg had been, he unlocked the phone.

He scrolled through the photographs, slow. His eyes narrowed as they lingered on details - the pillow-messed grey hair; the gleam of Greg's eyes, knowing exactly what he was doing; the plains of his chest with a smattering of soft, dark hair, crying out for hands to be laid upon them; the wet shine of lubricant on Greg's swollen, hardened cock.

Mycroft hadn't navigated the burning wreckage of international politics for twenty years without acquiring cataclysmic amounts of self-control.

He relied upon every single iota of them now as he closed the files, locked his phone, and returned to the buffet, with a sleek, "Now... where were we?"

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Greg left it until two PM to text. It would be nine where Mycroft was. He might even be packing.

Are you still mad? G x

A minute later, he got a picture message as a response - Mycroft's incredulous, semi-outraged expression, one eyebrow nearly arched to his hairline.

Greg laughed, finished the second half of his kitkat and crumpled the wrapper into his pocket. The expense reports were spread around him in an endless sea. For now, he ignored them. There were more important things to arrange.

Tell your people don't bother sending jameson tomorrow night... I'll come pick you up from the airport. you can stay at mine. Help you over your jet lag x

Is that so? came the reply. How kind.
Heathrow - inbound from Dubai.
Terminal 3.
M xxx

His office door creaked as it opened.

It was Donovan. Her eyebrows lifted with the usual question.

"Please," Greg said, typing.

She left.

you'll definitely be on it yeah? No last minute emergencies... G x

You know I can never promise.
However, any emergency so profound it could keep me here a second longer than I must would certainly stop all international air travel.
I will be on that flight.
M xxx
Greg made it to Terminal 3 of Heathrow for half past seven the next night.

He parked, found the arrivals building and got himself a seat outside Caffé Nero, where he sat with a coffee and watched the live board updating itself by the minute.

*Emirates EK045 (Dubai). Expected.*

An unbroken river of people were pouring from baggage reclaim - though none of them were the person he wanted to see. Mycroft was still in the air for now. It would be some time yet.

Greg found himself uncommonly nervous. It was the waiting, he thought. The last part was always the worst. He tapped his watch against the underside of the table, nursing his coffee in one hand as he tried not to check his phone every two seconds.

The last text had come through just before lunch.

*About to board in Dubai.*

*For the next 8 hours, I will be getting closer to you at a rate of around 500mph.*

*M xxx*

He'd done next to nothing at work today. He couldn't bring himself to feel guilty.

"Ready for the weekend?" Donovan had asked, amused, as he found him packing up his briefcase and preparing to leave at 5pm on the dot. "Sheffield, did you say? Exotic."

"There's nothing wrong with Sheffield," he said. "Old school mate's fortieth. Could get messy. Don't ring unless it's category zero, will you? I'm going to have a headache for most of it."

The arrivals board flashed. Greg lifted his eyes from his phone, watching as the flights shuffled into their new places like a deck of cards. *Emirates EK045 (Dubai)* hopped one space up the queue - then blinked, its status of 'Expected' fading away, replaced with a proud and clear 'Landed'.

Greg's heart heaved.

Not long now - half an hour at the most, with passport control, baggage and customs.

But it was the *last* half an hour. That was what mattered.

His phone gave a jolt on the table, making him jump and nearly spill his coffee. He secured the paper cup, grabbed for the phone and flipped it over.

*New Message from: Rachel Whittaker.*

He caught sight of the word 'Dad' just before the preview faded. Frowning, he tapped in Sarah's birthday and the message expanded to fill the screen.

*Hey G you okay? Just fyi... Dad in hospital. Chest pains again. Everything is okay and they are keeping a close eye on him. Just thought should let you know. Lots of Love xoxoxoxoxoxoxox*

"Oh God," Greg muttered. This was all he needed. He downed the rest of his coffee, ordered another and hit 'Call Now' as he waited for it at the end of the counter.
Rachel answered after a moment or two. He could hear the TV blazing away in the background - kids' cartoons. "Hello?"

"Hey squirt," he said. "It's me."

"Oh! Hey, G… you alright?"

"Yeah - how's Dad? What's happening?"

"Oh God, G, I'm sorry. I've scared you. It's nothing major, honestly. Just the usual… you know…"

He could hear her cooking - pans hissing, plates rattling, Toby crying in his highchair. "I've not bothered you at work, have I?"

"No, don't worry. M'just at Heathrow."

"Heathrow?" she said, amazed. "You off somewhere hot and sunny? Take me with you."

He smiled, pinning his phone between his shoulder and his ear as he was handed his coffee. He mouthed a 'thank you' to the server and picked his way back towards his table.

"No, just… here to collect a - friend. Offered him a lift from the airport. So… what's the thing with Dad?"

"Oh, well… he started saying yesterday evening that he felt a bit funny, then…" His sister sighed, scraping something loudly out onto a plate. "I dunno, Greg. They've admitted him just in case. The nurse said there wasn't anything obviously the matter with him, but he kept insisting he knows what chest pains feel like… so he's in for the weekend now…"

Greg waited, suspecting there was more.

"Graham and I were meant to be going out to Eastbourne," she said. "Just for the night, you know… get away."

"Shit, Rach. I'm sorry."

"S'alright. Sue from next door was going to have Sarah and Toby for us..." There was a rapid banging of a spoon against a pan, knocking out the last of its contents. "It's just - … he does this every time, Greg. Every time. The second Graham and I say we're going to try and get away - "

"I know."

"- and I can't exactly then say, 'oh no, Dad, you'll be fine' - "

"I know, Rach. M'sorry."

"- and the worst bit is I think he knows it, Greg. He does it on purpose. He's just…"

She sighed. Within the sigh, Greg heard most of their childhood together - the council flat in Spitalfields, never enough food in the fridge, kids kicking cans about the street for fun.

"I know," he said. "I know, squirt. M'sorry he's a shit."

"He's not a shit, he's just…"

"He's a shit, Rach. Through and through."
"Yeah, alright," she mumbled. "He is a shit. Sometimes."

He heard the clatter of a pan as she put it down in the sink, the hiss of water and steam. A fresh wave of people were emerging from Baggage Reclaim, trailing trolleys and suitcases - families, kids in sun hats; couples, tanned, happy together and holding hands.

Greg knew he had to offer. He couldn't not offer. She was his sister, and she'd suffered enough - he knew that more than anyone.

He gave a silent grimace as he did, gripping his coffee cup a little harder.

"I could - … you know, keep an eye… if you and Graham still want to get off - "

"No, G… don't worry. We've cancelled the booking now. Hopefully we can get our money back… and we'll get down to Eastbourne some day." He heard her smile. "You're sweet to offer."

"I - don't do enough, Rach. I'm sorry. I just - "

"I know," she said.

" - and God, he knows just how to dig the knife in - …"

"I know."

" - I mean, would it be so hard just to…"

He realised she was wrestling Toby from his highchair. He could hear his nephew's screams shifting from rage to delight, yelping as he got his mum to notice him at last.

"I know, G," she said, her voice full of warmth. He could imagine her in the kitchen of her home, barefoot on the lino in her skinny jeans, bouncing a toddler under one arm with a laundry basket in the other, phone held against her shoulder. He didn't know how she managed. She was relentless, like their mum had been. "Honestly, Greg, I understand. But there's nothing you can do for him now, anyway… he just needs to order some nurses around for a while, and he'll be back on his feet..."

Greg gave a half-smile, removing the lid from his coffee.

"If you're sure," he said, taking the first sip.

"M'sure." Her voice brightened. "What's your weekend looking like, anyway? Up to no good, are you?"

"Work," he lied. He didn't like doing it, but he sure as hell couldn't tell her the truth. "Might venture out to the pub at some point… see how energetic I feel..."

"Cool. Sarah got ten out of ten for her project, by the way."

"You serious? Ten out of ten? That's my girl."

"Yep. Mr Lyons was astounded. Said he'd never come across a six-year-old so knowledgeable on the subject of dolphins."

Greg grinned, lifting the coffee back to his lips. "Well, when you've got the full expertise of Scotland Yard behind you…"
There was a toy shop round the corner from his flat, he thought. He'd have to drop in - get Sarah something nice.

"Ten out of ten," he said. "She's becoming a proper whizz-kid, Rach. You'll be driving her off to university before you know it."

"God, G... don't. Toby outgrows a pair of trousers every week now. My life's flashing before my eyes."

Boofle's insistent barks started up in the background, and the sound of Graham telling him to hush.

"Where did you even learn all that stuff, anyway?" Rachel asked. "And don't tell me you solved a dolphin-based crime once, either. I ain't falling for that."

As Greg hunted around for some believable lie, the coffee cup halfway to his mouth, his eyes fell on the entrance to Baggage Claim.

Mycroft was coming through the arrival lounge, trailing a suitcase behind him.

The world, and everything in it, went still.

"Rach - "

Mycroft had seen him. His whole face opened with relief. He sped up, headed this way, looking exhausted after two eight-hour stretches on planes. Greg's heart began to pound. Oh fuck, he thought. I'm gay.

"Rach, I'm - I'm gonna have to go, alright? But tell Sarah I'm proud - and let me know how Dad gets on - "

"No worries, G. I will. You have a good weekend."

"Definitely. I mean - yeah - you too. As much as you can."

"Don't do nothing you'll have to arrest yourself for on Monday."

He laughed, though he could barely hear her anymore. Mycroft was carving through the crowd at speed, sliding between holidaymakers and tourists with a single and forthright purpose.

"Yep," Greg said, no longer breathing. "Right - see you."

"Love you, G. Take care."

"Love you too, Rach. Bye." He put down the phone without ending the call, pushed his way out from behind the table and broke into a run. In the same moment, so did Mycroft.

They hit each other just past the escalator - hugged, hard, spinning on the spot as their separate momentums collided. Greg staggered, stooping to catch Myke as they almost stumbled off balance. Somehow they managed to stay upright, an ungainly mess of limbs and coats. They gripped each other as if it had been months.

Mycroft was shaking.

It was all Greg could do not to kiss him. Only the flashes of fascinated eyes from all around kept him from doing so.
"Alright?" he managed, as Myke finally let him go.

"Yes - better, at least..." Myke said. He'd never realised how much he loved Mycroft's voice. He wanted to listen to it all weekend - just make him read things, old bills and scraps of takeaway menus, just to hear him. "I never want to see a departure board again in my life. Please tell me there's something with at least three shots of espresso in that cup."

"Grande Americano," Greg said. "Four shots. And I got you a muffin - " He reached into the pocket of his coat, removing a now very squashed and misshapen paper bag. "Shit, sorry. It'll taste just as good. Double chocolate? Figured you can scrap the diet for one night..."

Mycroft was looking at him as if he'd just descended from the sky on white feathered wings.

"Take me away from this place," he said.

Greg grinned. He grabbed the handle of Myke's suitcase.

"Come on," he said. "We're getting out of here. Did you eat?"

"If you can call it that."

"Right. Well, the freezer's full of Haagen Dazs. Got the Dark Chocolate and Almond one you like - and there's bacon in for breakfast. I'll do you a fry-up."

Mycroft's eyes flared. "Get me out of here. Now."

The radio came on as Greg turned the key in the ignition - a Nicki Minaj track from a couple of years ago. Its low, steady beat filled the car. How dare we sit quietly... Greg reversed out of the car park with barely a glance at his blind-spots; they hit the road, headlights ghosting along with them in the darkness. And watch the world pass us by...

Myke sat beside him in the passenger seat, making short and appreciative work of the muffin.

"You do realise I've gained four pounds since this has commenced?" he said, even as he retrieved the last crumbs from the paper with his fingertips.

'This', Greg thought. He knew what he meant.

"I've not noticed," he said.

"I suppose you'd be the first to." Mycroft reached for the coffee cup between them, uttering a rather interesting noise as he drank. "Dear God, I've needed that..."

"We're just gettin' started, yeah yeah...
Can't you see the night's still early?
And we gon' get it wild and crazy...

"How was Dubai?" Greg asked, glancing up at Myke in the mirror.

"The four hours I was there? Interminable." Myke met his gaze, blue-grey eyes flashing. "My sleep cycle is a flaming wreck at the moment. I hope you realise that. Four shots of espresso shan't help."

"I'm a cop," Greg reminded him. "What's this 'sleep cycle' idea? Sounds over-complicated."

Mycroft laughed. He stretched back in his seat, tipping his head back against the headrest, and gave a sigh. His eyes closed.
After a moment, he said, "Come with me next time."

Greg laughed. "Because I can go flying off to Beijing at a moment's notice, right?"

"I'm not entirely joking."

"D'you know how much paperwork builds up if I leave the office for an hour? I wouldn't be able to get the door open when I came back." Greg eyed the lorry pulling up close behind them, easing his foot on the accelerator. "That's if London hadn't burned to the ground in the meantime..."

"Resign, then," Mycroft said.

Greg laughed again, turning the wheel.

"You could be a kept man," Myke went on, smirking at him from the passenger seat, the coffee cup held in both hands. "Come to dinners with me... rub my feet when I get home... let me parade you around official events. We could mortify ambassadors and dignitaries all over London."

"Yeah, well... I haven't got the calves for stilettos and a ball-gown." Greg glanced sideways, his eyes sparking. "Why don't you resign?" he said. "Pack it all in and become DI Lestrade's him-at-home. You can send me off with a packed lunch every morning and have my tea on the table for when I get home."

Mycroft grinned, sighing. He let his head fall back once more. He looked alive, Greg thought. He looked happy.

"Let's both resign." Mycroft took a sip of coffee, exhaling deeply. "We could - I don't know, go into crime together... embezzle funds from major corporations, live off the proceeds of our ill-gotten gains. Yachts in the Gulf of Mexico. Chicago high-rise apartment. Buy an island in the Maldives..."

From police inspector to private island crime-lord, Greg thought. It almost sounded fun.

"Will a pint of Haagen Dazs and a bacon sandwich in the morning do for now?" he asked.

"Dear God, yes." Mycroft's eyes fell shut. He put his hand on Greg's thigh, affectionate through the black denim. "Drive, Greg... just ignore the traffic lights. I'll pull strings."

So long as you pull some of mine, Greg thought. He put his foot down.

"Was that Rachel on the phone?" Mycroft asked him, turned his head with casual interest.

"Oh - yeah." Greg felt a small chunk crack away from his good mood. He ignored it, reminding himself it was all fine - Rachel would ring him if there was a problem. He smiled up into the mirror. "Just touching base."

"How's your nephew's cough?"

Greg felt his heart warm slightly. "Oh - no, he's fine. Back to bawling his head off again." He smiled, touched. "You remembered."

"Of course I did." Mycroft fitted the coffee back into the cup holder. "And your father?"

Greg wondered for a second if Mycroft possibly, just possibly, knew.

He figured honesty was the best option.
"Pulling his old tricks." He switched lanes, keeping an eye on the dickhead in the Volvo behind them. "Having convenient chest pains… Rachel wanted to get off to Eastbourne with Graham. Booked it months ago. Third time the old bastard's done this now."

"What a shame." Mycroft paused, undoing his cufflinks. "Did you - "

"I did. She said no." Greg shunted the gear-stick into second. "To be honest though, if he's having chest pains, the last person he needs to see is me."

Mycroft slipped his cufflinks away inside his jacket.

"Tell me the story one day," he said.

Greg kept his eyes on the road.

"There's no story," he lied. He indicated, watching the bell-end in the Volvo go zooming off into the night. They peeled off towards home.

He'd left the lights on back at the flat - he figured it made a more welcoming sight than a darkened hallway and a gloomy lounge. The place was even looking tidy for once. He'd had a lot of spare time this week, and made the most of it.

Mycroft looked around in restrained surprise as they let themselves in.

"Wanted it to be nice for you," Greg grinned, parking Mycroft's suitcase by the sofa. He pulled off his coat. "So… what first? Ice cream, TV or sex? Your choice. I'm good for anything."

Mycroft's expression of surprise opened into an exhausted grin. He reached up to undo his coat.

"In the interest of my energy levels," he said, "please… five minutes to sit down would be a miracle. Perhaps a drink, if it's not too much to ask."

Greg grinned, coming nearer.

"Then," he said, swatted Mycroft's hands aside, and started undoing the coat buttons himself, "five minutes to sit down and a drink you shall have..." He smiled, glancing into Mycroft's rapidly growing pupils. "Wine?"

"You've thought of everything," Mycroft murmured, in apparent wonder. "Haven't you?"

"Red or white?"

"White," Mycroft said. He marvelled up at Greg for a moment, wordless. "Please." As the final button came open, he smiled and let Greg remove the coat for him, his eyes averted. Greg hung it up with a flourish on the back of the door.

"Sit," Greg then said, guiding Myke over to the sofa. "Be here - relax. It's over."

Mycroft allowed himself to be coaxed down into a seat. Greg leant over him, kissing the top of his head.

"Stay there," he murmured. "Wine. Two minutes."

By the time that he returned from the kitchen, Mycroft had removed his waistcoat and jacket. He was lying against the back of the sofa in his shirtsleeves. He was breathing deep, as a peaceful
smile played about his mouth.

Greg grinned to himself at the sight.

"My hero," Mycroft remarked, as the wine glass was placed in his hand.

Greg smiled, proud.

"Let me lock the door," he said. "The weekend starts right here."

They watched TV on the sofa until one AM was long gone. At last, with an empty tub of Haagen Dazs beside their feet on the coffee table, a bottle of white wine in the bin, and Mycroft falling asleep on his arm, Greg decided it was time for bed.

He kissed the other man's temple, mumbling, "Myke."

Mycroft sighed, shifting against him. "What... time is it...?"

"Nearly two."

"Mm. Thought so."

"C'mon. Let's go start reversing the jet-lag."

"Fine." Mycroft sat up, stretching to his fingertips with a yawn and a crack of several bones. Something occurred to him suddenly. "Oh... I almost forgot. I brought you a gift."

Greg smiled, intrigued. "A gift?"

Mycroft extended a hand towards his suitcase, tousled and a little drunk. The colour in his cheeks was quite endearing.

Greg brought the suitcase over.

"You said to bring you something nice," Mycroft murmured, removing a wrapped paper package whose contents were flexible and soft. "I wasn't completely convinced of your size... but I imagine it will fit."

Fascinated, Greg tore open the package.

As he tipped it at one end, a pool of navy blue silk poured out into his hands. It was light as air, as cool as water woven into fabric. It was embroidered in gold with Chinese patterns - a phoenix, Greg realised, as he opened the silk up to study it.

It was a dressing gown.

"Jesus - Myke... this must have cost a fortune."

Myke smiled, waving a hand. "Purely selfish motives," he admitted, reaching for Greg's unfinished glass of wine on the coffee table. He drained it without a blink. "I wanted to see you in it."

Greg smiled, rubbing the silk between his hands.

"Did you?" he said. "Well... I wouldn't want you to think I'm ungrateful."

Mycroft's eyes were bright. "Mind if I shower?"
"Not at all." Greg watched him get up from the sofa, wondering if Myke's jet lag might let him have another hour or so of consciousness. "Don't be long."

Myke cast him a look of amusement, retrieved a bag of toiletries from within his case, and headed off to the bathroom.

Greg went around the flat, turning off the lights. He checked the door twice. He put another bottle of wine in the fridge for tomorrow night, switched his phone onto silent, and undressed in the bedroom as he listened to the sound of the shower.

By the time the bathroom door opened and Mycroft emerged, wrapped in a towel, his hair damp, Greg was already in bed.

The silk robe fit just fine.

It fit rather perfectly, in fact.

Mycroft surveyed the scene before him for a moment, apparently marveling over his own fortunes.

Greg ran a hand backward through his hair, soft-eyed. The silk laid along the sides of his chest as light as shadows.

"Come here?" he said.

Mycroft removed the towel, slowly. He held Greg's eyes as he did. He hung it up on the back of the bathroom door, snapped off the light, and came naked and still damp towards the bed.

As Mycroft eased into his arms, Greg felt a week's worth of longing unwind all at once. He roamed his hands over his Myke's slender body, kissing him with a quiet desperation, breathing in his lover's scent and praying to God that somehow this weekend could last all his life.

Myke pushed him back gently against the pillows, crawled on top of him and ground their hips down together. Greg shuddered, hard. He was melting already, and he knew it - losing it, drifting away on this feeling. He'd needed this all week. Myke's fingertips slid gently outwards along his arms, capturing his fingers.

He gripped back, tight, feeling his heart drum harder with approval. Myke smiled against his mouth. Greg reached up, desperate; he nuzzled at those lips for more kisses. Myke was lifting his hands slowly upwards to the headboard, easing his arms high, exposing his chest.

"Suits me?" he managed, between kisses. "The robe..."

Mycroft hummed, low. "Will suit you better on the floor." He sighed, kissing Greg hard, squeezing their fingers together tight. Greg pushed his hips up, hopeful. He made a noise of quiet plea. Myke pushed back against him, with a rasped and soft-breathed groan.

Then Greg heard the first click, and felt the brush of cold metal against his wrist.

He stiffened. He opened one eye, concerned.

Mycroft locked the other handcuff into place with a low, subtle click.

A smile curved onto his mouth.
"What...?" Greg managed, his head spinning. He pulled at the cuffs now securing him to the headboard.

"You tormented me," Mycroft whispered against his mouth.

Realisation dawned. Greg's eyes widened.

"You beguiled me," Mycroft continued, "with a staged picture of your prick when I was five thousand miles away. I just spent sixteen hours in the air. I spent every second of it picturing this."

Greg's heart-rate spiked. He ran his tongue across his dry lips, staring back into the swollen pupils that were gazing down at him with such ferocity.

"You - you know these things have a safety-catch... right?" he managed, flexing at the cuffs.

"Do they?" Mycroft inquired.

Greg raised an eyebrow. He twisted his hands together, cautiously, and pressed his middle finger into the emergency release spring on the underside. He gave it a careful flick, holding Myke's gaze all the while.

Nothing happened.

He tried again, performing the maneuver he'd been shown twenty-years ago in a training room on Curtain Road. This always worked.

The cuffs held firm.

Myke's eyes blazed in the half-dark above him.

"These aren't mine," Greg deduced, feeling his stomach tighten.

"No," Mycroft murmured.

"You didn't get them from my bag."

"No."

"You bought them specially."

"Don't worry," Mycroft promised, his voice low. "I'm about to have my money's worth out of them. I assure you."

"Fuck," Greg concluded.

"Among other things."

Greg's heart nearly jolted out of his chest. "Okay so - maybe now would be the time for me to say sorry... for distracting you at work - for potentially causing a major diplomatic incident with China. But in my defence - "

Mycroft was reaching for the bedside drawer. Greg's voice escalated a few levels of pitch.
"Oh fuck, Myke - "

Greg could only swear as oil was dripped liberally across his cock and lower stomach, then spread slowly by his lover's hands. The oil began to warm in seconds, glistening on his skin in the lamplight. Myke was watching him with a look of the greatest, most possessive interest that Greg had ever seen, glorying in his every moan and jerk.

"Holy shit," he groaned, wrenching against the cuffs as Myke began to work the oil downwards, beneath his balls, between his thighs - everywhere. "You're not even fucking drunk, are you?" he gasped. "You were just - …"

"Have you any idea," Mycroft inquired, "of what two eight-hour stints of helpless sexual arousal will do to a man?" Greg groaned, screwing his head back into the pillow. "Let's find out," Mycroft said.

"Shit - you're not serious - "

"How often do I joke?" Mycroft's voice dripped across his skin, even warmer and sleeker than the oil. His fingers were easing lower now - brushing, just once, somewhere that made Greg jerk and pull, hard, at the handcuffs.

"O-Okay - steady - " he managed. "That's - …"

Mycroft's eyes were burning through him - ferocious in their power, soft as candle-smoke, holding him perfectly safe in their gaze.

"No?" he murmured, searching Greg's face.

"I - I'm not sure if - …"

Mycroft leant close, stroking a kiss across his mouth - too light, too soft, barely there.

"If it's no, then tell me no," he said. Desire spiked through Greg's chest, white-hot and blinding, matched in equal measure by fear. "If it's yes... then tell me yes."

Greg's heart hammered at his ribs. He gazed up into those eyes - completely in control, he thought; utterly at ease; gazing nowhere else but at his face.

This was new - it was terrifying. He didn't know how it would work out. He didn't know what it was going to be like. But God almighty, he wanted it.

"Yes," he breathed - so quiet it could barely be heard.

Mycroft's eyebrow lifted, just a fraction. They shared another kiss - longer, deeper, slow - and the fingers idling between Greg's legs returned, stroking him, testing, seeing if his answer had been true. He shuddered, closing his eyes tight. Mycroft began to circle with a fingertip. Greg groaned and dragged at the handcuffs, twisting against them; he let his thighs ease open. His heart was going so fast he feared it would break apart.

"Fucking be gentle," he bit out. "I know I pissed you off, but - "

"Greg… look at me."

Greg opened his eyes. His fists were clenched, knuckles blazing white against the handcuffs.
Myke was gazing down at him. The ferocity, for just a moment, had ebbed in its entirety; there was only softness in the stormy blue-grey.

"You're safe," Mycroft murmured.

Greg breathed the words in. He felt them shiver outwards through his every nerve - soothing him, quietening his fear. Safe, he thought. It was a promise; he believed it. He swallowed, forcing his hands to uncurl from their grip and his arms to relax against the pillows.

Mycroft watched him breathe for a few moments, his expression infinitely gentle. He smiled.

"Close your eyes," he murmured. "Just feel. Tell me if you want to stop."

Greg closed his eyes, willing himself to relax - to concentrate on that gentle, exploratory stroking between his legs. The careful swirling slowly drew towards its centre.


Greg breathed, wrapping his hands tight around the chain of the cuffs.

The first didn't hurt as much as he thought it would. Mycroft watched his face the whole way, tender. He smiled a little as he saw Greg release some of the fear.

He couldn't say it felt good yet. But it didn't feel bad.

What was keeping him hard - and the realisation of it only made his heart pound faster, made him briefly lose track of his breath - was the knowledge that it was Myke looking down at him like that, watching this first-time happen to him with a burning, protective intensity that put the sun and the stars to shame. It was Myke making this what he wanted. It was Myke who turned him on.

The second hurt a little more - nothing he couldn't handle.

The third sent a jag of pain upwards through his spine.

"Steady, steady - "

"Okay - breathe..." Myke kissed him, soothing him; he returned his other hand to Greg's flagging erection. Greg exhaled, forcing himself to breathe slow as Myke fisted him, stroked him, easing him back towards pleasure. More oil from the bedside; more kissing, tender. By the time the third was all the way in, he'd forgotten the pain. "Are you alright?"

Greg let out a huff of air, his face flushed. "When does this start feeling good - ...?"

In response, Myke gently pushed upwards inside him.

A sensation that Greg could only describe as white - blinding, sharp, perfect white - seared through his senses, burning out his ability to think for a few seconds. When he came back to lucidity, he found himself choking Myke's name.

"W-What the fuck - …" he groaned as he came down, arching, the cuffs tensed taut around the slats of the headboard. They were holding firm. How hard do I have to pull to break this thing?, he thought, in the miniscule part of his brain still capable of thinking.

It seemed like Myke was intent on finding out. He began to thrust his fingers, gently, brushing in rhythm against that place of pure white. Greg hauled at the cuffs hard enough for the bed-frame to creak. He swore and gasped and at one point whimpered, screwing his head back against the
pillows in desperation. Throughout it all, there was Myke - murmuring to him, studying every facet of his face - drinking him in - adoring him.

"You want me," Myke murmured, soft. Greg wondered, dazed, why that sounded familiar. "Want me inside you..."

He swallowed, his chest heaving. "Christ, just - just do it, Myke..."

Myke's mouth curled.

"Beg me," he murmured.

Realisation fell into place, clear and sharp and exactly what Greg deserved. He groaned in despair, ruing the day he'd ever said those words.

"Myke, just - fucking - *do it. Do it now. I'm not kidding - ...*"

"That was an order," Mycroft breathed, his eyes wild. "And I didn't say order me. Now beg, or I'll go watch TV."

Greg wrenched at the handcuffs, desperate, grinding himself down onto Myke's fingers and letting out a cry.

"Beg for my cock," Myke breathed, and Greg realised he'd remembered the whole fucking thing word-by-word - maybe played it over in his head for weeks. Greg could barely breathe anymore. "Give in, Greg... we both know how this will end..."

"Please, Myke - ..." He pulled back his legs, aching, gripping at the cuffs. "Fuck me. *Please. Please just - *"

Myke's fingers eased out of him, slow. Greg arched.

"Yes - " he groaned. "Yes, yes, just - ..."

Mycroft was getting off the bed. Greg pulled his head up from the pillows, panting and desperate, spinning free into nothing as he watched Mycroft calmly walk around the bed.

"Where - where the fuck are - ..."

Without a word, Mycroft picked up his mobile from the bedside.

"Jesus - " Greg dropped his head back into the pillows. "Of course. Of fucking course."

Mycroft stood beside him - breathing deep, flushed, but entirely cool. He unlocked the phone and began to flick through.

"Let's make these shots a little more authentic, shall we?" he murmured.

Greg stared up at him, wild-eyed, his chest rising and falling deeply with the roughness of his breath. Myke regarded him with a smile.

"Defiance, then?" he said. "That's fine. I rather like it." He knelt on the bed, angling the camera downwards to capture Greg, his cuffed wrists, the desperate swell of his cock. Greg lifted his chin, watching the lens contract. "Are you sorry yet?"

Greg panted, flexing against his cuffs. "Yes."
"Are you going to interrupt me in future when I'm working?"

Greg stared straight down the lens. The corner of his mouth upturned. "Yes," he said.

Mycroft watched him over the camera, eyes gleaming. "I thought you'd say that."

"Is this… video?"

"No. Thank you for the idea though…" Myke swiped quickly left on the phone, tapped to record, and said, "I think you were about to apologise to me, weren't you?"

Greg grinned, laying his head back. He ran his tongue behind his teeth.

"I don't remember that bit, actually."

"No?" Myke moved around the bed, slow, taking Greg's body in at every angle. As he reached the end of the bed, he knelt forwards on the mattress, easing himself between Greg's open thighs, filming him from directly above. "Allow me to jog your memory."

This shouldn't be so hot, Greg thought. He gazed up at Mycroft, lost and wild, hoping Myke would still be watching this video when he was ninety.

"Actually, Myke… I think we were talking about you fucking me."

Myke's eyes flashed. "Were we?"

"Yeah." He kept his gaze on the camera even as he put his legs around Myke, pulling him closer. "Might want your hands free, though. Going to need them."

Myke braced a hand on the mattress by his side, watching the screen tick-over with an idle smile.

"So I shall," he said. "First… say that word just once more for me, will you?"

Greg raised his eyebrows, amused. "Which word? 'Sorry'?"

"The other one," Mycroft murmured.

Greg realised. He looked past the camera, directly into Mycroft's eyes.

"Please."

Myke ended the video with a smile. He laid the phone down on the bed, leant down, kissed Greg until their tongues ached, then reached a hand back between his thighs.

Three fingers again - and again the whiteness, sharp and hot and good, until Greg couldn't stand it any longer, until it hurt not to fuck. Myke eased him to lie with his thighs held back, parted; he stroked a shaking kiss over the inside of Greg's knee.

"Breathe," Myke warned one last time, his voice tight.

Greg breathed. He breathed steady and slow, drawing it deeper and deeper into his body, letting the force of breath drown out the pain. Throughout it all, Myke was stroking his chest - cool hands that were gentle, easing him through the discomfort, safe to the other side.

"God," he whispered at last, his throat thick. "Just - move in me. Please."
Myke began to move - slow.

Greg's chest heaved with it, weak; how had he reached forty-three without trying this? How had he gone a single year of his life without having Myke? The man was slowfucking him in handcuffs, and it was good - it was too fucking good, too much, and he wasn't going to last. He'd been on the edge since Myke had first found his prostate.

"I missed you," he gasped, straining against the headboard. He could feel his every muscle starting to tighten.

Mycroft huffed his ascent, wordless; he laved his tongue across the inside of Greg's knee.

Greg heaved in a breath. "M'gonna come - soon - ...


That was it. It was over. Greg came with a cry that woke half the building, cracking a slat of his headboard in two. Myke followed him soon after, groaning as if it were his last.

In the quiet that followed, Mycroft pulled up the covers around them, released the cuffs from his wrists and cast them away out of the bed with a clatter. For some time he held Greg, saying nothing, running quiet fingers through his hair.

"Are you alright?" Myke asked after some time, still hoarse.

"That was - …" It took a while to find the right word. In the end, Greg settled on, "Wow."

"Do you want me to delete the video?"

Greg frowned a little, confused. "No… why would I?" He wrapped his arms around the other man, tight; he kissed the curve of Mycroft's shoulder. "Keep it," he said. "My secrets are safe with you."

"It - means a lot to hear you say that." Mycroft brushed his jaw along Greg's. "Was that the first...?"

"Was I a blushing virgin, you mean? No." Greg wove his fingers in Mycroft's hair, gently. He gave a slight smile. "But I'd never done that before."

"How do you feel?"

"Fine." Greg closed his eyes, breathing it in. "Thanks for... going slow with me. I'm glad it was you." He rumpled the auburn hair with his fingertips, feeling for the first time in days like he was at peace. "So... am I back in your good books now?"

"Assuming you've learnt your lesson," Myke murmured, delighted.

"To be fair, purposely sending porn to China just to wind you up… I mean, that's going to be hard to top."

"Are you planning on topping it?" Mycroft asked.

"Rarely plan these things," Greg admitted. He drew his lover closer, running a hand down his back. "Christ, Myke, that was… intense. You are dangerous."

"Not to you. On your behalf, perhaps… but never to you."
Greg huffed, smiling. He placed a kiss in the other man's hair. "Just so I know," he said. "How many of your ex-lovers are now dead, missing, or imprisoned for crimes they didn't commit?"

In reply, Mycroft leant up. He kissed him, with startling intensity.

"Worry about that if you become an ex-lover," Myke said, as they parted. "Not a moment beforehand."

If.

Greg decided he would need a while to process that tiny, two-lettered word. Mycroft was nestling back into his chest now, settling down with him, holding him as if he was all that mattered in the world.

For tonight, Greg thought, 'if' was just fine.

He could cope with 'if'.

Sleep came easily.

Along with it came the nightmare he hadn't had for two years.

He woke in the darkness with a gasp, reeling from the crack of the belt across his face. It wasn't there. It wasn't real. The darkness bore down on him from above. It seemed to loom upon him, huge - every bit as frightening as the figure had been. Screaming terror pulsed through his every vein and artery.


He kicked his way out of bed, shaking, and stumbled to the bathroom. He wasn't surprised to find that he was drenched in sweat. As he shut the door, he scrabbled for the light. Its stark white glow flashed into being and surrounded him. He was alright. He sank to his knees, covering his face in his hands, the light blazing between the gaps in his fingers.

Gradually, over the course of minutes, his heart-rate started to settle. The coldness of the tiles under his knees was calming - the hard press of the sink edge against his forehead. He gripped his face and he breathed, safe in the light, until the nightmare and its death grip upon him had loosened.

He found himself alone at last on the bathroom floor, forty-three, shaking and frightened like a kid.

Just a dream, he told himself. Unsteadily he got to his feet and splashed water in his face. Just a bloody dream.

He dried himself and returned to his bedroom, leaving the bathroom light ablaze. He wanted to see it from the door. He just needed to know it was there.

As he got back into bed, and Mycroft stirred gently within the sheets, he remembered he wasn't alone. It was testament to the nightmare's strength that he'd forgotten Myke was here. He burrowed under the covers, cold, and pulled the other man close into his arms.

Myke murmured some sleepy sound of approval, nuzzling into his neck.

He stroked his fingers through Mycroft's hair - petting him, he thought, like a frightened child with a beloved pet.
"Don't go," Myke sighed after a while, still half-asleep.


"Good…" Mycroft sighed again. Greg wondered for a moment if he was dreaming. "You're mine this weekend," Myke then told him, settled close, and kissed his jaw goodnight. "I won't permit you to go."

"Yours," Greg agreed, his throat tight. He held Mycroft close. "M'not leaving you for anything."

It was four AM before he got back to sleep. The nightmare did not return. He slept through, undisturbed, and woke the next morning to find sunlight on the bedroom curtains.
Saturday

*Saturday*, Greg thought, gazing at the suffusion of sunlight. It turned his dark red curtains to a soft, cross-hatched pink. It made him feel hopeful. It made him feel good.

Mycroft was still asleep beside him. He looked, Greg thought, more vulnerable and at peace than Greg had ever seen him - breathing deeply as he slept, his expression soft, his face unlined and untroubled by anything in the world.

It was a wonderful sight - too good not to keep.

Gingerly Greg reached across Myke to the bedside, where his phone lay just out of reach. He stuck his tongue out to help his fingertips span that final two inches, trying not to squash Myke under his arm.

"What are you doing…?" Myke mumbled, as the mattress was disturbed around him.

"Nothing. just… stay right there. Don't move a muscle."

Mycroft opened one eye, dubious. He blinked a little in the morning light. As he spotted the camera, he gave an exhausted laugh and his face opened up in a smile.

"Dear God, Greg... I doubt I look my best right now..."

"You've never looked better," Greg assured him. "Now pretend to be asleep again... I need a memory of this."

Mycroft, grinning, laid his head back down into the pillow.

"And stop smiling, will you?" Greg teased, earning himself another laugh. "You weren't grinning in your sleep. Take this more seriously, please."

Mycroft duly smothered his smile, closing his eyes. Greg grinned, taking the first couple of shots.

"This is photography," he chided. "It's art. It's not for laughing about."

Mycroft opened one eye, fighting a smile. "Art?" he said.

"You are right now. Believe me." Greg snapped another picture. Mycroft's mischievous smirk, one blue-grey eye glittering, expanded to fill the screen. Greg sighed a little. "And that's the one I'll have blown up for the wall."

Myke laughed again. Greg couldn't resist. He couldn't believe, after months of waiting, that they'd finally managed it - a weekend together, all theirs. He put the phone aside, grinning, and tipped Myke over onto his back. He growled into Myke's neck as he continued to laugh, nuzzling at him with dog-like snuffles that melted into kisses. Myke's chest expanded underneath him, sighing. The whole room sighed with him, full of sunshine.

"Greg - " Hands gripped his shoulders as Myke tipped back his head, letting Greg access his throat - which he did, with enthusiasm. "God…you're a beast."

"I am," Greg husked. He punctuated it with a gentle bite. Myke shivered, whispering his name once more. "I missed you. There's - something I've wanted to do all week."
As Greg wound his way down beneath the sheets, Mycroft uttered a faint groan.

"Oh - lord..." He pushed a hand backwards over his forehead, eyes fluttering shut. "Greg."

"Mm?" Greg settled himself between Myke's thighs, sweeping a long lick just below his navel. "Missed me too?"

Mycroft shuddered. "You will be the death of me."

"And you'll die with a smile on your face." Mycroft's hand wove weakly into his hair; Greg smiled, flicking his tongue across his lover's hardening cock. "Now let me look after you."

Myke never came quickly from this. Greg was glad - it wasn't meant to be done quickly. It was meant to be enjoyed. Greg flattered himself he was getting pretty good at it. He knew when Myke wanted soft, barely there licks; he knew when Myke wanted to grip his hair and be worked, hard; he knew when Myke needed him not to stop, not to change a thing, just to keep doing that - whatever that was. He knew what "Greg - …!" meant, too. It was among his favourite words to hear in the world.

Silence, though, was a new one.

After fifteen minutes, when the groans faded out and quiet came, Greg inclined his head up the bed to check all was well.

He found himself facing his own phone camera. Behind it, Mycroft's eyes were dark, wild and soft with arousal. Greg smirked around the sight of his attentions. He lowered his head again, humming, and enjoyed the gasped exultation it earned him. He hoped the camera had caught that noise.

This was getting close to kinky. He didn't care. He liked it.

After a while Myke shifted, returning the camera to the bedside. Both his hands appeared on the back of Greg's head. His restless swallow audible in the sunlit quiet of Greg's bedroom. Greg knew what that hint meant, too. He sped up a little, roughening his movements. Myke gripped his hair and started to pant.

Afterwards, they laid together tangled in the sheets. Myke's cheeks were still flushed, his breathing deep and slow. Greg shifted gently in arms.

"Show me?" he said.

Myke smiled, weakly retrieving Greg's phone from the bedside. He unlocked it one-handed.

"How d'you know my passcode?"

"You've been entering it in front of me for months... that's how. A birthday, is it? Seventeenth of July? Likely your niece..." Myke navigated his way through the phone, eyes heavy-lidded as he scrolled. At last, recorded audio began to play - a bird, singing, somewhere in the sunshine outside the closed curtains. Myke turned the phone around, languid.

Greg watched, smirking. He was startled to find that the sight of himself giving head was actually rather working for him.
"You're a lucky man," he said.

Mycroft laughed - Greg's heart tightened. *Spend the day laughing with me*, he thought. *Spend the week. Just fucking move in. I'll hire a van.*

"I am lucky," Mycroft remarked. He replaced the phone on the bedside. "You're - very attentive."

"How do you ever resist me? Really, it's a miracle we don't spend every second in bed..."

"Perhaps we should," Myke mused.

Greg grinned. "On that note," he said. "I promised you breakfast. The works, right? How do you want your egg - fried or scrambled? I can't poach. God knows I've tried."

Mycroft laid a hand across his eyes. "I think that sentence made me gain three pounds..."

"Don't worry," Greg said, as he slid out of bed. "I'm sure we'll find a way to work it off."

As he passed by on the way to the kitchen, he wondered briefly why the bathroom light was on. Last night - the part of it he'd rather not have happened - returned to him with a dull thud. It had been a while since a nightmare. He'd had them often in his twenties. After thirty, they'd tailed off - the odd one now and then. They came out of nowhere left-field, just to remind him what lay beneath.

Greg pushed the thought away.

He wasn't interested in smudging his good mood - not today. Not for anything.

Naked, he emptied the fridge of the things they'd need for breakfast. He hummed as he got them ready, assembling pans and oven trays on top of the cooker. It wasn't a weekend without a proper fry-up. As he was slicing the mushrooms, he became aware of the pad of footsteps across the lino behind him.

Arms gently encircled his waist. He smiled.

"Please," Mycroft intoned. "Tell me you're at least going to put an apron on."

Greg grinned, tossing the mushrooms into the pan. "Food tastes better cooked naked."

"That's - ..." He'd broken Mycroft's brain at last. Four months, he thought, and finally he'd done it. He was amazed it'd taken this long. "The logic of that is… questionable at best."

"Yeah?" he said. "Now stand there and watch me prove it."

"You are remarkable - you are aware of that, aren't you?" Mycroft said. "You're… captivating. You dazzle me a hundred times a week, and I don't think you even intend to."

Still grinning, Greg reached for the bacon and sliced open the pack.

"Some of it's intended," he admitted. "I like it when you marvel at me. Seems to be happening more and more often."

"It is," Mycroft said, thoughtful.
Greg started laying bacon across the pan, smiling to himself.

"Do me a favour?" he said. "I left my phone in the bedroom. I need it to keep my timings tight. The secret of a good fry-up is all in the sequence."

Still marvelling, Mycroft left.

When he returned a minute later, his expression had changed slightly. Accustomed now to Mycroft's face, Greg noticed it at once. He knew that look. It said that a thought had occurred - not an entirely happy one.

"You alright?" he asked, cracking another egg into a bowl.

"Yes... forgive me. I didn't mean to look."

Mycroft placed the phone on the counter beside him.

"You - have two missed calls. From your sister."

"From Rach?" Greg tossed the eggshells into the bin, still smiling. "Has she text?"

"No... calls only, close together. Five and eight minutes ago."

"Weird." Greg reached for the milk. He unscrewed the cap, checking the bowl of eggs for any shell fragment. "Put some toast in for me, will you?"

Myke did so, still pensive.

"Does she usually call?" he asked, as he pressed the button down on the toaster.

Greg, now whisking eggs, thought about it.

"More of a texter, to be honest. Always sends a hundred hugs and kisses..."

"Curious."

"What's wrong?"

"It seems early to call for a Saturday... even more so, considering that you only spoke last night. And she waited just three minutes before calling again..." Mycroft frowned, thinking. "It suggests that the reason is - "

Greg's mobile gave a violent buzz.

He glanced down at it. *Incoming Call from Rachel Whittaker.*

" - urgent," Mycroft finished, with unease.

Greg frowned, watching the phone vibrate. He handed Mycroft the bowl of scrambled eggs, wiped his hands on a teatowel and answered the call, leaning back against the counter.

"Hey, squirt..." he said. "What's up?"

" - hey," she said.

Her voice was oddly small.
"You - at work?" she asked. "Can you talk?"

Greg felt his stomach start to curdle.

"Rach," he said. His heart knew what was coming, even if his brain didn't. "What - are you about to tell me?"

She shuddered as she breathed in. He could hear the tears in her voice.

"He's - had a heart attack, G... a big one."

Somewhere a thousand miles away, he could still see Myke just across the kitchen from him - holding the bowl of scrambled eggs, all of Greg's horror and fear reflected there in his features.

"I - ..." Greg reached for a chair. One appeared in an instant. Mycroft pushed him down into it. He barely felt the hands on his shoulders. "Rach, is he - has he - "

"No," she said. "No. He's... still with us. He's in ICU at St Bart's." She started to cry. "Oh, G... oh, shit - I didn't think he was actually - "

"I'm coming." Two decades of police training kicked in at once. Greg was back on his feet before he knew it. He left the kitchen and hurried through to the bedroom, talking as he went. The words came out on their own, strong and reassuring and calm, even as blind panic screamed like a firebell in his head and the world started caving into pieces around him. "I'm on my way. Just give me a minute to put some jeans on and I'll be there. Are you at the hospital now?"

"M'in the car park - ..." She sobbed. He could imagine her trying to dab at her mascara, hands shaking, trying to keep the tears in. He used to watch their mum do it too. "I - I didn't know who to call - "

"You called just the right person, okay? It's going to be fine." Greg snatched a shirt from the laundry hanger as he passed, fighting into it one-handed. "You got Graham there with you?"

"Yeah, he - he drove me here... Susie from next door's watching the kids - "

"Good. Susie'll watch them. Rach?"

"Y-Yeah, G?"

"Are the doctors with him now? Doing what they can?"

"Y-Yeah - "

"Then I want you to get a coffee, alright? They've got a coffee shop on the ground floor. You go buy yourself a coffee, sit down and drink it with Graham, and I'm going to be there before you know it. Alright?"

"Alright - I'll g-go get coffee - "

"Alright. You get coffee. I'm on my way."

He hung up, pulled on his jeans, wrenched up the zip and slid his phone into his pocket, checking for his wallet. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. The old bastard's gonna die.

He wasn't ready.
Not by a long way.

As Greg charged back into the kitchen, fully-dressed and hunting for keys, he found Mycroft standing by the door in a dressing gown, pale.

The sight of him stopped Greg in his tracks.

They stared at each other for a few seconds, silent. Greg finally swallowed.

"I've - got to - " he said.

"Completely understandable," said Mycroft. "Go."

"I'm sorry about - " Fuck. My dad's going to die. Oh, fuck. " - breakfast - but I - "

"Forget that," Mycroft said. His voice was firm. "Go. She needs you. We will talk later."

Greg was barely aware of pulling on his coat as he ran down the stairs, taking them three at a time. He had the key in the ignition and was driving away before he realised he'd left the front door open. It didn't matter. He had to get to his sister.

Mycroft watched him go through the window, silent and concerned.
It was nearly one o'clock before they let anyone see him. Rachel cried into Greg's shoulder for every minute that they waited, wracked with guilt and swearing she would never leave their dad alone again. Greg did his best to reassure her - to tell her that she couldn't have known.

But there was only so much he could say.

At noon, Graham left to check on the kids. Toby would be too young, Greg thought. Grandad Lestrade would be a memory that other people had, not him.

But Sarah would know. She was only six, after all. She thought Grandad was funny, even if he smelt of cigarettes. He gave her Polo mints sometimes. That was all a six-year-old needed to know about a person. Childhood was far too short.

At half past twelve, a text came through.

*Any news? I am thinking of you. Please give my deepest sympathies to your sister. M xxx*

Greg's heart twisted. He wished he could. He slid the phone away into his coat as Rachel began saying once more that this was all her fault, all of it, and that she should have paid him more attention.

At last, a nurse in powder-blue came to find them in the waiting area.

He was conscious, she said, and talking a little - though very weak. They could only take one person at a time by the bed.

"Go on," Greg said to his sister, hugging her one-handed. "Go see him. I'll be here."

Crying, and dabbing her mascara, Rachel left.

Greg waited in the silence, watching hospital trolleys and orderlies pushing people in wheelchairs go by. He hated hospitals. They were too quiet, too big. Half the people in it had come here to die. He couldn't cope with that right now.

He didn't know what to think.

He didn't even know where to begin.

He pulled his phone from his pocket, opened the last text, and wrote a short reply.

*just woken up. stable for now. Rach is in with him. she's blaming herself... sorry i had to leave you like that x*

*You have nothing to apologise for. Let me know how things progress. M xxx*

It didn't feel like this morning that they'd woken up together. That day seemed like years ago - long, painful years. Greg shook his head, knotting his fingers together in the silence. *What a difference a few hours made*, he thought.
"Mr Lestrade?" The nurse was back. She had Rachel with her - once more in floods of tears. "You can see him now… he might not be awake for long. He needs to rest."

Greg nodded, his heart heavy. He got Rachel into a chair, bundling a fresh bunch of tissue from the loo into her hands.

"Stay here for me," he said. People in crisis needed instruction - they taught you it in the first week of training. It was no good asking them questions, putting decisions to them. They couldn't do it. "You have a cry, alright? You've got your tissue. I'll be back in ten minutes."

She watched him go, mascara leaking down her cheeks. As he rounded the corner, he heard her break down again, gasping into the tissue he'd given her.

The nurse, with a sympathetic look, came to a stop at a door.

"Just in here," she said. "If he doesn't recognise you, don't take anything from it… he's had a very bad morning. But he's comfortable, and he's in good hands."

Greg swallowed around the lump in his throat, realising he'd neglected to breathe for a minute. It made it all so much worse to receive the professional sympathy he dealt out to hundreds of people a year. He knew all the words. He knew what to say. He just didn't know to hear them in return.

The nurse opened the door for him, understanding. Gently she ushered him through.

The small room beyond was gloomy but calm, shrouded in the solemnity of serious illness. The quiet was disturbed only by the faint, steady beep of machines all around. A curtain had sectioned some of them away. Greg stepped inside it all, his heart lurching, at once on the verge of throwing up.

There he was - full of tubes, lines and pumps, lying amongst them with his eyes barely open.

Greg sat down beside him on the hard plastic chair, the feet scraping gently against the floor.

"Dad?" he tried.

The swollen eyes crinkled, blinked weakly, then focused. No recognition crossed his father's face.

"Oh," he said slowly, after a moment. His voice grated in his throat. He sounded like death, Greg thought - but then, that wasn't new. "S'you."

"Yeah, it's... me Dad." Greg gripped his fingers together, trying to stop the shake in his hands. "I'm here."

"Nice of you to drop by," his father rasped, with a huff. Greg bit the side of his tongue.

"Dad, don't - " He swallowed it, shaking it away. Not now. Not with him lying there, tangled up in fishing line, machines beeping out what could be his last. "How - are you feeling?"

"Oh... fine. Just fine." The old man coughed, spattering a little spit onto his flabby chest. "Never bloody better..."

Greg looked down at his hands, drawing in a long breath. He hadn't thought it would be this bad though.

"The doctor says it's good you were here," he said, for something to say. "They could get you where you need to go faster... get you sorted."
His father humphed, closing his eyes, and said nothing. It looked like breathing was difficult for him. Forty cigarettes a day, two pints a night, and a fifty-hour working week had been on his tail for years now. They'd been catching him up for some time.

"How's Cindy?" his father asked, voice gravelled.

Greg hung his head. "Dad, we've… talked about this."

"What?"

"We split up, Dad. She left me for the guy at the gym. Two years ago... remember?"

"Oh." His dad sniffed, looking off across the room. "Don't you see her still?"

"No." Greg rubbed between his eyes, tired. This was the last thing he wanted to discuss. "Rach says you were having chest pains yesterday, were you?"

"You dropped the ball when you let her go, you know."

"Dad - "

"Elegant woman like that."

Greg bit down at his cheek. "Cheating on me four times is 'elegant' now, is it?"

His father snorted, reaching up a hairy-knuckled hand with difficulty to scratch at his cheek. "You shoulda kept her happy at home... not spent s'much time at work... it's no wonder she went wandering."

Greg was about to point out the time that his mum had spent 'happy' at home - fighting to bring up two children with no money in the house, no chink of hope on the horizon, and a husband who gave flowers to barmaids on their birthday but not to her.

It took all of his strength to swallow it. He screwed his fists tight and shook his head, determined he would not rise to this. He wouldn't kill the old bastard. He wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing it was all working, working like a charm.

"Well... you're in good hands," he said, dredging up those things that one said to the ill, throwing them out like if he could just sound okay, everything would be. "And you survived the first one... battled through."

"Hmm." His dad breathed in, coughing slightly. The small eyes shut. "Your sister's looking after me, at least."

"Is she... good."

"Mm... round every weekend."

"I know."

"Very dutiful daughter." He coughed again, drawing in a hoary lungful of air. "Don't remember when I last saw you... Christmas, was it?"

"Christmas," Greg said, mouth hollow.

"Hmm," his father replied, and no more. For a while there was silence, speckled with the faint blip
of the machines. The loudest, beside the bed, was beeping out his father's heart - sluggish and unsteady. "How's work?"

"Fine."

"Good." His father sniffed. "I used to work fifty hours a week, you know."

"I know," Greg said, stiff. *You never let us fucking forget. Not for a minute.*

"Just what you did in those days..." His father shifted, uncomfortable, giving another snort. "Family first."

"Yeah. I know." He reminded himself this might be the last time they spoke, swirling the venom around his mouth to get rid of it. "Dad, I'm - sorry I don't get round much. It's just - it's hard. Working most weekends these days. Fifty hours myself most weeks. Never really off-duty..."

His father huffed once more, pondering this at length.

"Well," he sighed in the end, in the airy tone that Greg hated more than all the others. "You've got to do you, Greg. Living your own life now... don't worry about me."

The door opened - an apologetic squeak. Greg's heart lurched.

"Mr Lestrade?" the nurse said, gentle.

Greg had never been more grateful to someone in his life. "Right, Dad... I've got to let you sleep. Got to go."

"That's fine," his father said, gruff. "You go."

As Greg left the room, barely suppressing his shake, the old man called after him -

"Say h'lo to Cindy for me."

It was gone seven by the time Greg got home.

He'd wanted to see Rachel home safe - then she'd insisted on cooking for him, making him some tea. Sarah wanted him to see her finished project. She was so good at drawing dolphins now, she said - he had to see them. Mr Lyons said they were the best dolphins he'd ever seen. Greg sat, empty inside, on Rachel's leather sofa, smiling at his niece as she told him endless tales of school and friends and what Mr Lyons said, showed him every school book she'd ever written in, talked him through the plot of *Frozen* for the hundredth time.

At last, hugging Rachel tight in the door, with leftover lasagne in a tupperware box under his arm, he said his goodbyes for the night. Graham - not usually a demonstrative man - had hugged him too, thumping him hard on the back.

"S'good of you," Graham said. "Lookin' after her."

Greg thumped his brother-in-law in return, jaw tight. "We'll - manage between us, mate."

They all waved him off from the door - Rachel, dabbing at her mascara again; Graham with an arm around her, his expression grey; Sarah, tiny and confused, standing between them in the light of the hall.
He didn't remember driving home. He let himself into the flat, numb, to find that all the lights were out.

He locked the door, left his coat on the sofa, and let his feet take him to the kitchen without thought. He looked in through the door at the scene now draped in cold shadow - the breakfast things washed, piled up neatly on the draining board, a new teatowel hung out on the rail. There was a note on the fridge, in a cramped and slanted handwriting that he realised he'd never seen before.

*Saved everything for you. Please eat when you get home.*

He didn't know what he'd expected to find.

Some part of him, heartbroken, had thought he would look in and find Myke there - and it would be this morning again, the place full of sunlight, and everything would be the way it was. They could just go back - reverse it, he thought, skip back to the point when things were okay.

He put Rachel's lasagne away in the fridge, numb.

Everything in there had been rearranged according to category. Short dates were at the front.

Greg sat down on the sofa on top of his coat. He stared at the empty television screen for some time.

*You've got to do you, Greg. Living your own life now. Don't worry about me.*

A familiar square lump was pressing into his leg. He reached, without looking, and tugged the packet free, lighting a cigarette with shaking hands.

He smoked in the dark until nine, at which point he ran. Two texts had arrived in his pocket by then. He hadn't the strength to read them - too tired, too broken, too wrapped up in his ghosts.

He read the first as he sat down on the edge of his bed in the dark. It wasn't even ten, but the only answer to this day was to end it. He'd start again in the morning and see what it brought. The covers beneath him were cold; the bed had been made to perfection, tidy as a catalogue-cover. The screen was too bright in the dark, painful on his eyes.

*Thank you for being there for me today G. Don't know what I would do without you. We will get through ok and look after each other. Will be all right. Loads and loads of love. xoxoxoxox*

The other text he saved until he was under the covers. He didn't want to have a nightmare, but he didn't know how to stop it.

*I hope you are alright - all of you. I am deeply sorry. You have been in my thoughts all day. Believe me that I shall give you all the space you need. If there is anything I can do, you need only say the word. With the very deepest of affection.*

*M xxx*

Greg stared at the words; he felt himself choking around them. *With the very deepest of affection.* He switched off the screen, gasping to the darkness, "Oh, shit...", and pushed the phone far away across the bedside, as far as it would go. He pulled the covers high around his throat, shaking. *Not a nightmare. Please. Not tonight. Just let me sleep.*

He dropped off around ten.
At half past five, Greg's phone started to ring.

"Oh, fuck..." He scrabbled for the bloody thing, half-blind, his eyes raw and red. He stared down at the screen. *Incoming Call from Sally Donovan.* He answered it, hoarse. "What?"

"Sorry, sir. Am I interrupting your hangover?"

It took him a second to catch up, bewildered. He grimaced as he did, covering his face with a hand. "I'm not - … what is it? What d'you want?"

"Sorry to be a party-pooper, but we need you to get back here fast. Got a problem. You're gonna want to see it."

"What sort of problem?"

"Murder in Spitalfields," she said. "Hate crime, nasty… it's gonna hit the papers. How fast can you get back from Sheffield?"

"I'm not in Sheffield," he grunted, pushing back the covers. He clutched his head as he got to his feet. "M'in London. Can you get a car to me?"

"What are you doing in London? I thought Sheffield was party central for the weekend."

"My dad had a heart attack," he said.

He heard her slam, full force, into utter mortification. She was silent for a second as she scrabbled for what to say.

"Shit - Greg... I'm - sorry - I didn't - "

"Can you get a car?" he said again, pulling open the wardrobe and raking through it for a shirt.

"Yeah - yeah, of course. I'll be there soon. I'm really sorry, I had no - "

"Bring coffee," he said, ended the call, and got dressed.
"Hate crime?" Greg asked as he opened the car door, sliding into the seat beside Donovan. He didn't want her to ask about anything else. Focusing on work would help. It always did.

"Homophobic," she said. He slammed the door and they set off. There was a large coffee waiting in the cup holder, along with a bacon roll that he suspected was meant as a serious apology. "Pretty grisly. Forensics are there now."

"'Grisly'? And how d'we know it's homophobic?"

She looked uneasy. "Body's been messed around with."

Greg strongly suspected his bad fucking week was about to get worse. "Right. Shall I wait for forensics, or are you going to tell me?"

"Just… see when you get there," she said. She glanced down at the coffee and the bacon roll. "How's your - "

"Alright," he said. If they had to do this, he thought, let them get it over with now. "My sister text me ten minutes ago. He's stable. Slept well. Not the first heart attack he's had. Whereabouts in Spitalfields are we going?"

"Back of a community centre," she said. "Just off Hanbury Street."

Greg snorted. Why was that not a surprise?

"Cleaners found the kid when they arrived to open up... didn't know what they were seeing at first. He's stable. Slept well. Not the first heart attack he's had. Whereabouts in Spitalfields are we going?"

"Back of a community centre," she said. "Just off Hanbury Street."

Greg snorted. Why was that not a surprise?

"Cleaners found the kid when they arrived to open up... didn't know what they were seeing at first. He's maybe about eighteen."

"Any ID?"

"No, nothing on him." She hesitated, joining the queue of delivery vans and taxis at the traffic lights. "You'd - better eat now, sir. While you still can."

"Jesus." That didn't bode well. Greg unwrapped the bacon roll, tearing a chunk from it. He tried not to think about the uncooked bacon now going to waste in his fridge. "Have we got people going door to door?"

"Yep. Keeping an eye out for calls at the station, too… someone must have realised he didn't come home last night."

"Let's hope," Greg said, as he reached for his coffee.

The community centre was a bleak, solid grey square of a building, dumped in the middle of an estate and overlooked by high-rises on all sides. Valiant attempts had been made to make it look less institutional - posters in the window advertised a weekly pop-up café; while boards mounted either side of the entrance showcased what the centre called 'mixed media' - but what Greg was more inclined to call 'graffiti practice'.

This section of the street had been barriered off at both ends. A few curious onlookers had gathered to peer shamelessly across the fluttering lines of yellow tape.
Donovan parked, opened the door for him and led the way down the side of the centre, past the bins and the bike ride, to where a white square tent had already been erected at the back.

"Been here quite a while, Forensics have said maybe one, two AM?" She was handed a file by a pathologist as they passed, flicking it open with a grim expression. "Plenty of rain last night, so his clothes are sodden...."

Greg found himself staring at the tent as they approached, wondering why the sight of it was unsettling him. He'd approached a thousand crime scenes this way. He'd entered flats in Hackney to find human remains scattered across everything in sight, up the walls and down the curtains, and he'd got on with the job.

But for some reason, his stomach was knotting now. Maybe it was his dad, he thought. Maybe it was this place - Spitalfields. His native territory. These streets had built him and broken him.

Now they'd broken someone for good - someone he was about to see.

Donovan pulled open the door of the tent.

"After you, boss," she said.

Greg frowned, telling himself he was tired from lack of sleep. That was all. He stepped inside the tent, readying himself for what he was about to see.

The forensic team looked up as he entered. They were crouched over a young man sprawled upon the ground, his head fallen back and turned to one side. His dark blonde hair had fallen in his eyes. It was matted with blood.

The cuts to his cheeks were deep and jagged, disfiguring everything down to his mouth. Rain had watered the blood on his pale skin; only the cuts stood out, black and red and awful.

On one cheek, "FAG"; the other, "GOT". The letters were sharp, spiky and unmistakable.

Someone in a lethal fury had done that, Greg thought - someone whose hands had been steady enough not to shake as they carved it. Someone who'd believed, even if just for five minutes, that this was absolutely the right thing to do.

He exhaled, experiencing a strange and uncomfortable flicker of relief.

He didn't know what he'd expected. All things considered, it wasn't anything worse than he'd seen before.

Then one of the Forensics team moved, and Greg caught sight of the kid from the waist down.

For a second, he was okay. His brain then started to process what it was looking at, what exactly was lying before him on the ground, and a screaming scarlet panic seized control of his thoughts. His stomach heaved. Everything lurched. He realised what was going to happen seconds before it did.

Silent, upright and deathly calm, Greg turned and exited the tent.

He crossed the yard, took hold of the fence and emptied his stomach into a drain, retching long after there was nothing left to get rid of. Somewhere between the beginning and the end of it, Donovan's hand appeared between his shoulder blades.
As he began to breathe again, a pack of kleenex appeared without comment in his view.

He took it, wordless. He ripped it in half to get the tissues out. Donovan stood beside him, maintaining an expression of calm disinterest as he cleaned himself up, spitting the very last of it down the drain.

They always carried tissues. It was a while since either of them had thrown up - but when it happened, it happened. She'd nearly passed out when they found the kid in the Chapman case. Greg had, too. They all had. You didn't look at this stuff day in and day out without it getting to you sometimes.

"Tell me that was done post-mortem," he managed, as she took the empty tissue wrapper and crumpled it away into her pocket.

"Doesn't look like there was much of a struggle," she said. She avoided his eyes as he passed his hands over his forehead, into his hair, breathing the cold morning air deep into his lungs and letting it calm him. "Lot of bruising around his neck - strangled, maybe... the rest of it, maybe after..."

"Do we know what was - ...

"Broken off the fence nearby." She looked down at her feet. "Fence itself is in pretty bad shape - rusted. Easy to break a length off. Philip's team are checking the rest for fingerprints now. Painted black metal, so they should show up clear... don't think this was done with gloves on..."

"Right." Greg breathed, hard, telling himself it was a case - not a person. That wasn't a real kid lying on the ground in that tent. It was a question to answer, and it was his job to find it. "Get someone knocking on nearby doors, find out if they heard anything - a scream, or - ... and find out what time this place is locked up for the night. Check the CCTV, too. Hanbury Street. There'll be loads. Let's get going."

In the week that followed, Greg was in the office by seven every morning. Each day was spent struggling through forensics reports, out in the car with Donovan trying to construct the kid's final hours, or otherwise holed up in the interview room with weeping relatives, horrified school friends and neighbours, all of who didn't have a thing to tell him. They'd heard Daniel Newsome was gay - of course they had. Everyone had. The kid made no secret of it, and even now in Spitalfields, that was a radical thing to be.

But no-one could imagine why someone would kill him for it.

CCTV fell as an early and catastrophic failure. Some local white knight had been on a crusade against the whole idea. They'd smashed every camera they could find, daubing the lenses with black paint or cutting the wires. They had a few grainy seconds of Daniel getting off a bus outside the vintage clothing shop on the main road - then the trail went cold. The fingerprints were crystal clear, showing no known match in the system. Their perpetrator was that rarest of rare things in London - a total and utter unknown.

Each night, Greg got home past ten. His flat became somewhere to smoke and to sleep, nothing more.

His dad left hospital on the Wednesday.

"Going to stay with him for the week," Rachel said on the phone that night, as Greg ate a Pot Noodle at his desk surrounded by timelines and witness statements. "Graham says he'll be fine with the kids... and Sue'll look in on them, I know... I just... don't want to leave Dad on his own, G. Not
when he's so vulnerable."

If there was one thing their father knew nothing about, it was being vulnerable.

Greg almost said it. He looked down into his Pot Noodle, remembering Daniel Newsome's father weeping into a handkerchief as Donovan had taken a statement. Greg hadn't been able to be in the room. He'd watched through the one-way mirror, telling himself that Donovan needed a pay rise.

"M'glad Dad has you with him," he told his sister at last, running a hand across his stubbled jaw. "How many tablets is he on now?"

"About a million. I got him one of those little boxes, you know... help him keep track..." She paused. "How's your - investigation going?"

"I can't really talk about it," he said, with regret. Daniel Newsome had a sister too. She was twelve. They'd pulled her out of school so she could grieve. "It's - rough, Rach. Reporters barking at you like they'd solve it any faster. Why haven't we this, why haven't we that... all things we've bloody done..."

He sighed, pressing hard between his eyes.

"Someone will crack soon," he said. He was promising himself more than her. "Someone knows something."

"It - said on the news he was strangled..."

Greg had never been so glad to hear something from a pathologist in his life. "Yeah. He was. They'd - ..." He saw again, with a flash, that sight he would scrub from his brain with bleach if he could. "... - messed with the body. I shouldn't be telling you this. Cut his face and all sorts. Suggests they knew him... facial mutilation. Normally indicative of a relationship."

"Jesus, G. I'm sorry."

"Not you that did it," Greg said. He sighed. "Just been a fucker of a week, Rach... that's all. But I'm glad Dad is alright."

His phone jolted gently in his hand.

"Did you just get a text?" she asked.

"Yep..." The office door opened with a creak. It was Donovan, looking slightly less depleted than she had. "My sergeant's here, Rach... talk later?"

"Yeah - give me a ring tomorrow. Make sure you eat something, G."

Greg looked down into his congealing Pot Noodle with disinterest. "Tell Dad I'm glad he's home."

"I will. Love you."

"Love you, too." He hung up, turning to Sally with a blank expression. "What's happened now?"

"Got a neighbour who thinks she saw Daniel sitting on a wall with someone when she got in from her late shift. 'Bout eleven. She says it was another kid, roughly Daniel's age, in tracksuit bottoms with a baseball cap. They were talking about something, and they went quiet when she passed by."

Greg rifled quickly through his mental folder of family and friends, shuffling them like playing
cards.

"Nobody claims they saw him after nine."

"She's pretty sure. Says she knows Daniel well. He used to go down the shops for her."

"Right…” Greg hesitated, still holding his phone. "Give me two minutes, will you? Then I'll be out."

"Fine. Coffee?"

She needed a large pay rise, Greg thought. Maybe a bonus too. "Please."

As Sally closed the door, he unlocked his phone and read the text that had arrived.

_I've been following the news. Are you alright?_  
_M xxx_

Greg's chest ached. At first, he wanted to say no - he wasn't alright. He'd eaten nothing that involved more than opening a packet for days, and he was forgetting what it felt like to feel clean. He hadn't seen Myke since he'd belted out of the house on Saturday morning, which now seemed like two or three years ago. He hadn't even had time to text.

Then he reminded himself he was still better off than another East End boy, whose mutilated corpse was in the morgue several floors below.

_Been better, he replied. Sorry for radio silence. been a shitter of a week. no sign of it ending any time soon. G x_

He scooped his Pot Noodle into the bin, collected up the witness statements and returned them to the ringbinder, by which point another text had arrived.

_Tell me at least that you're eating and sleeping. Has your father made any improvement?_  
_M xxx_

_Out of hospital. Recovering at home with a million tablets. you sound like rach fretting over me. G x_

His last coffee had gone cold. Greg downed it. He wasn't in a position to be fussy with these things right now. He checked his e-mails, read a statement from Daniel Newsome's form tutor that he was a friendly and good-natured young man who got on well with everybody, and his phone buzzed again.

_She cares for you. As do I. Come here for the night. Please. I'll arrange dinner for the moment you arrive. A decent night's sleep will do you endless good. A driver can be there in twenty minutes._  
_M xxx_

Greg gazed at the text as if it were his only hope in the world, listening to his ragged heart whimper at the thought - a limo, a driver, dinner, bed. He looked like shit, and he felt like the walking dead. He'd never wanted something so much in his life.
The door opened. It was Sally - with coffee and news.

"CCTV’s got the other kid on Commercial Street," she said. "Just after one AM, headed up towards Shoreditch with two others. No sign of Daniel with them. We're seeing if we can track him any further. Coming?"

In the brief pause that followed, Greg heard the quiet snap of his own shattered heart.

Then he thought of Daniel Newsome, lying dead in the rain behind a community centre.

They'd impaled him with a broken pole. Behavioural analyst said it was symbolic. An act of anger. He might have made advances towards them - taken a risk on someone he shouldn't. So they'd lured him somewhere quiet, choked him, carved 'faggot' into his face with a pen-knife, humiliated his corpse with a piece of fence, and walked away. They'd let themselves back into their house, gone to bed, and calmly waited for the police to arrive. Lestrade had probably already looked into their eyes.

And they were still out there now - maybe starting to wonder if they'd get away with it.

There was only one answer he could give.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah... of course."

He put the phone away in his drawer, closing it with a muffled clunk.

"Show me what we've got."

It was two by the time he left work. He didn't dare text. He slept in his clothes, too tired to undress, and woke the next morning to a message from Rachel.

*Hey G… dad fine. Glad to be back in his flat. He says are you coming round on saturday? Don't worry if not, he knows you're busy. Loads of Love xoxoxoxoxox"
"This has gotten to you... hasn't it?"

It was Friday morning. They were on their way to Shoreditch, where a guy who owned an off-licence had sold cigarettes to three very jumpy teenagers just before two AM on the morning that Daniel was found.

Greg looked up from his third coffee of the day, frowning at Sally's profile as she drove.

"What d'you mean?" he said.

"I dunno, it just... seems personal." She pulled up at the traffic lights, watching the Peugeot behind them in the rear view mirror. "You're on your way to a full beard. And I've not seen you go home before nine all week."

Greg sipped at his coffee, guarding his eyes from her glance.

"Just seems a shame, that's all. Nice kid. Treated like that."

"You're a Spitalfields boy, aren't you?"

"Born and bred." He checked his texts - they were waiting on a report from the behavioural analyst on Daniel's close friends. "From our kitchen, you could see down an alley called Gunthorpe Street... used to be called George's Yard. First likely victim of the Ripper was found there. My mum could stand peeling potatoes and look at the exact spot."

"... yikes."

"Spitalfields," Greg shrugged. Anyone from the area would understand. "Half of them would give you their last quid in the world without a thought. The other half would cut your throat for a kitkat."

"Which half are you?"

"Well..." he said. "You know how I feel about kitkats."

"Good," she said. She reached over and snapped open the glove compartment, revealing a strip of shiny red paper that made Greg's heart swell. "Multipack. Knock yourself out. I haven't seen you eat since yesterday morning."

"Why do people keep trying to feed me lately?" he said, even as he ripped off the wrapper.

"Because you're crap at it yourself."

She cast him a smile in the rear-view mirror as he ate, keeping an eye on the shops that passed by.

"We'll get them - you know that."

"I know," he said.

"It's only a matter of time."

"I know."
"We'll find the kid some peace, if nothing else…"

Greg paused, crumpling the kitkit wrapper into his pocket. He eyed the rest of the pack still sitting in the glove compartment. "Don't know how much good 'peace' will do him now."

They pulled to a stop outside the off-licence. As Greg had another kitkat, Sally checked the file.

"You - identify with him a bit, don't you?" she said. "The kid. Daniel."

He gave her a frown, unsure how much he was being accused of. "What are you saying?"

"Spitalfields," she said - and shrugged.

Greg looked down at his mobile. He had received no texts all morning.

"Spitalfields," he agreed, his voice low. They got out of the car.

"You're off tomorrow, at least," she said.

"What d'you - … oh."

Saturday.

He was going with Rachel to see Dad - he'd promised the whole afternoon. That meant four hours, at the very least, of making pained conversation about what a disappointment he was, and how Dad had nearly died, while Rachel smiled at them both until it hurt and tried to make things better.

He just hoped they weren't bringing Sarah along.

His niece didn't deserve that. She was a sunny little thing - she should be outside playing on a Saturday afternoon. Not stuck in doors, sitting glumly with her plastic animals on a rug that stank of smoke and Stellar, while her grown-ups pretended there was a good reason to be there.

"Right," he said. "Day off. Yeah."

Had it really only been a week since last Saturday?

Waking up in bed - sunshine on the curtains, Myke in his arms. It seemed unreal. A dream he'd once wanted to dream.

Everything had changed, he thought - everything. The world and all that it contained were so much less bright. It was harder just to think, and to walk, and to keep going. As he passed his fellow man on the street, he didn't wish them well anymore. He just wondered what act of vicious douchebaggery they were about to perpetrate next.

He worked late that night, trying to get everything in place for his absence tomorrow. Nobody seemed to resent him the day off. News of his father's heart attack had slowly, subtly filtered its way through the office, leading to a lot more pats on the back and offers of anything he needed. It was kind of them all - but in truth, he didn't care. He just wanted to see someone's head forced down into a car for Daniel Newsome's murder.

As he left, he told Sally that he expected to come in on Sunday to find a miracle waiting on his desk. She told him to get out of here, and fucking eat something for once.

Greg drove home in the dark, listening listlessly to the radio.
A report began, with an update on the recent homophobic killing in Spitalfields. Greg switched it off. He'd seen terrible photos of himself far too many times this week, looking more and more haggard as the days had dragged by. He didn't need to hear himself lying about their 'progress' on the radio too.

He got in, locked the door, spent forty-five minutes in the shower and sat down on the sofa at last, nursing a cup of tea while he watched the last hour of Robo Cop without really seeing it.

As the credits rolled, it occurred to him that he hadn't checked his phone all day.

The first message was from Rachel. Hey G, still gtg for tomorrow? See you at Dads after lunch? xoxoxoxoxox

The other was from an unknown number.

Greg paused as he read it, his brow furrowing.

just so you know... i'm seeing someone. and it's serious. thought i should tell you before you heard.

Underneath, there was a second text from the same number.

you seeing anybody?

It was a mark of his ball-breakingly awful week that it took several moments for the penny to drop.

When it did, he rolled his eyes back into his head. He deleted the text without a second thought.

"You can fuck right off," he told her, gruff, as he blocked the number. "So we're telling each other now, are we? Makes a change."

It had been two fucking years. What was she texting him now for? He knew he should have changed phones - he just kept putting it off. He didn't have the strength to deal with the peppy fucking idiots at Carphone Warehouse, with their matching polo-shirts and their lanyards and their gelled-up hair. Maybe he'd force himself in tomorrow morning.

If Cindy was texting him again, that gave him one big fat reason to get up and out of bed. He wasn't opening that door again - not for all the tea in China.

It occurred to him, as he settled down in bed, that he'd not heard from Myke in two days.

Every time he'd tried to text, he'd not known what to say. He'd found himself staring at the empty screen until Sally arrived with something new, or until a call came in from yet another journalist. As the days had worn on, it felt more and more awkward just to reach out and text. A simple 'hi' didn't seem like it belonged in this week. It was too small, too fragile - this week would crush it up and spit it out like a bug.

Lying down in the dark, he stared for a while at his last text from Mycroft. His thumb hovered over a message he didn't how to type.

He closed the window, defeated, and put his head down to sleep.

He would see how tomorrow went with Dad.

Three miles away, in a Belgravia apartment overlooking Chester Square Gardens, Mycroft Holmes
laid his phone to one side. He'd spent enough time staring at the wretched device today. It had done him no good.

Across the softly-lit lounge, the silent flat-screen TV flickered to show a few seconds of Detective Inspector Gregory Lestrade of Scotland Yard, descending stone steps with his grim-faced sergeant marching to heel. SPITALFIELDS HATE-KILLING LATEST, read the scrolling banner at the bottom. 'We are pursuing a number of leads', SAY SCOTLAND YARD.

Mycroft watched, quietly massaging one temple, as the silent and unshaven Greg performed a weary, well-rehearsed piece to camera.

He looked a mess, Mycroft thought. All the vigour and vitality had gone from his face. Left in his place was a man who looked grey, and defeated, and tired.

But there was only so much help one could offer, before it became glaringly apparent you were pushing.

Greg had no interest in comfort - no matter how unhappy he seemed. Whatever he felt he needed at this time, it was not Mycroft.

And there was little to be done about that.

Everything in the world was subject to control, Mycroft thought - everything.

Except for the wishes of the human heart.

Those, even he could not dictate.

He reached for his glass of wine, drinking it slowly with closed eyes. He noted as he did the very faintest of tremors in his hand.

In truth, the pain was his own fault - and he knew it. He'd let this go too far. He'd allowed himself to get attached, in spite of all his original intentions, and now he was to pay the emotional debt.

It had been so easy, though.

It had felt so good.

The archetypical East End boy, he'd thought - that grin, those eyes, both dark and bright at once.

It had begun last Christmas Eve at Baker Street. Mulled wine, mince pieces, and the realisation that Gregory Lestrade was rather easy to talk to when he relaxed. He'd liked Lestrade's laugh. It wasn't often he made people laugh. Before long he'd had perhaps a glass of wine too many, and it made him feel reckless and warm. They sat beside the tree and talked about the Chief Superintendent - what a prize-winning moron he was - and the problems with the modern legal system; the new E-Class Cabriolet from Mercedes; the difference between a good whiskey and a very good whiskey.

Lestrade couldn't seem to look away from him. Driving home, they'd passed Lestrade on the street, attempting to walk rather drunkenly back to his flat. Mycroft had offered him a lift - then, after a couple more drinks, offered him something else.

And now it had brought them here, Mycroft thought.

He suddenly didn't feel like wine. He'd poured himself a second glass, but he was realising it had nothing to offer him. It wasn't numbing his thoughts in the slightest.
And damn it if he didn't just want to help the man - to lift him up, to hold him somewhere safe, and just carry himself through this vicious mockery of a week.

What had previously happened with the father, Mycroft didn't know. Those waters ran deep. Greg was not ready for him to know. There was nothing to be changed about that.

But the Spitalfields case could be dealt with - there were things that could have lightened the load. Surely Greg knew that. With a single text message, he had access to one of the objectively finest-rated minds on the planet, with inexhaustible resources and the ability to open doors that didn't even resemble doors.

And yet nothing.

Mycroft was keenly aware that the circumstances of the case had unnerved Greg. A fellow son of the East End, killed in squalid conditions for a crime that Greg must now be regarding as his own… leaving Mycroft, therefore, a partner-in-crime. It was the only explanation for the silence.

But there was nothing to be done.

Mycroft rubbed the bridge of his nose, slowly, taking a moment to settle himself.

'For where thou art', he thought - 'there is the world itself… and where thou art not, desolation'.

"Shakespeare?" asked a voice in his mind - one that was not really there.

Henry IV, he told it. Part two.

A minute later, he caught himself checking his phone.

He smoked for some time in the bedroom, gazing through the window at the endless plane of lights beyond. His tuxedo had been hung up on the wardrobe doors, ready for the function tomorrow night. Nothing could have appealed to him less. Once, perhaps. Not now.

There was only one place he wished to be.

He was accepting, with the keenest of regret, that he was not wanted there.

His hand shook on the cigarette. His own expression was shown back to him, haunted, by the glass. It was the heart of all human suffering, he thought - he had never truly felt it before: to long, and yet to lose. All art, all faith, all culture came from the power of that sensation.

How breathtaking it could be.

How desperately it hurt.

When Greg woke the next morning, he found to his amazement that it was almost half ten. He showered, dressed, put some laundry in and cleaned a week's worth of expired food out of the fridge. He walked to the coffee shop for a bagel and a flat white. By the time he got back, it was almost twelve. He needed to head off.

As he got in the car, switching on the radio, it occurred to him that he'd rather be investigating a savage homophobic murder than doing what he was about to do. Some day, when he had the time - maybe when he was retired, he thought, lying on a beach in St Lucia with a cocktail in his hand - he would investigate that feeling further. For now, he had to be there for Rachel.
She looked exhausted as she opened the door. She was smiling her very hardest to cover it. She hugged him tight, squeezing him around the shoulders for just a little while. He held her back, closing his eyes.

"Good to see you, G," she mumbled into his shoulder.

Greg was looking behind her into the cramped hallway - patterned carpet, patterned wallpaper, patterned ceiling. He could smell the stink of smoke even from the doorstep. He steeled himself, already wanting to leave.

"How are you?" he asked her, tense.

"Oh - things are fine… he's getting used to his tablets. He's up and down the stairs by himself now, if he goes slow. Talking about going down the bookies tomorrow, so he must be feeling better..."

"And how are you?" Greg asked.

His sister waved a hand. She was still trying to smile. "Family's family," she said. "I'm fine."

They stepped inside.

As his dad laid eyes on him, Greg wasn't surprised to catch a grunt.

"You've not shaved," his dad said.

_God preserve my fragile fucking sanity._ "No," he said. "Didn't have time - I slept in. Been working past ten every night this week."

"Working on a case?"

"That's the usual idea, yeah."

His dad said nothing, lighting up.

Greg sat down. The sofa was older than he was, worn to threads and without a working spring left in it. He'd tried buying the old beggar a new one, but he wouldn't hear of it. Dad didn't like the way they were built now - not built to last, he said. Cheap and flimsy things.

Rachel arrived with tea and biscuits.

"How's Graham?" Greg asked, picking up the rose-patterned mug. The stuff was still scalding, but it gave him something to do.

"Oh, he's good! They're looking at a promotion for him, after this big project he managed… he must be impressing the right people these days."

Their father's ears had pricked up. "Promotion?"

"Yeah, Dad. Bumping him up into senior management, if it all goes through. Couldn't believe it. Proud as punch, I was."

"That's great," said Greg, smiling. "Good on Graham."

Their father dunked a digestive into his tea. "You hear that, Greg?" he said. "Promotion."

_Here it comes._ Greg drank from his boiling tea, wincing silently as it burned his lips.
"You should start angling for one of those yourself… don't want to languish at one level all your life."

Greg didn't look up from his tea, breathing in the steam for strength. "They only need so many Chief Inspectors, Dad."

"That's it, is it? Not willing to push yourself?"

At Rachel's frightened glance, Greg smothered his retort. He said nothing, and took a bourbon from the tray.

"You should be careful with those, too," their father remarked. Greg shut his eyes. "Putting on weight. You'll end up like me."

"I've barely - …" Greg breathed again, telling himself it would be over soon. Only four hours to go. "Right. Fine. Thanks, Dad. Just the one for me, then."

"Hmm," their father said.

There was silence for a while. The clock on the mantelpiece ticked it by, sluggishly. Greg said nothing, holding his burning mug, glaring above the sideboard at a framed print of a beach to which none of them had ever been. His father slurped loudly, snapping through a shortbread as he drank his tea. Rachel sat between them on the floor, cross-legged, staring into the fireplace.

After a while, she looked up at Greg brightly. She was so brave, he thought. She'd walk smiling through hell if it was expected of her.

"How's Sally?" she asked.

"Oh - she's good." He smiled a little. "Keeping me out of trouble, at least. S'all I can ask of her."

"Who's this?" their father inquired, budging into the conversation.

"Greg's partner," Rachel said. "You know, at work?"

"Oh right." Their father reached for another biscuit. "What's she like?"

"Striking - pretty," said Rachel. "She's mixed race, isn't she, Greg?"

Before he could answer, their father cut him short with a humourless laugh.

"Ha," the old man barked. "That's all we need."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Greg asked. He ignored his sister's whispered, "Greg - "

"Dating a black now, are you? Don't know why I'm surprised."

"No , Dad - " Rachel said in desperation. "They're not dating, Sally's just a work colleague - and she's a lovely girl, I met her at the - "

"Lovely’, is she?" their father jeered. "Don't think you'll be bringing her round here, boy. Over my dead body."

Greg put down his tea. "Scuse me a second," he said.

He left the room. As he passed through the kitchen, he could hear Rachel back in the lounge trying
to talk some sense into the old arsehole. He was having none of it. "Not under my roof," Greg heard him scoff. "Not while I still breathe."

Greg pushed through the kitchen door and out into the yard. He covered his face with his hands. The door clattered shut behind him.

He swore and kicked over a broken lawn chair - it made him feel no better. He kicked it again, then leant against the shed and tried to breathe.

He couldn't do this. He'd tried, and he couldn't.

He checked his watch.

Ten to one. They'd only done twenty minutes.

"Fuck… fuck, fuck…" He scrabbled for his cigarettes and his lighter, twisting them out of his coat pocket. His phone came with them. It clattered loose across the flag stones.

He bent down to pick it up - checked the screen, brushing off a little dirt.

No cracks. No harm done.

For a second he crouched there on the ground, staring at the empty screen with the cigarettes in his hand. The world seemed to slow.

He lit up, shaking. He crammed the cigarette into his mouth as he scrolled through his contacts list. 'M'. Down he went, flying past people from work, people from the football club he hadn't attended in a year, people whose names he couldn't even put a face to now.

There, right at the bottom, was the one he needed.

He hit call, shaking.

Mycroft looked up from the map of the tube system he was currently studying, inclining his head towards his vibrating phone.

As he saw the name, he stiffened.

"Out," he barked. "Out - now!"

His assistant jumped, turned on her heel and ran from the room without a word. The door slammed shut in her wake. Mycroft grabbed for the phone, slashing his finger across 'Swipe to Answer'.

"Hello?"
"Hello?" said Mycroft's voice at the end of the line. Greg almost passed out from the rush of it. 
*Holy fucking shit. I'm gay.*

"Hi," he managed in reply. He hated himself for it at once - the littleness of it, that pathetic single sound. *Hi.* He swallowed, tightening his grip on his cigarette. "It's - me."

"I... hadn't expected to hear from you." Mycroft sounded as shocked as he did, and no happier. "Are you alright?"

Greg broke.

"No," he said. His heart caved under the weight of it, cracking him open and into pieces. "I'm not. Look, I'm really sorry I've not... I've just been - "

"I watch the news," Mycroft said. "It's - fine."

"It's not though. It's - not fine at all. One thing it's not is fine. So I'm - sorry. Really sorry. I didn't even text you back. I've just been - ... oh, shit..."

With horror, Greg realised that tears were starting - tears of stress and sleepless nights. He pressed his knuckles into his tear ducts, shaking.

"I'm having a bad time," he managed, his throat tight.

He heard a faint creak over the line - Mycroft had sat down.

"Greg..." For a moment he said nothing more, silent. "Where are you?"

*My dad's yard, wrecking his garden furniture.* Greg swallowed, dragging on the cigarette. It calmed him enough to speak. "Just - family visit. Where are you?"

"My office." Mycroft breathed deeply. "You're - struggling with the case. The Spitalfields boy."

Greg shut his eyes, seeing Daniel's body again in a flash. *'Faggot'. Strangled and dumped and humiliated.*

"Like you don't know his name," he said, his chest tight.

"Daniel Newsome," Mycroft admitted.

"What am I missing?"

"Sleep," Mycroft said. "For one."

"The case - the case, Myke - what haven't I seen? What's the thing? Be Sherlock at me. Do the trick. Tell me the clever thing that I can't see because I'm so stupid, so I can let his parents bury the poor little bastard... so I can stop seeing him every time I shut my eyes..."

"Not all crimes are clever," Mycroft said. "Sometimes, there's nothing to be done but what you're doing... working through their contacts, one-by-one, until a mask somewhere begins to slip."

It wasn't what he wanted to hear. Greg rubbed his eyes, weak, listening for just a few moments to
the sound of Mycroft's silence. He'd wanted to hear it for days.

"Nobody deserves that," he managed at last, his shoulders shaking.

"It was - callous, from what I hear." Mycroft was choosing his words. "To murder is one thing…

but to desecrate the remains is - "

"The remains?" Greg lost hold of his last shred of composure, scrunching a hand into his hair.

"Myke, they raped his corpse with a metal pole. They carved 'faggot' into his face. Some poor kid. Just some East End kid - …"

He dug his knuckles into his tear ducts again, shuddering into silence. He couldn't do this. Not here. He realised, with a jolt, that he was doing what Rachel did to stop her mascara running - what their mum had done twenty times a week. He leant his forehead against the shed and concentrated on just breathing, just getting from this moment into the next one.

"I know this has affected you," Myke was saying in his ear - distant, faint. "It - would distress anyone, dealing with this. For someone with your background - …"

Greg almost sobbed. "My background - ?" He pushed his hand over his face again, blocking out all the surroundings that he could. "I can't - talk about this. Not now."

He drew in a long breath, letting it out just as slow.

"I need you," he said. "Please."

As Mycroft spoke, he sounded distressed for the first time. "You don't need to plead with me, Greg… I'm not a monster - …" He swallowed, collecting himself. "Tell me what I can do. Name a mountain, and I'll move it."

"Come over," Greg said. He mumbled it into his hand. He hadn't felt this weak in months - years. Not even when Cindy told him to pack. He couldn't cope anymore. "Tonight. Just… come round. Don't ask me any questions. Just sit there on my sofa and be you. Quote old poems at me. Just - fucking hold me. I don't want to sleep alone."

"Greg…"

Something tight had taken Mycroft's tone.

"Greg, I -"

"I'll get food in," he said. "Thai?"

" - I… can't."

Greg wasn't sure he'd heard right. "You - what?"

"Tonight, I… have a work event. It's - crucial. If I could cancel I would in a heartbeat, but - the ramifications - it's of... global importance…"

Greg reeled, lost. He was speeding into the abyss. He could feel it swallowing him up.

"That's - fine," his mouth said automatically, in the absence of his brain.

"Please let me explain. The ambassador is very sensitive to slight. He's made it clear that he expects - "
"It's fine," Greg said again, drowning out the apology. He didn't want to hear it. He didn't care. It didn't matter. "I just - ... it's cool. You're busy."


Greg hung up.

Name a mountain and I'll move it.

"I'm off," he said, as he entered the lounge five minutes later. "Work call. Got to shoot. They need me."

Rachel hurried to her feet, anxious. "Oh - are you sure?"

"Call me," he told her. "Bye, Dad. Glad you're home."

As he drove away, she came running through the front door and down the path. He watched her shouting after him in the rear-view mirror, standing in the middle of the road and starting to cry. He watched her press her fingertips to her eyes, breaking down.

As he banged through the door into the office, heads looked up from computers in alarm.

"Boss? What are you - "

"Sir... we didn't think you'd - "

"Where's Donovan?" he demanded, interrupting them. They stared at him, bog-eyed.

"She - just went for pastries. How come you're - "

"Tell her I need her," he said, unlocked his office and let himself in, closing the door with a bang behind him.

He sat at his desk in the quiet, his head in his hands. Thoughts ricocheted around, one and then another, cracking against his skull like misfired bullets. Above them all, one kept coming back.

At last, he heard the door creak open.

"Greg...?" She stepped inside, wary. "You... okay?"

"Come in," he said into his palms. "Shut the door."

Sally did so, gingerly.

"Sit down," he said.

Sally sat. He could hear her concern even in her silence.

Breathing in, he brushed his hands back over his face and sat up in his chair. He opened his eyes. There she was - ready and listening, even though she was scared. There was a Patisserie Valerie bag in her hand.

"When's your performance report due?" he asked her, numb.

She visibly swallowed. "October."

"Right. M'bringing it forward," he said. "To now."
"Okay." She crinkled the bag slightly as she braced for impact. "Shoot, boss... hit me with it."

He prepared the words in his mouth for a second, so tired he could crawl into the filing cabinet and die.

"You're a brilliant sergeant. You know that? You never let me down." He laid his hands on the desk. "I spend my life shouting at you and telling you to get me coffee. It should be the other way round. I'm an old bastard and I don't appreciate you, and I'm sorry."

Her jaw had slackened. She came to her senses, closed her mouth and said, "Right."

"I mean it. God knows what a mess this place would be without you. Even more of a mess than it already is."

"Right."

"I'm going to ask the chief to put your pay up where it should be. He'll say no. I'll keep asking him until he does it. Right?"

"Right," she said, wide-eyed.

He could feel his phone ringing desperately in his pocket. He ignored it, staring at Sally, wishing he had more to give her.

"Now tell me who killed this kid," he begged her.

She looked away; she thought about it in silence for some time.

"Someone he trusted," she said. "Probably his own age… close friend, maybe. He said the wrong thing to the wrong person - hit on them. Went too far. So they ring up two mates and ask if they want to punish some queer with him."

"Give me a name," he said.

She span the selection through her mind, slowly shaking her head. "What was the one he knew from his old job - said they went camping last month? He was way too cocky."

"Peterson," Greg said. "Get him in. We'll turn him upside down and see what falls out."

As she pulled out her mobile and began to make a call, he added,

"Then if that doesn't work we'll go through the next name and the next, until someone cracks."

" - yeah. It's me. DI says to get the Peterson kid in. Get round there now, see if you can haul him away in front of his parents - rattle his cage a bit - "

Lestrade got up from his desk. As he passed her by in the doorway, he put a hand on her shoulder.

"Coffee?" he asked.

She looked up at him, startled. The voice on the phone crackled on in her ear, unheard.

She smiled a little.

"Please," she said.
He got home for eight, had an oven pizza and chips, and watched *Die Hard 2*. It wasn't as good as the first one.

The texts from Mycroft stopped at about nine. They'd grown increasingly ardent over the evening, finishing with a promise to go away next month - two weeks together, anywhere - take a globe, spin it and point, he said. They would go.

Greg did not reply.

He didn't reply to the others either. He was glad when they stopped, tired of having to empty his inbox every ten minutes.

He called Rachel to apologise. She cried to him until almost ten ("I know he nearly died, Rach, that doesn't mean he's not an arsehole...") at which point they parted as friends, agreeing that his visits might be better suspended until Dad was feeling better. Greg didn't say (though he wanted to) that this might mean 'indefinitely'; but he was feeling brutal and honest enough to admit to himself that he hoped it.

He slept well, got up and showered, getting to work ten minutes before nine.

No texts had come through overnight.

"Any sign of that Sunday morning miracle for me?" he asked, placing a caramel latte beside on his second-in-command's desk. Sally looked up from the paper, tired.

"Not just yet," she said, with a half-smile. "He was wriggling like a worm yesterday though. Refusing to give fingerprints - big mistake. I've got Charlie raking over his alibi again, testing it for holes... no leak so far."

"Keep at it," he said. "I'll line up the others... someone's going to tell us something by the end of the week. I can feel it."

He paused as he turned to go, his eyes falling on the newspaper open across her keyboard.

"What's that?"

"Just checking the press are sticking to the story we gave them," she said, with a sigh. "They're all chomping at the bit to unleash more details... I wouldn't put it past them to try hinting something. They could blow the whole thing."

Greg wasn't listening. He was looking instead at the picture on page four - two minor politicians, a bigwig CEO who famously let his staff wear jeans, a beautiful Chinese girl in a sequinned dress, and a pleased-looking dignitary, all posing at a party with champagne glasses in hand.

Greg leant nearer, sure he was seeing things.

He wasn't.

At the far right of the photo, just visible behind the dignitary's shoulder, was Mycroft.

He was talking to a woman whom Greg recognised at once as a major newspaper editor. The two of them were laughing over canapes, unaware of the nearby photographer.

*STARS GATHER IN LONDON FOR ZHANG MEI BIRTHDAY*

*Lavish Saturday night party for Chinese ambassador's daughter, 21*
Greg gazed down at the photo for a while, his face impassive even as his stomach threatened to abandon him via his throat.

"What's wrong?" Sally asked, after what seemed like an age.

He thought quickly, the shock losing its grip. He reached out, tapping the newspaper editor's face. "What the hell's her first name? Can't think at all."

"Uh - Dawn, isn't it?"

"Dawn," he said. "Thanks. That would have driven me mad."

He shut himself in his office for a while, alone, trying to decide if he was heartbroken or furious. In the end, he let himself be both.

He opened a new text message three times, unable to put it into words. He considered just taking a shot of the article, and sending it without comment - but then he'd have to ask Sally for the paper again. He'd already shown far too much interest.

Move me a mountain, will you?

What a joke.

You're a prick, he typed in - then deleted it.

Even those three words were more than Mycroft deserved.
Half past one. Sally burst into Greg's office at speed.

"Pen-knife stashed in recycling bags off Commercial Street," she said in a rush, the phone still in her hand. "Blood all over it. And we've got a positive ID of the kid Peterson from the neighbour who saw Daniel sitting with somebody on a wall. She says it's him. She's prepared to swear."

Greg's heart lurched.

"That's it," he said, shoving back his chair. "Right. Get him in, get him charged, and we'll have the fingerprints off him. DNA too. We'll have the bloody lot."

He lunged for his car keys and coat.

"Come on," he said. "I'll drive. Get uniform and tell them to meet us in the car park."

"Right," she said, and set off running. Greg ran too. He took the stairs three at a time, his coat flying as he pulled it on, heart pounding.

This was it. It was over.

They'd got him.

He drove like a demon through central London. Cars, taxis and buses leapt out of the path of the screaming blue lights. Beside him, Donovan drummed her fingers against her knee the whole way. Two streets away, he cut the siren.

They screeched to a halt outside the house; the car full of uniform almost rammed into the back of them. Officers began pouring out of it.

"Confession by six," Sally said, unclipping her belt and scrabbling for the door handle. "I'd put my life on it. Headline slot of the evening news."

She stopped, halfway out of the car.

Lestrade was sitting in the driver's seat, completely still.

"Greg?" she said. "C'mon. It's time."

It was something about the sight of the peeling front door, he thought - the net curtains, the wheelie bin, the withered lawn strewn with plastic kids' toys. This time last week, the pathologist had been performing a post-mortem on Daniel Newsome's body. Now, they were arresting his killer.

It was over.

It was that thought, he realised - the thought that it was done - that had locked his hands into place on the wheel.

"What's wrong?" Sally asked.

Greg exhaled, hard. He forced himself to speak.
"Go - pull him in, will you? Read him his rights." He looked down, gripping the wheel. "I'm… DID."

It was a code they all knew - rarely used, but well understood. It meant 'Danger of Instant Dismissal'.

He didn't remember the last time he'd been DID. It was a long while since he'd found himself within close range of a perpetrator he might just batter into a pulp on sight. In the past few years, he'd dealt with muggers, killers and paedophiles aplenty - but nothing had put him on edge like this.

Sally was right. It had gotten to him.

He wasn't proud of it - but he wasn't going to make it worse by throttling the little bastard on his own doorstep.

Sally's face shifted at once, understanding. She reached into her coat for her badge.

"Right," he said. "Two minutes."

She slammed the door and was gone.

In the silence that she left behind, Greg shut his eyes.

Sometimes, this part felt like a victory - they'd all been there. Every single one of them had experienced that glorious moment of escorting some deserving little arsehole to a waiting car, then forcing their head down inside it - sometimes, on purpose, not forcing them quite far enough, and bumping their miserable skull against the roof. For the best of those moments, there were photographers there to capture your triumph - your coolness, your nonchalance, as you wrestled some scowling little scrotum into handcuffs and took them away to a nice cold cell.

Then sometimes, this part felt more like what it was - an unhappy ending to something you wished hadn't happened at all.

Greg watched, hollow inside, as Donovan and uniform led the bastard down the path to the car. There was a mother on the doorstep, raging and in floods of tears as she expressed her concern at her precious child's treatment. Greg wondered if she would rage and cry when his fingerprints proved how he'd treated someone else's child, too.

With the perpetrator secured in the back, the other car set off. Its flashing light soon turned away down the end of the street, out of sight.

Sally returned, letting herself into the car without a word. She sat down, shut the door, and folded away her badge inside her coat.

"Thank you," Greg managed, stiff.

She flicked back her hair. "Any time."

Greg turned the key in the ignition.

"Best go powder our noses for the press conference," he sighed, pulling away from the kerb.

Sally huffed, shaking her head.

" - charged with the murder of Daniel Newsome, aged eighteen, who was found strangled behind a
community centre in the East End last week."

Greg didn't usually watch himself on TV. His mum had used to tape every single appearance - hours and hours of footage, him there in his best suit at the white-draped table, explaining that the public should exercise reasonable caution until the violent mugger was apprehended. She used to show the tapes to all the neighbours. "That's our Greg," she'd say. "Isn't he handsome? He broke up a paedophile ring in Hounslow last month. Look, here's the clipping from the paper."

"We'd like to thank the public for their assistance in these inquiries, and encourage anyone with further information to contact us as soon as possible."

Spooning microwave carbonara into his mouth, Greg watched with a small smile as Donovan led the rat-faced little prick into the car. As she lowered his head, he banged it against the roof.

"Brilliant," he muttered into his pasta. The heavily made-up reporter appeared once more, standing outside the community centre in a belted beige mac.

"Local residents of Spitalfields will be glad to see a potential end to this case," she said, professionally sombre, "which has affected many people deeply. Daniel's family have tonight issued a statement, thanking the police and the local community for their support."

Beside his second can of cider on the coffee table, Greg's phone gave an insistent buzz.

He leant forward to read it, one eyebrow raised as he tangled carbonara around his fork.

Very well done.
M.xxx

"Prick," Greg said. He put down his fork, reaching for the cider. "Don't patronise me."

He drank half the can, replacing it on the coffee table with a clink. He wiped his mouth on the back of his wrist.

"Go tell the Chinese 'very well done'," he muttered, settling back on the sofa and drawing his feet up beneath him. "See if they'll make you howl."

For all his bravado, he couldn't deny that it hurt.

He'd not had time to think about Mycroft all day. He'd pushed the picture in the paper to the back of his mind - too busy to think, too close to the end of the chase. Now, in the quiet of his flat, in his pajama bottoms on the sofa with a packet of twenty Rothmans waiting for him on the arm, the picture came floating back to the forefront of his mind - Myke and some newspaper editor, laughing over canapes at a birthday party.

'Global importance', he'd said.

It had been the worst week of Greg's decade. He'd had his heart pulled apart and kicked around like a football, and he'd tried pouring it out to Myke - only to have it flung back in his face. Of all the weeks he'd needed someone, this was it. And he'd struggled through the entirety of it alone.

It was fine, though.

It wasn't like he was gay.

He'd experimented a bit - that was all. Most men did.
And really, he thought, he should have known - anyone that shared genetics with Sherlock Holmes was going to turn out a callous bastard in the end. They were hard-nosed, hard-edged and inhuman. You couldn't trust them. You certainly couldn't rely on them.

All the same…

It would be weird having nobody to text - nobody to wake up with in the morning.

He stirred quietly through his carbonara, thinking.

He'd have to delete the photos off his phone soon. He couldn't bring himself to do it just yet. He didn't even want to look at them right now. There were a lot of things he couldn't bear to do.

He remembered meeting Myke at the airport - lifting him off his feet as they hugged. The drive home, London's lights flying by. Mycroft picking muffin crumbs off the paper.

It had been one of the happiest nights of recent memory, he realised. Maybe even not-so-recent memory.

And The Beaumont, too - arguing on the terrace - making up in the bed. He even missed the arguing. He missed making Mycroft feel something and show it, one way or another - taking that cold, hard facade; breaking it open to let the human out; knowing he was the only one who could.

He remembered Sherlock's drinks last Christmas Eve, too. Christ, he'd been so drunk. He'd buried all that shit for nearly thirty years.

Then a few glasses of mulled wine with Mycroft Fucking Holmes - and out it all came, blowing his whole bloody life apart.

Now here he was again, by himself in his flat.

It had all come full circle, he realised. He was on his own; Mycroft was an icicle-clad prick who would build bridges out of fallen bodies to get where he wanted. His dad was an arsehole. Rachel was determined not to see that. Work was hard, but it kept him busy. Life trundled on, and nothing ever changed.

It was better off forgotten, he thought, as he took his uneaten pasta away to the kitchen, scraping it out into the bin. All of this shit was better off in the past, where it belonged - where it couldn't do him any harm.

Things were just easier that way.

The nightmare came again that night - it was the second occurrence in two weeks.

This time, it was not his dad brandishing the belt. It was Mycroft, tuxedo-clad; journalists and dignitaries laughed as he did it. The lash of the buckle left marks across his face - marks that, as he cowered, formed a word.

Greg woke with a jolt, sweating and in tears.

It was three AM.

He broke down in bed, and he wept.
Thank you all so much for your tremendously kind comments so far... I can't believe we've passed 200 kudos. Insanity. Thank you all for reading, and I hope you enjoy the rest to come. With much love, Moth. x

One week later, Greg found himself in the Disney Store on Oxford Street.

He was trying to decide between a Belle costume from Beauty and The Beast, or a Little Mermaid playset. His sister had made him swear on his life not to buy Sarah any more plastic animals - but they weren't animals really, he reasoned. They were more... sea-life.

Toby - always easy to buy for - had a stuffed R2D2 ready in the basket. Sarah was taking some time.

He'd been round for tea last night.

It had been good to see Rachel back in her home, with the kids and the husband who appreciated her. It was doing her a world of good. She'd cooked far too much food as always, and bought a cheesecake the size of a bin-lid for afters.

As Toby was taken off bawling for his bath, Sarah in her Minnie Mouse pajamas had sat with Uncle Greg on the rug. She was laying out a farm with her animals - including, Greg was surprised to see, a number of dinosaurs and a Darth Vader action figure.

"He's the farmer," Sarah explained to him, patiently, when he asked.

"Of course he is."

"He's got the helmet on for when he does the bees."

"Oh, he's got bees?"

"Yes. They make organic honey and they sell it at the shop." She indicated a modified Coco Pops box to one end of the rug. "See?"

"Ah, right... now I understand."

She continued laying out ponies in thoughtful silence, her tongue protruding between her teeth. She was the spitting image of her mother when she concentrated. Toby, though small, was just like his dad - solid and pudgy and red-cheeked.

"So... who lives with the farmer?" Greg asked.

Sarah pushed back an errant curl of hair with a hum, twining it behind her ear. "Nobody," she said.

"He's like you Uncle Greg."

Greg had a brief, fascinating vision of Darth Vader watching Top Gear in his pants, balancing a
microwave curry on his stomach, while all the animals and the dinosaurs peered in through the window. "Doesn't he ever get lonely?"

"No, he's got all the animals. Besides, you don't get lonely."

She started setting out another fence for the chickens, humming to herself as she did. There was something very peaceful about watching her play, Greg thought. She saw the world a different way.

"Uncle Greg?" she asked, after a while.

"Yes, squirt?"

She pulled a face at him. "I'm not a squirt, Uncle Greg. Don't be mean."

"Okay... yes, Miss Sarah Whittaker?"

She sat back on her heels, fidgeting with a plastic velociraptor for a moment. She seemed to be wrestling with something.

"Was Grandad Lestrade very poorly?"

Greg's heart fell. Rachel and Graham were both upstairs with their youngest - he didn't know if it was his place to have this talk with her.

But then, he wondered, maybe she hadn't felt comfortable asking her parents. Her mum, in particular, had been a mess for two weeks. Things were only just getting back to normal. Her Uncle Greg might be the only one she felt safe to ask.

He picked his words carefully, watching her face as he did.

"He was very poorly - yes... but the doctors took good care of him. They got him all the tablets he needs, and they're keeping a close eye on him now. They're making sure he's alright."

"Did being poorly... make him feel bad?"

Greg had a feeling she was asking more than first appeared. "What d'you mean?"

She hesitated a while longer, rubbing her tiny thumb over the velociraptor's snout in great thought.

"He said some mean things about you. Mummy said it was because he felt bad, because he was poorly. She said he didn't really mean them."

Greg took a moment to collect himself, trying to figure out the best thing to say.

"It's... a shame if Grandad said things he didn't mean. He was very poorly. And nobody likes feeling that way."

She said nothing, still gazing down at the little dinosaur. Her face had fallen.

Greg realised what it was she wanted. He shuffled across the rug to her, taking care not to bump her carefully-placed fences.

She burrowed into his chest, clinging shyly to the back of his jumper. He put his arms around her gently, and patted her back. She was so tiny. Her baby blonde curls smelt of bubblebath.
"It's okay," he told her. "You should always tell someone if you're sad."

"Does Grandad love you really?"

Greg swallowed his pride. He had to lie for her. She was only six, and she was so small - he wanted her to believe, just for a few more years, that the world was good and kind and that even the cruellest person was just a Disney song away from redemption. He wanted her to stay small forever, so she never had to learn.

"Of course he does," he said, thick-throated. He rubbed her back. "And I love you. And so do your mum and dad."

"I love you too, Uncle Greg."

When he next opened his eyes, several minutes later, he found Rachel and Graham together in the doorway. They were watching the scene soft-eyed. Sarah was still cuddled into his chest, half-asleep, clutching her plastic velociraptor.

Rachel's eyes brimmed with tears as Greg looked up at her.

"You okay?" she signed to him, silent.

He nodded. He gave his niece a last gentle squeeze.

"Oi... missy. S'your bed time."

"I don't want to," she told his chest.

"You've got ballet club in the morning," he murmured. "C'mon... up the old apples with you."

As Graham led her sleepily away up the stairs, Rachel knelt down on the rug to help gather up Darth Vader's farm.

"She - was asking about Dad," Greg told her, quietly.

"Oh, God... really?"

"Asking if he was saying things because he was poorly. Or if he meant them."

His sister gazed at him, afraid. "Oh, Greg."

"I told her nobody likes to feel poorly."

"Right... I'll... see if I can talk to her in the morning." She clipped shut the box of plastic horses, her hands shaking a little. "I might - have to talk to Dad."

"Life's too short," he advised. "Just don't... let her think it's true. Whatever he's saying."

"G... she thinks you're the whole world - you know that?"

As Greg stared down at the Belle costume and the mermaid playset in his hands, Rachel's face fazed gently before his eyes.

"She thinks you're everything," she'd said.

Greg reached a decision. Suppressing the lump in his throat, he added both items to the basket and
As he examined the mountain of squishy-faced characters, he felt his phone buzz quietly in his pocket. He ignored it, choosing between Simba and the tiger from Aladdin. He'd need something else for Toby, too. This was going to be expensive, but it was worth it.

As he queued up to pay, his phone buzzed again. Once more, he ignored it.

It buzzed for a third time as he set the bags down under a table in Starbucks. He got a flat white first, removed the lid with a sigh, and finally slid the phone from his pocket, dreading a name he didn't want to see.

The surname was as he'd expected.

The first half was definitely not.

*Three New Messages from Sherlock Holmes*

"God help me," Greg breathed under his breath, opened the texts, and read.

*Can you please reconcile with my brother? SH*

*He's been unbearable for a fortnight now. I fear for the stability of the economy. SH*

*Also well done for Spitalfields case. SH*

"Oh Christ," Greg said, turning pale. He pushed his coffee cup away, sat forwards at the table and hit 'call now', his heart pounding as he listened to it ring.

There was no answer.

Just as he was about to ring off, there came a short crackle and a crunch.

"Hello…?" said a voice, wary. Sherlock always picked up the phone as if startled to discover you could actually call people on them.

As he answered, Greg realised with a surge of panic that he had no idea what he was about to say.

"I - just got your texts," he began. "I don't know what you're on about, mate. You've lost me."

The lengthy sigh said it all.

"Please, inspector... spare me the act."

"I'm serious, Sherlock. You've got the wrong end of the stick somewhere."

"Which other 'end of the stick' explains a two-pound weight gain over a seven day period? To say nothing of the insomnia and the volcanic temper. The two of you have quite clearly undergone some manner of romantic schism and frankly, Lestrade, it's now tedious in the extreme."

Greg had the distinction sensation that he was drowning with two full lungs of air. "How - how did you - "

"Are you seriously asking me that question?"

"Yes!" Greg blasted, suddenly angry. "Did he tell you?"
"In so far as he's spent the last four-and-a-half months smelling of L'Oreal For Men, yes. Need I mention the knees of his trousers?"

Greg covered his face.

"Look," he said into the phone. "This is - crazy. There's nothing between me and - ..." He realised the couple at the next table were listening in, fascinated, and quickly lowered his voice. " - ... your brother, and there never has been. Alright? I dunno what you think you've seen. But you can forget it."

"I can see you're determined to waste my time, Greg. In which case, could you please kindly reconcile the relationship you are not having with my brother, and could you possibly do it soon? One moment he's mourning about the place like a Gothic heroine... the next he's roasting interns alive with his breath. I'm sure you understand the situation."

Greg stared at his reflection in the Starbucks window, shaking his head.

"Did Myke put you up to this?"

"'Myke'," Sherlock noted, with interest. "Suspected it would be a diminutive form of some sort... I was leaning towards 'My', but 'Myke' makes sense. And no, he did not. I put me up to this. My sanity is stretched thin as it is."

"You can say that again."

"How kind of you, inspector. But shouldn't you be off making a rather different phone call?"

Lestrade rubbed his knuckles against his forehead, despairing the day he'd ever met any man called Holmes.

"Look," he said. "This might come as a shock. But you don't know everything you think you do."

Sherlock made a noise of surprise. "A dramatic claim to make."

"Well, I'm making it. And it's not a claim. I'm not kidding, Sherlock, this is... nothing to do with you." He looked down into his coffee, disheartened. "It's nothing to do with anyone."

"I assume Mycroft has wronged you in some way," Sherlock said.

"It - doesn't matter."

"If the stock market crashes, it shall matter."

"Well, that's - ... he should have thought about that, shouldn't he? Before he - " Greg stuttered to a halt.

"Before he... what?" Sherlock asked, sleekly.

Greg put his tongue into his cheek, massaging his forehead as he stared into the table-top. He couldn't believe he was having this conversation. Now they'd started, he didn't know how to make it stop.

"He... let me down," he said at last.

Sherlock scoffed. "John lets me down about eight times a week... hardly justification to cut off contact."
Greg winced as a voice in the background, clearly audible, said, "What do you - ... who exactly are you talking to?"

"Sherlock," Greg said, tired. The voice on the phone fell mercifully silent at last. "Listen... this isn't - your area. This isn't something you can solve."

"Then who can solve it?"

"I don't think anybody can," Greg said. "It's not about just - forgetting it and moving on, it's... more than that."

"That seems... unnecessarily complicated."

Greg swished the words around his mouth. "Sometimes life is," he conceded.

"So... you don't intend to reconcile with my brother."

"I - don't know."

"So you might do?"

"It's - no, Sherlock! I don't know. I don't know anything. I'm just having a quiet weekend for once, without any drama or - problems. So just... just leave it, will you?"

The silence that came back down the phone was unsettling.

"I know you're only trying to help," he added, weakly.

"He seemed - happy," Sherlock said, after a moment, "when you were not in disagreement."

Greg rested his head in one hand, trying to ignore the thump of his heart. He ignored, too, the flash of memory that came to his mind - a sun-filled bedroom on a Saturday morning, Myke laughing underneath him and calling him a beast - the flush of his cheeks. The muss of his hair.

"Yeah, well... so was I."

Sherlock's voice betrayed his usual befuddlement at the machinations of the human heart. "And this does not provide sufficient incentive to reconcile..."

_I'm receiving relationship advice from Sherlock Holmes. God help me._

"No, Sherlock... no, it doesn't."

"... might I inquire as to why? I'm assuming his crime was of sufficient magnitude to somehow damage your faith in the relationship."

"Oh, God... why the hell are we talking about this?"

"John? Pass me the calendar, will you? Two weeks ago..."

"Sherlock. Stop."

He could hear Sherlock flicking through. "And then there was a distinct shift in his behaviour last weekend, indicating that an underlying problem was exacerbated at that point..."

"I'll talk to him!" Greg blurted out, desperate. "Okay?"
Sherlock waited on the other end of the phone, silent and listening.

"Just - don't do this," Greg begged. "Let us work it out ourselves. Please?"

"But - you will work it out."

"I... don't know. I'll try."

"Hmm." Sherlock came to a conclusion. "Acceptable," he said, and the line went dead at once.

Greg let the hand containing his phone slide to the table-top with a clunk.

He wished he'd ordered a bigger coffee.

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**Good news. I have arranged a reconciliation between you and our good friend Inspector Greg. You can stop torturing us all now. He should be in touch with the details shortly. S**

**What the devil are you talking about?**
* M.

**He played coy too. I understand that you wronged him in some way. I believe the expected protocol is an apology. Do have one ready. S**

**I am not in the mood for jokes.**
* M.

**Which I am currently trying to correct. Ascertain what you did and tell him you were misguided in your actions. Doubt he's a chocolates and flowers kind of man, but maybe worth a shot. S**

**Whatever you believe that you know, you do not.**
* M.

**Curious. He said almost the same thing. Must I call you? S**

**I think that you should.**
* M.
As he drove home, Greg played the inexplicable conversation endlessly round and around in his mind.

Weight gain... insomnia. Volcanic temper.

Was it true?

He hated that his immediate reaction to a short-tempered, sleep-deprived, binge-eating Mycroft was to want to get hold of him, calm him down... make him better. After everything that had happened, he still shifted in discomfort at the thought of Myke lying awake at night.

He tried turning his thoughts back to that bloody photograph in the paper - canapes at a debutante's birthday party - in the hope it would dredge up the fury and the betrayal and the despair it had first caused him.

It was getting harder to remember, though. He kept going back to thoughts of Myke miserable and lonely somewhere - unhappy enough for even Sherlock to intervene.

He bit the side of his tongue as he sat in traffic, watching a family walking by along the pavement - Mum, Dad, toddler, baby in the buggy. The little boy had a stegosaurus back-pack on. It made him think of Sarah and her plastic farm. It softened him.

Maybe he'd over-reacted with Myke.

God, he'd been so low though... so angry. So sick of his dad, so tired of the case... Mycroft's desperate texts, promising they would go away together, just the two of them. Then, hours later, he was sharing vol-au-vants and mini-mousses with Fleet Street hacks and glitterati. Greg had needed him that day. He hadn't been there.

Greg didn't want to forget it. He didn't want to forgive it either.

He'd had a good week at work. He was feeling stable, settled, getting on with the quiet mundanity of life, and there was something to be said for that.

Without Myke, maybe he no longer felt the soaring joys - the deeper colours, the midnight laughter, the happy lurch of his heart whenever a text arrived.

But there weren't the lows either.

There wasn't that awful realisation that you needed someone who couldn't ever belong to just you.

A sharp pap of a horn alerted Greg that the lights had changed. He hurried the car along, frowning and muttering, "Yeah, you too, mate..." to the driver behind.

As he hauled his shopping bags up the steps to the front door, and clicked his key in the lock, a strange and unsettling premonition came over Greg.

He had a feeling he was about to find Mycroft inside.

He didn't know where the sensation had come from - what had alerted him to this possibility. It was strong enough to make him stop, and look up and down his street with concern. There was no sign of a car; no waiting driver. There was nothing to indicate the presence of Mycroft at all.

Slowly he turned the key in the lock. It clunked. He gave the front door a gentle push, letting it swing open and show him the empty corridor and the stairs. A little dust swirled in a shaft of
sunlight on the landing. There was nobody there.

Greg stepped into the building, closing the door behind him.

It was thinking about Mycroft all the way here, he figured. It made it seem like he was nearby. That was all.

Nonetheless, Greg ascended the stairs with a little more caution than he usually did. He turned at the top onto his landing, half-braced to find the figure there waiting.

No-one.

_Losing it_, he told himself. _Surprised I lasted this long._

He let himself into his flat.

He put the bags down on the sofa in the empty lounge, aware that he was listening for movement in the other rooms. There was nothing - he knew there was nothing. He was alone, and he knew it. He took off his coat, hanging it up behind the door.

Convincing himself he was too warm in this jumper, he headed quietly through to the bedroom. On the way, he gave a casual glance in the bathroom.

There was nobody in either.

He changed, telling himself he was being a bloody idiot.

Finally he went through to the kitchen, on pretense of wanting a cup of tea.

Everything was as he left it - the breakfast pots in the sink, last night's drying up, the Weston-super-Mare teatowel hanging up on the side of the fridge.

_There_, he told himself. _All checked. Now forget it._

As the kettle boiled, he opened the fridge to discover he'd run out of milk.

"Bollocks…" He knew he'd meant to pick something up. Half the Disney store, he thought, but no milk. He picked up his coat and keys and headed out to the shop on the corner.

On a whim, he got a copy of the paper and a Yorkie bar too. Life was for living, he supposed.

As he stepped off the stairs onto his landing, he stopped dead in his tracks.

There was a familiar figure standing outside his door.

Greg took a long, deep breath.
"What do you want?" Greg asked, hollow.

Mycroft took a moment to find the words.

"I'm here to return your key," he said at last, indicating a small object in his hand - a London Dungeons keyring, the skeleton swinging free. He had come dressed for business: three-piece suit, tie and umbrella, not a hair out of place. It was like finding Prince Charles at his door, Greg thought - or one of Sarah's Disney princesses. Someone not really real.

"You could have put it in with my post," he said.

Mycroft's gaze faltered. "Perhaps I could."

Greg became painfully aware that he was still hovering on the top step of his stairs, holding a Yorkie bar and two pints of milk.

"I - got the weirdest text from your brother," he heard himself say.

Mycroft shifted uneasily. "Yes… he told me. I've - remonstrated with him about that."

"Good," Greg said, stiff.

There was a silence.

"He's aware it was… misguided," Mycroft said.

"Fine," said Greg.

Further silence came.

Mycroft broke first.

"You - told him there was nothing between us. Said there never had been."

"What did you want me to say?" Greg asked. "That we were shagging like crazy until I found out you're a bell-end?"

Mycroft's expression flickered, as if static had intercepted the transmission. It looked like anger, and then it was gone.

"If by 'bell-end', you mean - "

Greg lost it. He'd been waiting to lose it for a week.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" he demanded, startling Mycroft into silence. "Showing up here looking like that - sneering at me - and what do you think I meant by 'bell-end'? I think it's pretty bloody clear."

His chest heaved. He didn't wait for an answer.

"Get the hell out of my doorway," he snapped. "This milk's curdling."

Mycroft stepped aside, sticking his tongue into his cheek. He said nothing as Greg approached the
door with a scowl, searching his pockets angrily for his keys. Phone, wallet. Yorkie bar. The seconds dragged on with no sign of the bloody things. He'd had them five minutes ago, he thought. He remembered putting them on the counter to - ...

Realisation dawned.

He stopped searching, dead-eyed.

"Left my keys in the paper shop," he muttered.

Mycroft held out the Dungeons keyring without a word. Greg took it.

As the key rattled in the lock, Mycroft drew a slow breath. "Greg, perhaps I owe you - "

"Don't," Greg burst out, "use my name... just... don't."

Silence fell once more. Greg stood with the key in the lock, unmoving, broken-hearted.

"I don't ever want to hear you say my name again," he managed, his throat tight. "You're a - prick. That's what you are. A toffee-nosed, cold-hearted prick."

Mycroft breathed it in.

"Yes," he said. "I am."

Greg wasn't sure what he'd expected. He shook his head, wordless, letting go of the key in the lock.

"I should never have got in your car," he said. "Christmas Eve. I should've just - … you've fucked everything up. Everything. And now I can't put it back where it came from."

"I'm sorry."

"And I am not gay." Greg's jaw set. He grabbed for the key, jerking the lock open. "Some birthday party."

Mycroft inhaled. "A work event."

"Fuck off, Mycroft. I handed you my shattered heart and you flounced off for canapes."

"With the ambassador to China," Mycroft said, slowly, "whose global influence at this moment cannot possibly be underst-"

For the second time in as many minutes, Greg lost it.

"Then you made your choice," he shouted, "didn't you? You had it and you made it. You fucking made it. I'm sure the ambassador to China's gonna keep you warm at night. Now get out of here, and leave me the fuck alone, and I ever find you hanging outside my - "

A door banged open on the landing below.

"What's going on up there?" came a shrill voice. "Mr Lestrade?"

Greg bit down on his tongue. "Nothing!" he shouted. "It's - nothing, Mrs Dobson. We're just - "

"Right. Well, could you just inside your flat, please?"

Greg struggled for a second, swallowing a retort. The last thing he needed was a complaint to the
management. He wouldn't find another flat at this price.

He wrenched open the door.

"In," he barked.

Mycroft, without a word, stepped inside.

The second the door shut, Greg rounded on him again.

"I needed you," he seethed. Mycroft stood there in silence, rubbing his eyes with exhaustion as he let Greg berate him. "Needed you. I've not needed anyone since I was fifteen years old. I begged you to fucking hold me, Mycroft. And you went off to chortle with your glitzy pals - talking money, talking politics, talking all that shit that doesn't matter. This mattered. You and me mattered."

Mycroft chose his words with care, struggling to get them out.

"If you think for a second," he said, "that I gained so much as an ounce of enjoyment from that event - "

"I saw the fucking photo in the paper, Mycroft! Now you're going to stand in my hall and lie to me? You were laughing with journalists while I was falling apart!"

"You knew who I was going into this," Mycroft suddenly raged, "You knew exactly who I was. You knew my responsibilities. You involved yourself with me anyway."

"It was a birthday party! For the love of God, how can you seriously - "

"How many times," Mycroft suddenly raged, "had I reached out to you that week? How many messages did you ignore? How many offers had I made to you?"

"Then at the point I've convinced myself you have no need for me at all, suddenly - …" Mycroft breathed in, hard. "That event was not a jolly social!" he shouted. "You do realise that? You might see canapes and ball-gowns, because you don't live in that world! That was a battlefield, upon which entire careers are won and lost - 'some birthday party' is where ninety percent of international relations are forged! I wasn't there to play musical chairs and raid the bloody buffet!"

"Christ, excuse me then! Excuse me for being too thick to understand the complexities of international relations, 'cause I'm just some laughing cockney PC Plod - solving a fucking gay-hate murder while my dad's on death's door and the world's fucking media are screaming at me asking why I've not fucking solved it yet - "

"I was trying to reach out to you, how many times had I tried to reach out to you - "

"You should have tried harder! I NEEDED you!"

"And how was I meant to have known that if you didn't TELL me?"

"Because you're meant to KNOW things!" Greg howled at him. "You're MYCROFT FUCKING HOLMES! That's what you DO!"
Silence struck - hard as a slap. The whole room and the flat and the building rang with it.

Greg realised he was still holding the milk.

He turned on his heel, raging, stormed to the kitchen and threw it into the fridge. He slammed the door so hard it bounced back open. He closed it. He hurled the newspaper straight into the bin.

As he returned to the lounge, he half-expected Mycroft to be gone.

He wasn't. He was standing by the TV, attempting to light a cigarette with hands shaking too hard to operate the thing.

"Why are you still here?" Greg snapped, grabbing his Rothmans from the arm of the couch.

"Because I am sorry," Mycroft bit out around the still unlit cigarette, clicking the lighter pointlessly. "And I haven't impressed that upon you yet. I'm not leaving until I have."

"You're not fucking sorry. Give me that." Greg snatched the lighter from him, flicked it and held it steady. Mycroft lit the cigarette, seething in silence. "If you were sorry," Greg went on, "you'd have been round here earlier. Instead you've been terrorising London, breathing fire down on people. Not sleeping. Not looking after yourself. Sherlock told me. Look at the fucking state of you."

"Yes, thank you, mother," Mycroft snapped. "And it's a miracle I sleep in normal circumstances. Let alone these."

Greg lit his own cigarette, still raging.

"Become a detective," he suggested. "Go take a hard look at some murder victims. Then take a hard look at their weeping families. Then come talk to me about normal circumstances."

They smoked for a few seconds in furious silence, neither speaking, neither looking at each other.

"You should have removed yourself from the case," Mycroft said, coldly. "You were quite clearly compromised."

"I was DID from day fucking one. Of course I was compromised. What would I have said to the Chief Super? 'Sorry, boss. I can't handle this one. As a fellow queer East Ender - '"

"You should have told him the subject was too emotionally volatile for you to handle."

"And lose my job? Fuck that for a game of spades. Like I'm going to give my dad another reason to rip chunks out of me." Greg snatched an ashtray from the bookshelf, slamming it down by Mycroft's elbow. "Don't get ash on my carpet. I need my deposit back. We're not all millionaires."

"How is your father?" Mycroft asked, sharp.

"Fine," Greg snapped.

"Good," Myke snapped back. "I'm glad."

"Are you? I'm fucking not." Greg dragged on his cigarette. "Treating my sister like a slave. Telling my niece Christ-only-knows-what about me. Sat there in his fucking armchair like a fucking toad, reminding me how hard he worked for us all, what a bloody failure I am - ..."

Mycroft said nothing, smoking by the mantelpiece in stiff-necked silence. Greg shuddered and dragged on the cigarette again.
- going on about fucking Cindy...

"Still?"

"He'll never stop," Greg snapped. "Never. Two fucking years now." He blew smoke through his nostrils, shaking. "How elegant she was. How classy. How out-of-my-league. Then with bloody Sally, just - anything, anything that persuades him I'm straight… and you weren't even there..."

Mycroft was watching him from the mantelpiece, the cigarette held between his fingertips. There came another silence.

"How old were you?" Mycroft said, at last.

Greg shut his eyes tight. "Fuck off, Mycroft," he breathed. "We're not doing this."

"You need me to drag it from you, then? Fine. You told me you'd not needed anyone since you were fifteen. Let's begin there."

Greg's shoulders had gone as rigid as the door frame. He smoked in silence, pale. He knew he should stop this. He had to put an end to it before it all came out - because when it did, there would be no putting it back.

But he couldn't speak.

"Based on my experience of being fifteen," Mycroft went on, "I'm going to make a wild leap of assumption that you hit puberty with the force of a bullet train, and realised you were gay. In Spitalfields. In a family with a tyrannical father, a frightened mother and a younger sister who thought you were the only light in the entire world."

Greg felt his wrists start to shake. He suppressed it, dragging on the cigarette.

"Were you fifteen when you told him?" Mycroft asked.

Greg stared into the wall, numb.

"I - didn't need to," he said.

Mycroft took a moment to put two-and-two together. "There was a boy."

And there he was - standing before Greg in the lounge, as real as if they'd only seen each other yesterday. Jack. Fifteen, sporty and funny. The scoundrel of the estate, with the floppy dark hair. They were best friends - next door to each other from almost birth. Swapping stickers, causing havoc at school, trailing the streets for miles with a punctured football between them. Everybody loved Jack.

Greg had loved him most.

"How did your father find out?" Mycroft asked him, somewhere a million miles away.

Greg did not move; he was staring into the memory of Jack's face. He could still see him laughing. Those eyes full of life.

"Walked in on us one day," he managed.

That moment. That awful fucking moment. A sudden creak, an opening door - the scramble for bed covers to hide, but too late - his dad's face. His dad's expression as he realised what he was seeing.
"What happened?" Mycroft said.

Greg heard his voice speak somewhere outside his own body.

"Beat me black-and-blue. Then he locked me in the bathroom for two days."

His hand shook as he went through it all again in a flicker - the lash of a belt across his face - the raging, the screaming. 'Not my fucking son'. Fists pummeling every inch of him they could reach. Spitting blood and pleading. He'd crawled under the kitchen table at one point. His dad had dragged him out, hit him against the floor until he couldn't see, then hurled him into the bathroom and locked the door. He'd refused to let Mum in to see him, not even to clean the cuts. Two days, two nights, in darkness.

"What happened to - ?" Mycroft said, quietly.

Greg looked down at his fingers, finding the cigarette still glowing within them. "Jack," he managed. His fingers shook. He dragged on the cigarette. "My - dad told his parents. They moved away the next month. Just... woke up one morning and they were gone. Place empty."

Silence fell.

Greg realised he wanted to cry. He'd wanted to cry for twenty-eight years. He only ever did after the nightmares. They were the only thing that forced him to feel it.

"Did you - try to contact him?" Mycroft asked.

Greg swallowed. Words wouldn't come. He waited, breathing, until the lump in his throat had grown small enough to speak around.

"Overdose," he managed, at last. "Heroin. Squat somewhere in Glasgow."

He flicked his cigarette; ash scattered over the carpet.

"Week before my thirtieth birthday," he said. "Rachel saw it in the paper."

For a long time, there was nothing - no sound, no movement from behind him. He wondered if Mycroft had gone. Maybe the realisation that Greg was so broken, so beyond help, had finally prompted Myke to get out of here and go. He didn't dare turn around to find out.

Mycroft could have anyone in this city.

He had no reason to be here - some tiny flat in Marylebone, with a man who couldn't even admit what he was, too frightened of the ghosts in his head. There were billionaires with trust funds out there; artists; CEOs; rockstars and journalists and footballers. People worth knowing.

There was nothing here for someone like Myke.

A hand laid gently on Greg's shoulder from behind.

"What - happened to you… what he did..." Mycroft's voice wracked with pain. "It wasn't... right. It wasn't deserved. If no-one has ever told you that before - …"

Greg shook, staring down at the cigarette in his hand.

"I know it wasn't right," he managed, his jaw locked tight.
"I'm sorry." Mycroft wanted to weep too. Greg could hear it in his voice. "I'm - so sorry - ..."

After twenty-eight years, the tears finally began to well.

"He's been mouthing about me in front of Sarah," Greg managed - he choked on a sob, breaking apart at last. "My niece - she's - and I don't know what he's said, but I - ... oh, fuck..."

Mycroft's arms were wrapping around him. He couldn't fight them. He couldn't pretend any longer.

"Myke, I'm sorry - … I know you work hard - I know you're busy - "

"Hush - ..." Myke moved around him, taking the cigarette away, crushing it into the ashtray. He enfolded Greg tightly in his arms. "It's alright. I'm here."

Greg sobbed, gasping into his shoulder. "Myke, I'm gay."

Mycroft's fingers carded through his hair, pulling him tight into his shoulder.

"I know you are," he breathed, shaking. He began to stroke Greg's hair. "It's alright."

"Y-You don't understand, it's - … oh fuck, I can't be gay - "

"It's alright that you are... I promise you. It's all alright." Mycroft held him, whispering in his ear. It was everything Greg had ever wanted, everything he needed. He couldn't breathe. "Nobody will hurt you..."

"N-Nobody can know - …"

"Only the people that you wish."

"Nobody, Myke, I mean it - "

"Then just us," Mycroft murmured, his chest heaving. He held Greg ever tighter. "Nobody shall harm you. I promise."

Greg clung to him, tears falling in silence into Mycroft's shoulder.

"I will shift the stars to keep you safe," Mycroft breathed.

"Oh - Christ…"

"I am sorry." Mycroft swallowed. "No more - prioritising work. Not when you need me. You come first. The system can adapt around us. Around you."

Greg couldn't speak. There were no words left in his head - none that mattered. There was only Myke.

"Now come to bed," Mycroft murmured. "For the love of everything holy. I need to hold you, and it is long overdue. Let me - one short phone-call. Then we will fix this."

Greg breathed in, letting the expansion of his lungs start to calm him. "I'll - lock the door."

"Yes. That seems sensible..." As they parted, Mycroft pulled his mobile phone from his pocket. He looked pale and exhausted. "Your neighbours will think you have killed me...

Let them, Greg thought. He didn't care what they thought. He pushed his hands over his face,
unsurprised to find cold sweat on his forehead. "I'm sorry I - called you a prick."

"I am a prick," Mycroft told him. "I think I've proven that conclusively. I shall endeavour no longer to be one, beginning with a week's solid practice."

He keyed a number into his phone from memory, twisting his tie from his neck as he did. As the phone rang and he held it to his ear, he cast the tie over his shoulder without a glance. It hit the bookshelf and dropped. Someone answered.

"Sophie. It's Mycroft. Is my diary there?"

Greg locked the door, checked it twice, and moved numbly into the kitchen to make tea. His hands shook as he did. He could hear Mycroft through in the lounge, tired but unrelenting.

" - yes, I understand what I mean by 'clear it'. Consider it an urgent health matter," Mycroft sighed. "Well, tell them the deal will wait. If it can't wait a week, then perhaps they shan't require our assistance with Russia after all… no? I thought as much."

By the time Greg had managed to put together two mugs of tea, Mycroft was down to his shirt-sleeves. He was pacing the lounge on his phone, increasingly exasperated.

"Forty. No, forty. Not one less, Sophie. Tell Dovzhenko I'm prepared to take this back to stage zero if he pushes."

Greg put down the tea tray, wishing his wrists would stop shaking. The rattle of the teaspoon made it sound so much worse.

Mycroft reached the end of the lounge, turned, and began pacing back this way. He rubbed his right temple as he did, looking ten years older than he was. Some new issue caused him to sigh. He lifted his head and met eyes with Greg, waiting on the other side of the coffee table.

Mycroft's expression softened.

"... fine, Sophie," he said. There was a pause. "You heard me... I said 'fine'. Put it through. I haven't the strength to argue with the blasted woman about this a moment longer. Let her handle the fallout from France. I'm a diplomat, not a divorce mediator."

Heart beating hard, Greg came across the lounge towards him.

Myke watched him come nearer with deepened eyes.

"... no," Myke said into the phone. "Over my dead body. They'll have changed their minds three more times by Monday. I hardly need to be there to witness it."

Weak, lost, Greg eased his arms around Mycroft's waist and stepped into the warm of his chest. He was gathered into Myke's arms without hesitation. Myke pressed his nose into Greg's hair, gently; the noise from his phone droned on.

"... yes," he intoned, tired. "In theory, by next spring. Don't let them pin you down to a month or I'll never hear the end of it. Is there anything else?"

More sound from the phone. Mycroft's final sigh stirred through Greg's hair, soft, as he let go.

" - oh, just… tell them I've been kidnapped, Sophie. Have a wonderful week."

He hung up.
He tossed his phone onto the sofa, where it landed with a flump. He then gathered Greg's face in his hands.

"At last," he sighed, drew Greg's head up, and kissed him.

The tea went cold on the coffee table. Day turned into night - then day once more.
It was raining outside. Greg could hear its quiet drum against the bedroom window as he drifted from sleep into consciousness. He shifted beneath the sheets, weak, and drew in a long breath - his first of a new day.

It felt like the whole world was still asleep.

As he opened his eyes, he found Mycroft resting against the pillow beside him - keeping watch.

"Good morning," Mycroft murmured, as their eyes met.

Greg's heart seized a little. "Hi," he said.

Mycroft lifted a hand. Gentle fingertips brushed his cheek.

"How are you?" Myke asked, quietly.

Greg took a moment to put together a proper answer. It was a significant question, he thought. It deserved a significant response. "Fine," he said at last. "Bit - fragile. All things considered."

Mycroft smiled a little, his eyes quiet. "No nightmare?"

"You'd know if I had. Believe me." Greg hesitated, searching Mycroft's face. There was only tenderness there, but he worried nonetheless. "So... you think differently about me now..."

Mycroft's brow contracted gently. "No," he said.

"You - heard a lot of things yesterday."

"I did."

"Nobody's heard most of those things before."

"Such is ninety percent of my professional knowledge. I'm rather practiced at keeping secrets... I assure you. You have nothing to fear from me."

Greg relaxed somewhat. He closed his eyes as Mycroft stroked a hand across his cheek. He felt strangely clean, he realised - it was something about the sound of the rain.

"For what it's worth," Mycroft added, after a moment, "I may have changed my opinion of your father..."

Greg snorted, quietly. "You've... never even met him."

"I doubt that I should ever want to."

"You have access to assassins, right? Is there any room in this year's budget? Shouldn't be a big job. He never leaves his damn armchair."

"You might not joke about that," Mycroft warned, "if you knew the truth of things."

"Don't tempt me." Greg laid a hand on Mycroft's chest. It was nice to feel Myke's heartbeat there. It made him feel less afraid, somehow. "I suppose time doesn't charge for its services."
"Is that what you intend?" Mycroft asked, gently. "To wait?"

"I think it's... all I can do, to be honest. Wait, then someday grieve." Greg hesitated, holding within his mind some thought he'd never expressed. He wanted to express it to Myke. "Sometimes I think about - the funeral I'll be at some day. Dressed in black next to Rachel. Listening to her cry. I wonder what that will feel like. And I tell myself that I can be angry then - when it's safe. When he's gone."

"Not while he's alive?"

"No... not until it's over." Greg didn't know where the conviction came from. Often he'd asked himself whether he should be angry now - whether it would be best to confront his father while the old bastard was still here to confront, or risk losing the chance forever. He'd lost twenty-eight years of his life, paralysed by fear - cowering from a belt that had never really stopped beating him. Surely he needed to express that somehow.

No matter how he tried, he didn't want to.

He didn't know what good it would be bring. There would be no apology - and he didn't want one. He knew what had happened. His dad knew it too - just pretended it hadn't. There was nothing to be gained. Greg didn't even know what he would say. "So Dad... remember that time you nearly cost me a kidney? " There was no way to talk that out.

He looked up into Mycroft's eyes, swallowing.

"Am I - a monster for that?" he asked. "Just - waiting for him to die?"

Mycroft's expression flickered. "You would be within your rights to put the man through hell for what he did. Instead you allow him to bypass justice - for the sake of your own peace of mind. That is the decision you've made. Nobody is qualified to make that choice but you. You are not in any way a monster."

Greg looked away, hollow-throated. "I just feel like - … when he's gone... then."

"Then." Mycroft brushed a stroke through his hair, gentle. "Until that point..."

Greg shook his head, lost. "I - don't want to see him."

"Understandable."

"I just - ... fuck, I know he's ill - I know he's family, but... God, what he put my mum through. What he put me through. What he's putting Rachel through. I can't handle it any longer." He closed his eyes, feeling the emotion start to choke him. "I'm dealing with a lot right now. A lot I missed out on. A lot that I went through because I - I thought if I just tried, and tried harder, then... I don't know, I'd somehow get there... 'fake it until you make it'. I never made it. I wasted a lot of time faking it. Now I'm... forty-three. Fuck."

"I hear that it's never too late to find some authenticity in life."

"I... hear that too." Greg hesitated, glancing into the protective blue-grey gaze. "I'm not - ready to -"

"Small steps," Mycroft murmured. He drew Greg closer, pressing a kiss against his forehead. "I hope you're glad to have told me."
Greg let go of a long breath. "It's a weight-off. I won't lie. Since Jack, there's not been… so I've not really had the chance to talk about..."

Mycroft frowned a little, unsure for a moment what he was saying.

Realisation widened his eyes.

"Am I -?" he said.

Greg winced. "I - didn't know if you knew," he said, awkwardly. "Figured you'd... guess somehow."

"Greg…"

"Oh God, there it is. Seeing me differently."

"No - no, it's not that..." Mycroft drew him nearer, wrapping the sheets around him. "I just hadn't... realised. I'd have perhaps been less - forward with you, if I'd -..."

Greg reached up to cradle his jaw. "Then we'd never have ended up here," he said. He watched Mycroft's eyes soften. "I - needed it. The push. Someone to come along and... I don't know, open up the box. Start me thinking."

He brushed his thumb over Mycroft's lower lip, gazing at him, taking in every aspect of his face.

"It's not been all sunshine and rainbows," he admitted. "But I've needed it. I'm - glad. I mean it." He steeled himself, breathing slowly in. "And I'm ready to... try some authenticity..."

Mycroft pupil's swelled gently.

"Let me work you through it," he murmured. "Piece-by-piece. I shall be here - if you want me."

Greg felt his heart expand. "Myke…"

"Dear God, I've missed hearing that..." Mycroft held him, tight, nose burrowing into his hair. "Greg, I was... unhappy without you."

Greg smiled a little. "Really?" he said. "I - was a fucking wreck without you."

Mycroft laughed; it lit his face. For the first time since yesterday Greg gave a tentative grin, sitting up a little, and ran his hand over Mycroft's chest. He slid his fingers up the side of Myke's neck, round to the back of his head, and brought their foreheads together with a gentle bump.

Their eyes closed as one.

For a while, they simply breathed.

"Might I suggest something?" Mycroft murmured to him, as the rain came down.

Greg's stomach swooped. "Please do."

"I think this… arrangement of ours has become something more. More than first it was."

Greg smiled, pressing his tongue into his cheek. "More than ripping into each other in a hotel after far too much mulled wine?" he said.
Mycroft smiled too, pained. His gaze softened. "Now would be the opportune moment to tell me that I'm wrong. Before I mortify us both."

Greg shook his head, gently. "Yeah... I'm not telling you that."

He reached up to Mycroft and kissed him - brushed their lips together, slow. Mycroft palpably sighed. They sank down into the sheets together, stirring, and Greg found himself nudged gently onto his back. Myke eased on top of him, kissing him, surrounding him, above and all around with the scent and the warmth he had missed for days and days, and he never wanted to be away from Myke again. Their kisses slowed further, grew closer.

Gentle hands - infinitely careful - ghosted down his sides.

"You are wonderful," Mycroft whispered against his lips.

Greg's head began to spin. "I'm gay," he managed, overcome by it. He felt the first shine beginning in his eyes.

Mycroft raised an eyebrow, just a fraction. "Yes," he said. "You are."

Greg breathed it in, overwhelmed. Forty-three, he thought - dizzy as a teenager.

"When did you - get some authenticity?" he asked.

Mycroft snorted, the corner of his mouth upturning. "I've... never needed to state it. Frankly, it's something of a wonder that my parents didn't sit me down aged fifteen, to tell me gently I was gay."

Greg laughed. He couldn't help it - he watched Mycroft's face open in joy as he tried to suppress the humour.

"Don't you ever... get trouble for it?" he asked, as Mycroft laid a kiss upon his forehead, smiling, stroking back his hair.

"Curiously, very little..." Mycroft murmured. "The circles in which I move are strangely accommodating in that regard." He thought about it for a moment, putting it into words. "Power permits you many things. One of those is a certain... sovereignty of the heart. Become rich enough, influential enough, and you are no longer considered some strange old queer... you become a bastion of your own decisions. The world reforms around you. You are accommodated, not attacked."

It sounded good, Greg thought. Almost too good to be true.

His mind strayed briefly to his workmates - to family - to the old school friends he still sometimes met for drinks.

He couldn't imagine being... gay with them. The very thought of them knowing made him deeply uneasy.

He then realised with a lurch that he was imagining himself in the sort of gay stereotypes that coloured his father's thinking - hysterical and histrionic, pouting, having meltdowns over the decor and calling people 'darling'. But that wasn't how it would be.

He would still be Greg - cars, cider and cigarettes - maybe just with Myke sitting there beside him. Splitting the bill, turning up to things together. 'Greg and Myke', he thought - like 'Rachel and
That thought didn't feel so uncomfortable.

Mycroft watched him think, his expression infinitely gentle. Greg wondered if he knew the paths along which Greg's mind had quietly begun to wander.

"I care for you deeply," Mycroft said. "I hope you know that."

Greg smiled, feeling his heart stir. "I know."

"Whatever we began, it has… changed in nature."

"Seems so." Greg ran his hands over Mycroft's chest, gently. "I like this… thing we have. It - makes me happy."

"Perhaps we should nurture it, then," Mycroft murmured. "Let it grow as it will."

A feeling like champagne bubbles was rising between Greg's ribs. "I… don't think there's any stopping it, to be honest. God knows we've tried."

Mycroft smiled. His eyes were deep, and as gentle as the rain.

"Let us not try stopping anymore," he said.

"No… let's not. He smiled, gazing into Mycroft's face. "Are you're sure you can take the week away? All seven days?"

"I'd call that the least I can do."

"You - know I'm back to the thin blue line tomorrow, don't you? Duty calls, and all that…"

"I'm afraid you won't be," Mycroft said. A spark of something playful, something powerful, flickered in his eyes. Greg rather liked it. "The commissioner owes me a rather significant favour. Always a useful thing to be owed by Her Majesty's Constabulary. I've cashed it in on exchange for a week of your undivided company. It seems to me that the catcher of the Spitalfields killer is vastly overdue some holiday."

Greg felt his chest expanding with every word.

"What'll we do for a week?" he asked.

Mycroft raised a gentle eyebrow. "Not leave the bed?" he suggested.

Greg grinned, his eyes shining. There was no grey in Myke's gaze in this light, he realised. Only blue.

"I've not got any food in," he said. "I was going to go to the shop this morning… there's no breakfast, no anything… two pints of milk and a Yorkie bar. That's about it."

Myke smiled. "I'll have food brought."

"And what about clothes? You've not got any with you."

"I shall need clothes?" Mycroft asked, wry.
Greg laughed again, brimming over with it. His lover nuzzled his temple with a grin.

"I'll have clothes brought. Sophie can take care of it - she's more than capable of packing a suitcase for me… and I have made my choice." Mycroft kissed him, gently - the softest, barely-there stroke of lips across his own. "I am staying here," Mycroft murmured, "with you, until at the very last next Sunday. I will heal the pain that I caused you. I will start healing the pain caused by others. Hell's hounds shall not take me from your side."

"Myke…" Greg breathed in, deep. He felt like he'd been born anew over night. "Myke, you're…"

"I know," Mycroft murmured. He kissed him again, soft. "Now come here, and enjoy it."

The gentle kisses lapsed into caresses. Hands, endlessly tender, soothed the last flickers of fear from Greg's soul. Every shadow eased away. The worry was gone; the doubts were no more. There was only the stroke of Mycroft's hands, and the brush of his lips, and the sensation of being gently and carefully undressed in the morning light. A bird began to sing in the tree outside. Greg listened to it, breathing in its clear and peaceful song, as Myke took care of him and whispered to him, told him he was magnificent. His thoughts began to unravel. Pleasure rose, steady and soothing as the rain.

As Myke finally began to move inside him, it felt so good he thought he might pass out.

He gripped his lover tighter - one hand at his shoulder and one on his lower back, where each gentle rise and fall of Myke's hips corresponded with a fissure of white pleasure that robbed the breath from Greg's lungs. The bed rocked gently beneath them; the only other sounds were their breathing, the calling of the bird outside. Greg started to sweat.

"Myke…” he breathed, lost in another coiling wave of white. He twisted with it, panting. "Oh - …"

Myke kissed him, soothing him, easing him with the same steady strokes. He'd never felt so vulnerable and so safe at once. He broke the kiss to gasp urgently against Myke's lips, panic spiking in his stomach.

"I-I've not come in two weeks - I'm - not gonna last - "

"You think I want you to last?" Mycroft whispered; his pupils flared. "I want you to come."

"Holy God…" Greg's head fell back, his heart pounding. Something more, he'd said… it felt like more than that. More than something more. "Myke, I'm - I - …"

He didn't get to finish.

"F-f-u-ck…” he gasped - arching, burning. "Myke - "

They laid together in the sheets for some time - talking, kissing, drifting in and out of sleep. It was too perfect a morning to do anything with. Greg never wanted to see another person again as long as they lived.

Not long after ten, Mycroft made a phone call with Greg lying in his arms, stroking his lover's hair.

"Sophie… it's me." The phone chattered for a moment. Mycroft's assistant was as perky and responsive as ever. Mycroft listened, then gave a low rumble of amusement. "Yes, chewing through the nylon ropes as we speak… should be through them in eight days or so. Nothing to worry about."
He stretched a little with a sigh, trailing his fingers down Greg's back.

"I am about to give you an address in Marylebone," he murmured. "I expect it to be treated with the greatest of confidence."

Half an hour later, in a borrowed pair of pajama bottoms and one of Greg's shirts, he padded from the bedroom to answer the door. He returned with a suitcase. Greg watched from the disarray of their nest, half-asleep and horizontal in a peaceful sprawl, as Mycroft opened the case and looked through it.

"Groceries still to come," Myke murmured. "I wasn't sure what you would want. Sophie is expecting a list."

He placed a toiletries bag on the bedside - soft orange leather, and the word Farragamo. It made Greg smile.

"Would you do something for me?" Mycroft asked.

Greg gazed up, endlessly glad. "Anything," he said.

"Ensure I eat things that are green this week… I have lapsed into poor habits. I gather my ever-loving brother mentioned the weight gain."

"Domestic bliss," Greg murmured. "Or - domestic strife, as it was... it's fine."

Mycroft huffed. "A slippery slope," he said. "One I have travelled down before."

Greg reached out to catch Mycroft's hand as he passed. Their fingers tangled, gently. "We'll go running together," he said. "Hyde Park. It's only a mile away."

Mycroft's brow contracted a little. He smiled. "I'd - rather like that."

"We could go this afternoon… get some fresh air, clear our heads..." Greg stirred, drawing Myke's hand up to his lips. He kissed it gently. "Always better to run in the rain."

"Are you in a fit state to run?"

"I'm embracing my sexual identity, Myke... m'not having a breakdown."

Myke gave a half-smile. He leant down to the bed, to his lover's upside-down sprawl, and placed a kiss upon his forehead. "If you're certain."

Greg lifted his nose, nuzzling at Myke's. "I am," he said. "I'd like to go."

Myke nuzzled in return. He smiled against Greg's forehead. "Might I ask something?"

Greg braced a little. "Sure."

"What precisely did Sherlock say to you?" Mycroft said. Greg laughed, releasing the flicker of fear.

"Plenty. He was texting to start with. Requesting that I 'reconcile' with you, because you were driving him mad... so I rang him, and told him I didn't know what he was talking about… we ended up having a relationship counselling session over the phone in Starbucks. He said you were roasting interns alive and not sleeping."
Mycroft's gaze flickered. "Is that so?"

"Mm. Told me for the good of the economy that I should forgive you immediately."

Mycroft smiled a little. "He suggested that I procure you chocolate and flowers."

"Jesus."

"Mm. And yet... here we are again."

Greg smiled, his eyes shining. He felt like a giddy teenage girl. "Here we are again."

"An unusual niche for him to occupy," Mycroft remarked, as he drew away, returned to the suitcase and continued to unpack. "Consulting Detective and Amateur Couples Therapist."

"I'll get him a new sign made for the door..." Greg watched him assign clothes into drawers. There was something oddly touching about the sight of their socks nested together. "M'sorry you weren't sleeping, Myke. I mean it."

"Well... I'm sorry it took Sherlock to make me see it. A depressing state of affairs, if ever there was one."

"And I'm sorry I - got angry. With the party."

"Hardly your fault. I hadn't shared with you enough about my work."

"Well - maybe, but..."

"We are both learning," Mycroft said, pausing as he passed, leaning down to place another kiss on the bridge of Greg's nose. "You are learning to be yourself; and I am learning to be less of a machine. I am very proud of how far you've come... all I can beg now is your patience."

The day seemed to vanish - laughing, unpacking groceries together in the kitchen; brunch, almost burned as their attention lapsed, too busy kissing against the fridge like teenagers. They walked in the drizzle to Hyde Park after lunch. They ran like grown adults for ten minutes, then like children for thirty - an impromptu and rain-soaked game of tag, lunging after each other between the trees and laughing. Dog-walkers and tourists in raincoats briefly turned to look. No-one had any idea who they were. It was wonderful.

At last, when they'd reminded themselves how unfit they were, they sat down on a bench beside The Serpentine. Rain speckled their faces and hands as they sat there, watching the ducks on the river. They talked about summer and the coffee-shops in Prague. "Remind me to take you," Mycroft said. Greg had never wanted anything more.

They walked back together as the storm clouds thickened and the rain came down heavy over London. Cars, taxis and buses hissed by; the streets emptied around them. It would rain until morning now.

They left their wet things tangled on the bathroom floor, kissing in the shower together until the gentle petting became groping, breathless moans softened by the spray of hot water and steam. They stumbled, still wet, to bed. Myke arched restlessly beneath him as he came, all damp red hair and flushed cheeks, grinding back in desperation and gasping Greg's name into the pillows.

The evening drew in - stir-fry, a bottle of wine, *Double Indemnity* on the DVD player.
Greg was growing rather fond of forties' films. It wasn't so much the films themselves - rather, the effect they had upon Myke. It was like seeing him under a spell. As they watched, and the wine bottle ebbed lower and lower, Mycroft curled into a number of positions before finally stretching himself along the sofa, resting his head on a cushion in Greg's lap. It was the first time Greg had ever spotted the resemblance to Sherlock. It was strangely adorable.

He wondered how many people in the world had ever seen Mycroft like this - at ease in a lover's lap, loose cotton pants and a night-shirt, gazing at a film as if enchanted.

It had been a perfect day, he thought.

They could do it all again tomorrow.

As the credits rolled, Greg gave a silent prayer of thanks for the day he'd said yes to mulled wine round at Sherlock's.

Mycroft sighed, far away for a moment. He then stirred in Greg's lap, turning his head to gaze up at him from the cushion.

Greg smiled down, delighted. "Hi."

Mycroft's eyes glittered. "Hello…"

"D'you want another glass of wine?"

Mycroft rubbed his face, tired. "No… I fear I'm rather tipsy, in fact..."

"Are you - actually tipsy this time? Or is this another ruse to cuff me to the bed again?"

Mycroft chuckled into his hands, sleepy. "It's genuine… not that I'm ruling out a repeat of that at some point." He sighed, stretching, the motion almost feline in its lethargy. "This is… rather perfect, you know. Ordinary life."

Greg's heart glowed a little. "Isn't it?"

"Is everyone usually this happy?"

"God... no." Greg reached down, stroking a thumb over Myke's forehead; the blue-grey eyes fluttered shut. "If I know anything, I know this isn't ordinary."

"Mm. I had a feeling it wasn't."

Greg smiled faintly, watching Myke's expression soften as he stroked his hair.

"Surely you must know," he said. "Surely you've been in love - …"

He almost said 'before'.

His heart pounded as he realised.

Mycroft sighed, oblivious and happy. "I find it hard to - connect," he said, as Greg's head reeled, all the world and everything in it falling into place in a whirl. "Sex is... well... procurable. Especially in London. But company is far harder to find."

There was quiet for a moment as Greg waited for the whole world to spinning. Mycroft had no idea. He laid at peace in Greg's lap, quite content.
After what felt like hours, a hand rested gently on Greg's stomach. He returned to earth with a bump, looking down.

Mycroft was looking back up at him - eyes bright, expression soft.

*Holy shit,* he thought. *This is really happening.*

Mycroft smiled and frowned at him at once, wondering. "What?" he asked.

As Greg carried Mycroft in his arms through the door of the darkened bedroom, the sheets were still in disarray from that afternoon. He laid Mycroft down amongst them with care. He didn't bother reaching for the light - just for Mycroft's lips, easing on top of him slowly in the dark. Mycroft gave a faint, gentle moan as they kissed.

After, they nestled together beneath the covers. Mycroft was glowing slightly in the darkness. Greg couldn't stop looking at him - couldn't stop kissing him.

He was beautiful.

"Please," Myke whispered to him - the last thing he said before they fell asleep. "Let it be like this all week."

For a moment, Greg thought he'd said 'always'.

He realised his response was just the same.

"I promise," he murmured. He cradled Myke's face in his hands. "Put up with me... let me learn. I'll make you happy. I swear."

Through in the lounge, the two mobile phones that had been abandoned on the coffee table buzzed as one, jittering a little closer together. Their screens lit up - two bright squares of light in the darkness.

An identical message flashed into view upon each.

*Assuming the radio silence indicates a success. Don't thank me too much. Remember to drink lots of fluid and take frequent breaks. SH*

After a fortnight of anguish, they passed into a month of perfect peace.

Even returning to work on the Monday couldn't tarnish Greg's mood. Mycroft spent half of all nights with him now - cooking with him, sleeping with him, making love with him. They kept as much of each weekend for each other as they could. The Thai food place on the corner soon recognised their Friday night order, and Greg collected it each week under the name of 'Holmes'. Myke's possessions began to get comfortable in his flat - casual clothes, books, DVDs he'd never bought. They settled among Greg's own, quite happily there.

The simple truth was that being with Myke was easy - it made him happy.

Before Greg knew it, it was May.

And they were falling in love.
Birthday

On the morning of the twentieth of May, Greg entered the office to a burst of cheers.

He stopped in his tracks, grinning. There they all were - assembled at front desk. There was a banner strung above them, spelling it out in brightly-coloured flags: HAPPY BIRTHDAY BOSS.

Sally laughed, pride of place at the front, as Greg did his best to look mortified. The cheers broke into delighted applause. She sauntered over to him, smirking, and put a plate of cake in his hand, then perched a paper hat on his head. As the others clapped, he grinned and shook his head.

"How long've you been planning this?" he asked her.

"Three PM yesterday," she said, "when you let it slip. Not bad, huh?"

He hugged her one-armed, trying not to cover her in cake. She patted him hard on the back.

"Many happy returns, boss."

"Thank you." He tipped his paper hat to the crowd, grinning. "Another year closer to retirement, eh?"

There was a resounding cheer, followed by laughter. Sharon from Reception started handing round coffee; Paul from Accounts divided up the cake.

Greg's pocket vibrated, gently.

"This is a hell of a start to the day," he joked, scooping up the first forkful of chocolate cake. "S'only downhill from here… give it a couple of hours and we'll be handing round the whiskey."

"Any plans for the evening?" Sharon asked, handing him a coffee.

"Cheers. Seeing a friend after work. Then my sister's got a big meal planned for Sunday… she'll be making a fuss of me. Apparently my niece has spent three days on a card."

He slid his phone from his pocket, checking it as casually as he could.

A banner, at least.
And it must be chocolate cake.
M xxx

He hid his smile behind his coffee, taking the first sip.

"Well, I hope you're spoiled," Sharon said, flashing her eyelashes at him. "Lots of presents."

"If I'm lucky," he said. "'Scuse me two seconds - just need to answer a quick text..."

He let himself into his office, scarfing another mouthful of cake.

how could you possibly have known? x

I have a nose for these things, Mycroft told him a minute later. What colour is the party hat? Surely red.
Greg snapped a quick photo of his own quizzical expression, topped with a red paper hat and with a forkful of cake in his hand. He hit send.

He could almost hear Mycroft’s laugh.

I hope my paltry efforts later can match up. I’ve booked the private room at The Nightingale for 8 - I’ll pick you up in good time.
Do leave some room around all the cake.
M xxx

Shame you’re on a Saturday this year. you’ll miss out on all this fun tomorrow.
Does the prime minister usually give birthday bumps? x

Heaven forbid!
Quite sure you can spoil me adequately yourself.
M xxx

Greg had been delighted when they realised.

"Seriously?" he'd said, wandering his flat on the phone one rare night apart, cigarette in hand. "The 21st? I'm on the 20th. We're only a day apart. What are the chances?"

"Interestingly," Mycroft mused in his ear, "if we were a group of fourteen people, it would be over fifty percent."

"... really?"

"Mm. It's known as the birthday paradox. In a room with twenty-two others, you are more likely than not to share your birthday with one of them. Separating by a single day - as in our case - increases the chance even more dramatically."

"Wow..." Greg stood at his kitchen window, smiling out into the London night. He stretched up on the balls of his feet. "That's pretty cool, though… right? We can do joint birthdays. And I'm never going to forget yours."

"Was there a chance you might otherwise?" Mycroft asked, feigning injury.

"Be serious, Myke." Greg dragged on his cigarette with a smile, surveying his happy reflection in the glass. "I'm gonna make your birthdays go off with such a bang they'll hear it back in Beijing."

"Birthdays?" Myke inquired, laying enormous interest on the plural.

Greg grinned, flicking ash into the bin.

"Have a good day at work tomorrow," he said. "I hope your report goes okay. Say hi to the PM for me. Tell him it's my night next."

Mycroft laughed, low and delighted, in his ear.

"Yes, I'm sure that will go down marvellously…" Myke paused; his voice was full of a smile.
"Good night, Greg."
Greg found himself grinning, biting the corner of his lip. "Night... Myke." He paused. "Miss you."

Mycroft audibly sighed. "I miss you, too."

As the door of Greg's office opened, he found himself back in the present, holding a paper plate of cake and smiling down at Myke's last text. He looked up. One of the new detective constables was standing in his door.

"Sorry, skip," the constable said. "Sharon asked me to tell you. Chief Super on the phone."

"Oh, really? He shouldn't have."

The constable smiled. "Not sure it's with happy returns, sir."

Greg grinned, polishing off his last forkful of cake. "Put him through," he said, dusting crumbs from his mouth. "Not long 'til five o'clock."

He sat down behind his desk just as the phone began to trill. He licked the last of the cake from round his lips and picked it up.

"Lestrade," he said.

"I'm forwarding you an e-mail," the Chief grunted, without preamble, in the one tone of voice he possessed - weary, short, and disappointed. Greg had been astonished at last year's Christmas party to discover the Chief Super was married. Presumably he'd said his wedding vows in that tone - as if Mrs Chief Super should have had them on his desk a week ago. "New HR scheme... I need you to read it and circulate to the troops. Apparently our ability to detect and prevent crime is now a side-issue, compared to how gay-friendly we are."

Thanks! Greg thought, sarcastically, as he opened up his e-mails. Yeah, just going for a drink with a friend after work...

"Have you got it?" the Chief snapped.

"Just coming through," said Greg. He liked to be cheerful at the Chief. Nothing wound the man up more. "What's this scheme?"

"To do with recruitment," the Chief sighed, vague. "Support at work - mentoring for LGBT officers - LGBTQA... some other letters I daresay I'm missing as well. Gets longer every time HR update the guidelines - which is about once a week now..."

"Sounds good," Greg said, watching the enormous e-mail inch its way into his inbox. "Support at work... mentoring... long overdue. Must be difficult for people. Glad to help my team feel more accepted."

The Chief made a noise of disinterest, as if unsure whether Lestrade was goading him or not.

"Well... it's twenty-six pages," he said. "Let's see if you're so peppy when you're done wading through it."

"I'm peppy with regard to all my duties, sir. I find it makes the day go by quicker."

The Chief Superintendent grunted. "Very good," he said, and hung up.

Greg adjusted the paper hat on his head, took a sip of coffee, and opened up the email from HR.
For all his flippancy, HR schemes usually bored the arse of him. He'd once had to make his way through a Strategy Development for Clerical Employee Engagement binder in five-page chunks, rewarding himself with a smartie after each one.

But this one didn't seem so bad.

Greg scrolled his way through, idling over his coffee, surprised to find himself at the end of page twenty-six before he knew it.

It was… sensible stuff. All of it.

It was heartening, he thought - the level of back-up that was out there.

It made him think.

He'd not made any plans yet. That mountain on the horizon was huge. Its top was hidden in cloud, too high for him to see. He wasn't ready yet.

But it had been the best month of his life.

He'd been happy - perfectly, peacefully, desperately happy.

He was happy as he showered in a morning - happy as he got dressed. He was happy at work. He was happy as he waited in the BMW in a car park near Whitehall, knowing Myke was packing up his briefcase to leave, and the weekend was about to begin. He was happy as he slept; he was happy as he thought about tomorrow.

Only one thing had changed.

He might not be ready quite yet - at least, he wasn't making plans. But some part of him was planning to make plans, and he knew it.

Sometimes, when he let his thoughts wander, he even daydreamed how he'd do it - what he'd say. Casual mention in conversations about the weekend, he thought. "Me and Myke". A photo frame on his desk, the two of them somewhere gorgeous in shorts and sunglasses.

It wasn't about saying, "I am gay."

It was about saying, "I am his."

He'd tell Rachel first.

No plans - not yet. But some day.

As he gazed at the HR document, his eyes out of focus, Greg realised his phone had buzzed. He glanced down at it, eased from his reverie with a smile as he spotted his sister's name.

Hey G happy birthday big bro!!! Cant wait to see you this w/e... so excited... you sure you dont want to come round tonight? Hate thinking you are on your own! Could get a bottle open! Loads of love xoxoxoxoxoxoxoxox

Greg smiled, his heart expanding. It was like she knew. Briefly he imagined it again, showing her a photo - proud. "This is him."

(Perhaps not some of the photos they had. There was quite a portfolio now. Greg took care not to leave his phone lying around these days, especially at Rachel's. Sarah liked to snaffle it to play...
games on. And what a coming-out that would be - accidental discovery of home-made pornography by a six-year-old. It would be an anecdote, he supposed.)

He replied to Rachel, happy, as he finished the last of his coffee.

*Heya squirt! thanks! don't you worry, work are spoiling me. check out the cake and the party hat! Going for drinks later with a mate… probably getting back in the small hours... G x*

He attached the photo - carefully picking the right one - and hit send.

*OMG suits you sir! Is it sally you're going with? xoxoxoxoxox*

Greg smiled, shaking his head a little.

*Nope, he replied. Just one of the boys. I will make sure he gets me home safe, don't worry. G x*

What are you like!!! she chided - he could see her there in her kitchen, laughing, Toby under her arm. Okay have fun, can't wait for cake and pressies on sunday! Favourite niece has used a whole pot of glitter on your card now. Loads and loads of Love xoxoxoxoxox

She wanted him to be happy. He could see it in every word. It made him feel brave, just a little fragment more. It was all Rachel ever wanted - her people, happy, at any cost. It was all their mum had ever wanted, too.

Mum would have loved Myke.

Joint birthday presents. Pictures of them on her mantelpiece. Newspaper clippings for the neighbours. "That's my son-in-law. He controls most of the country, you know."

The thought brought a brief lump to Greg's throat. He sighed, closed the HR e-mail, and turned his attention to the backlog of the rest.

Five couldn't come quick enough.

*I understand it is your birthday. Congratulations. SH*

It was lunchtime. Greg left his Pot Noodle to rest beside the staffroom microwave for a minute, answering the text with a smile.

*Thanks. how did you know? G*

Mycroft coffee cup from Henry's Cafe Bar on Piccadilly. Plus dry-cleaning of favourite waistcoat - reservation at Nightingale - Atelier Cologne. Suspect he has gone for the Absolue Gold, not the Silver. Both wildly over-priced. Sure you will appreciate regardless.

Facts in isolation indicative. Taken together... conclusion inescapable. SH

*Right. well… thanks. Hows john? G*

*I assume he's well. Why? SH*

Smiling, stirring the Pot Noodle, Greg returned to his office. He put his feet up on the desk to eat, sending a text to another recipient as he did.

*What are you wearing tonight? x*
His desk phone began to ring. He balanced the Pot Noodle precariously on his stomach as he picked up the phone, tucking it against his shoulder.

"Lestrade."

"Hello Greg, it's Kelly in HR! How are you?"

"Kelly!" he said. "Hi! How's Angie? You had the dogs out round Hyde Park lately?"

"You're so sweet to remember! You know, we went out to Waltham Abbey last weekend… have you been?"

"Don't think so, no. Good up there?"

"Oh, it's gorgeous… I'm not interrupting your lunch, am I?"

"I can talk." Greg spooned some Pot Noodle in his mouth, leaning back in his chair. "So - Waltham. Is a dog mandatory, or will I manage without?"

They chatted for some time, swapping pleasantries and stories. At last, she said,

"God, listen to me… keeping you for hours. I was just ringing to check you got the new document we e-mailed round. A few people have been dragging their heels passing it on, so…"

"Nope, I got it. Chief Super made it his top priority to have it brought to my personal attention this morning. Sharon's putting the posters up now."

"Oh, good!" she said. "That's great - I thought I'd have to go round the building and do them all myself."

"I can't speak for the rest," he said, "but fear not. In my division, consider it done."

"Thanks, Greg. It's much appreciated."

"Don't worry about it. And hey, if you want a piece of birthday cake, swing down later. I think there's still some parcelled up in napkins in the fridge."

"Is it - ? And I haven't wished you a happy birthday yet! Unforgivable of me! Happy birthday, Greg."

"Isn't it?" he grinned.

"I hope you're getting up to no good later."

"That's the plan. Going for a meal with a friend… have a feeling I'm going to be spoiled."

"I'm glad," she said. "Well… I'll be down for my cake at tea break time, I think. Thank you very much. Have a wonderful evening, if I don't see you."

"Yep," he said. "Thanks."

As he put down the receiver, it started ringing again. He raised an eyebrow and picked it up.

"Kelly?"

"The black pinstripe," said a voice that stilled his heart at once. "I was leaning towards red for the
tie, depending on what you do... who is Kelly?
"HR," Greg grinned, resting back in his chair. "You look great in that one. The waistcoat with the red silk back?"
"Yes... though I can't settle on cufflinks."

Good, Greg thought. "So we'll be matching, then?"

"Only seems fitting." Amusement curled Mycroft's voice. "Half the fun of dressing is dressing to be seen."

"Will you have the gloves on...?"

"In May?"

"It's my birthday," Greg said, earning himself a laugh.

"So it is," Mycroft mused. "Any other requests?"

"Come pick me up now." Greg smiled. He rubbed the side of his neck beneath his shirt. "Just... appear in a black car and take me away. They'll never notice I'm gone."

"Nothing would please me more... believe me."

Greg sighed, closing his eyes for a second. He could feel happiness glowing from him, palpable as warmth. It was real.

"So... red, then," he said.

"Would you be offended if I had something for you?"

"No," Greg said, smiling. "Kinda touched."

"Good." Myke hummed, idly. "I can barely concentrate today. You're - distracting."

"D'you want me to go?"

"No..."

Greg reached for a file of papers on his desk, sliding it over and pretending to thumb through as they talked. He should at least look like he was working, he supposed. Only a few hours left.

"Where are you right now?" he asked.

"My office..." He caught the sound of a telltale creak; Mycroft had sat back in his chair. Turning a pen between his fingers, maybe - neglecting the interests of the nation. "All human wisdom is summed up in two words: wait and hope."

"Hang on," Greg said. "I'm learning... not Shakespeare."

"No."

"Huh. Shame I can't think of any other writers."

"Alexandre Dumas Pére," Mycroft murmured. 'The Count of Monte Cristo'.
"I swear I get stupider every time you open your mouth."

"I certainly seem to disrupt your thought processes from time to time... "

Greg grinned, gazing up at the ceiling as he rocked back in his chair. "Are you going to tonight?"

"On at least two occasions, I hope."

"Two?" Greg asked, feeling his heart bubble. Flirting like teenagers, he thought. He could do this all day. "S'very specific."

"Three, if you're lucky."

"I have been, recently."

"Mm. That bodes well for you, then. Perhaps we should continue this verbal fencing later, when I am not adrift on a sea of paperwork and you're not in Danger of Instant Dismissal..."

Myke was picking up the codes, Greg thought. Of course he was.

"Wear the gloves?" he said, grinning.

"I shall consider it," Mycroft murmured, and hung up.

Greg got home just before six. A pile of cards were waiting for him on the doormat. He put them all up in front of the TV, and headed off to get ready.

He showered, shaved and dressed, finally opening the bottle of aftershave Rachel and Graham had given him last birthday. He wasn't usually too concerned with his fragrance - nobody got on at the Met by smelling like a flower shop - but it felt like a special night. He wanted to make an effort.

Our birthday, he thought, looking at himself in the mirror.

He could get used to that.

Very, very used to it.

At twenty past seven, the text arrived.

Two minutes.
M xxx

Greg headed down to the front door, grinning, hands in his pockets. He wanted to see Myke arrive. It had been a couple of days since they'd laid eyes on each other, and that first moment - together again - was always a miracle in miniature. He had a feeling he was about to have his thought processes disrupted.

A minute later, a black Audi rounded the corner of the street.

Greg's heart leapt at the sight. Thrills skittered over his skin as he watched the magnificent car ghost down the road, then ease to a stop by the pavement outside his flat.

It was an R8 Coupé - brand new this year, and beautiful. It gleamed from bonnet to bumper.

The driver's door opened with a clunk.
Mycroft stepped out - heart-stopping and perfect. He'd driven over in his shirt-sleeves. The black pinstriped waistcoat fitted him without a millimeter to spare, the blood-red silk of the back-panel without a single crease, his dinner jacket and a suit-bag slung casually over one shoulder.

He threw shut the door, cool as an ocean breeze, and proceeded up the path.

He was wearing the gloves.

Greg's brain restarted itself with a lurch. He found himself grinning as he watched this man who'd transformed his whole world idle towards his doorstep without a care.

Mycroft knew. The easy smile said it all - the gleam in his eyes.

"Happy birthday," he soothed, as he came up the steps.

It took Greg a second to remember some words and fit them together. "New car," he remarked, still blown away.

Mycroft's eyebrow raised. He lifted a hand, tossing something to Greg.

Instinctively Greg snatched it from the air.

He looked down at the contents of his hand.

Car keys. *Audi City, Piccadilly,* read the metal fob.

Mycroft waited for a reaction, the corner of his mouth upturned.

"Myke - …" Greg couldn't think. Where he'd once had a brain, there was now just a pounding space within his skull. "You're not serious..."

"All this time," Myke said, "and you believe me a creature of frivolity?"

"This is - b-but I mean - … *this* is - ...

"Expressed as a percentage of yearly income," Mycroft said, with interest, "you have in fact outspent me considerably."

"How… how do you know what I - …"

"If you will leave your bank statements on the coffee table..." Myke tilted his head. "William & Son of Mayfair?" he said, intrigued. "Should I be calling my mother in tears and hiring a marquee?"

Greg was still in pieces, unable to construct a rational thought for all he was worth. It was less a disruption, he realised, and more a total and utter reboot.

"Myke, this is - … I don't know what to *say*..."

"It is your birthday," Mycroft murmured. "And I shall hear no more about it."

He reached top step at last - and holy *fuck,* Greg thought, the man smelt *magnificent.* For the third time in as many minutes, his brain shut itself down completely.

"Shall we step inside?" Mycroft said. He indicated the suit-bag over his shoulder. "I have another gift for you."
As soon as the front door closed, Mycroft took advantage of Greg's shock to push him up against the wall and kiss him, slowly, gathering his lover's face into his black-gloved hands. Greg's heart whirled with joy. He stroked the blood-red silk that now covered Mycroft's back, wondering weakly if maybe he'd died - if this was paradise. Maybe he'd driven into the back of a truck on the way home, and here he was in a perfect eternity - forever with Mycroft Holmes in those gloves, kissing him like he was the only man in the world.

"Come and change," Myke murmured, with reluctance, as their lips came apart. His eyes glittered and he took Greg by the hand, leading him up the stairs. "Then you can take me to dinner..."

"Myke - …" Entranced, Greg could only follow; he felt as weak as a baby deer. "You - smell amazing - "

Mycroft laughed, turning at the top of the first landing and pulling him close once more, gentle hands seeking up into his hair as they kissed again. Greg felt drunk on him already, desperate for him. He was perfection in human form. He eased Myke back against the wall and soothed his tongue between the eager, open lips, half-wondering if they would even make it to The Nightingale.

"You are fucking beautiful," he whispered, as finally they drew apart for air. His hands were shaking as they stroked down Mycroft's sides.

Myke grinned at him, bright as the stars, gazing into his eyes.

"Thank you…"

"Don't go. Ever." Greg's heart was pounding. He felt it breaking open even as he breathed. "You just... can't. Stay here. Always. Stay here and look at me like that."

Mycroft laughed, catching his wandering hands.

"Dinner," he said. "You need to change."

He drew Greg eagerly into the flat, closing the door behind them.

As Greg was pushed to sit down on the end of the bed, he realised he was sitting on the Audi's new key.

"You - got me a car," he managed, still blown away.

"It was that or book vouchers," Mycroft said, unzipping the suit bag he'd brought. He approached the bed, tugged off his leather gloves and started undoing Greg's shirt. "Your knowledge of the classics is, after all, substandard. Book vouchers next year."

"Thank you - I mean it. I - don't know how I can ever - … God, my gift looks shit now…"

"I doubt that," Mycroft murmured, eyes flashing. He pushed Greg's shirt back from his shoulders. "Gift me your time. That's all I want."

"All of it," Greg breathed. "Every second. It's yours."

Myke smiled, delighted. He drew away, returned to the suit-bag on the wardrobe door and extracted from within it a silk shirt - blood red to match, tailored to within an inch of its life.

"Why have I such a weakness for you in silk?" he mused, almost to himself, as he slid it free from
the hanger. "Something about those granite shoulders of yours."

"Granite shoulders?" Greg laughed, sliding his arms round Mycroft's waist. "Twenty years ago, maybe..."

Mycroft grinned, twisting in his arms with a playful mock resistance. "Hush. You're ageing better than a Cabernet-based bordeaux. Your best is very much yet to come."

*God. Please let that be true.* Greg kissed Myke's neck as the shirt was drawn up over his shoulders and smoothed into place, buttoned by gentle fingers that adored him.

Myke left the top three loose, stepping back to appraise the effect.

His eyes flared.

"When does tailoring become art?" he sighed aloud.

Greg grinned, shaking his head. "Careful... or my ego won't fit in that car."

"I hope it shall... you're driving me to my birthday dinner in it, after all."

"Am I ready to go?" Greg asked, to a gentle scoff from Mycroft.

"Hardly." He eased himself from Greg's arms, returning to the suit-bag with a smile. Next out came trousers, a black waistcoat and a tie that probably cost the average week's rent. "You... cannot imagine how much I've looked forward to this."

Grinning, Greg submitted to be dressed. He did his best not to interrupt Mycroft during the process, but it was a hard task - resisting the urge to kiss him, to caress him, when he was quite so close and smelt so helplessly good.

And there were so many more steps than usual - smoothing, tucking, tying and retying. Mycroft worked with the expertise and precision of a master tailor, polishing him into some state of dressed perfection that he'd previously never reached.

At last, stepping back, Mycroft surveyed him at arm's length - their fingertips brushed together, not willing to let go.

Greg smoothed the waistcoat down; he waited for a reaction.

The look on Mycroft's face was one of veneration. Greg wouldn't forget it anytime soon.

"Is it alright?" he asked.

Mycroft heaved a silent sigh. "I am... truly fortunate."

Greg laughed, easing his hands into his trouser pockets. "Really?"

Mycroft caught his hand.

He led Greg to the wardrobe, where the mirrored door showed him a man whose inner happiness had somehow grown so profound as to take physical form around him - red silk gleaming over strong, square shoulders; a chiselled jaw; salt-and-pepper-flecked hair, dark eyes full of passion and life; the waistcoat that had sculpted him into some twenty-first century Byron.

Greg gazed at himself in the mirror.
He'd never looked like this before - so much like himself. It wasn't just the clothes, he thought. It was more than that.

There was just one thing missing.

He reached for Myke's hand, drawing him closer.

Myke's face lit with joy as Greg gathered him to stand in the reflection too. He wrapped his arms around Myke's waist from behind and held onto him, tight. As they stood together, a sigh eased through both of them at once - *there you are*, the feeling breathed.

Their eyes met in the glass.

"We look - …" Mycroft said - for the first time that night, lost for words.

"... perfect." This was the photo, Greg thought - the photo that should be on his desk - the two of them together, happy.

Mycroft shivered a little, his gaze flickering. He tightened his hold over Greg's arms.

"Greg... I…"

He drew together some courage.

"I wanted to - tell you…"

Greg gazed into his eyes in the mirror, barely breathing. "What?" he murmured.

Mycroft's ribs expanded; he opened his mouth.

A string of gentle bleeps issued forth from the dinner jacket lying on the bed.

It was a phone alarm.

"... we're going to be late," Mycroft finished, with a lift of his eyebrow.

Greg ran the tip of his tongue over his canines. "So we are."

"Do you still have your keys?"

"I do." Greg kissed the side of his neck, eyes dark and wild. "Just... one more minute. I need to give you your present here. I was going to do it at the restaurant - but I want to have you to myself."

The gift bag was waiting on the coffee table in the lounge, sleek and black, emblazoned in bronze with the monogram of a Mayfair jeweller.

He'd had to speak to the bank on the phone as he paid for it, so alarmed were Barclays by the size of this sudden expenditure. His card hadn't been anywhere more exciting than Costa Coffee before.

As he transferred the bag into Mycroft's hand, his heart began a drum roll in his chest.

Mycroft, suppressing a smile the size of a city, opened the bag.

Inside was a small, black leather box.

Greg watched with delight as Myke's eyebrows lifted three inches towards his hair.
"Jokes about calling my mother aside…?" Mycroft murmured, reaching in for the box.

Greg waited, not daring to speak.

As Mycroft opened the box, his fingers tremored slightly.

Cufflinks - sterling silver and onyx, set with mother of pearl.

Mycroft exhaled slowly as he saw them. "$\text{Greg... I...}"

Greg smiled, unleashing several weeks' of minor worry in a single breath. The relief was enormous.

"Here," he said. "$\text{Let me...}"

Gently he removed Myke's current pair and eased the new ones into place. Mycroft gazed down as he did, speechless. Greg smiled, watching his expression.

"I know it's not much," he said, as he brushed down Myke's sleeves.

Mycroft's arms wrapped around him.

"They're perfect," his lover breathed. "As are you."

Greg beamed, happier than he'd ever been. He encircled Myke in his arms.

For some time, neither of them moved. They simply held each other by the wardrobe door, glorying in this feeling.

"C'mon," Greg murmured at last. "$\text{Enough stalling with you, Holmes... you're going to make us late for dinner. I now get the trauma of driving the most beautiful vehicle ever produced through central London, screaming bloody murder at every taxi-driver that comes within two streets of us.}"

Mycroft laughed. As they parted, he reached up to briefly touch his own eyes. The gesture reminded Greg of Rachel and her mascara.

"You're not - " Greg said, soft.

"Hush," Mycroft chided. "$\text{Of course I'm not.}" He took his dinner jacket from the bed, throwing it over his shoulder. All trace of tears was gone. "$\text{I'm touched by your regard for me. That's all.}"

As they left the building, running increasingly late, Greg spotted a manilla envelope sitting in his post tray. Somehow he had missed it among the cards.

He picked it up, checking the typed address.

\textit{Inspector G Lestrade.}

It seemed to have a folded wedge of paper inside - like a thick letter, or forms to sign. He wondered if it was from HR.

"Greg?" Mycroft called, halfway down the path towards the car. His hair gleamed auburn in the evening light.

Greg tossed the letter back into his tray. \textit{Later}, he thought. The whole bloody world could wait until later.
As he slid into the driver's seat of the car, his brain restarted itself yet again - she was beautiful. Everything was perfect, pristine and brand new from the showroom, the leather seats as sleek as a jungle cat and comfortable as the bed at The Beaumont. He felt like a toothless old builder in a string vest, clutching a Hollywood actress in his arms.

"God," he groaned, resisting the urge to kiss the dashboard.

Mycroft laughed, buckling himself in. He looked inordinately pleased with himself.

"If you encounter any problems, the Audi dealer on Piccadilly will be happy to oblige you… just give them my name. I've mentioned you in the account notes."

Greg smiled, something coming back to him.

"Piccadilly," he said. "Near Henry's Cafe Bar."

Mycroft shot him a startled glance. "Yes… haunt of yours, is it?"

Sherlock was too observant for his own good, Greg thought.

He turned the key in the ignition; the whisper-soft purr of the engine wrenched another groan from his mouth.

"God, Myke…" he said. "What the hell are you going to get me for Christmas?"

"A marquee," Mycroft said, with an entirely straight face. "Now, dinner… before your birthday blends into mine."

It was past midnight when they returned. Mycroft slid the spare key from his pocket, letting them into the building with a smile.

"I am now forty-one," he remarked.

Greg smirked, closing the door after them. Witty flirting was rather more of a challenge after several hundred pounds' worth of wine. "It suits you," he said.

"Thank you," Mycroft murmured, lingering at the bottom of the stairs. His eyes flashed with a wildness that Greg had rarely seen in him - romantically drunk, a little restless, that silk waistcoat almost begging to be removed and crumpled somewhere on the floor. "What now?" Mycroft said - teasing. "Horlicks?"

Greg approached him, slow, drawing up to his full authoritative height. Wit was beyond him; seduction was not. His eyes burned as he pressed Mycroft back into the wall, dipped his head and kissed him, enjoying the shudder that passed through the slender body in his arms.

Kissing was encroaching into foreplay by the time that Mycroft nudged him away with a gasp. His cheeks had flushed; his eyes glittered wildly in the darkness.

"We should - "

"Mm. We should." Greg reached out, taking the manilla envelope that he'd spotted earlier from his post tray. "That Horlicks isn't going to make itself."

Mycroft almost dragged him up the stairs.
They kissed some more against the door of his flat, then again in the lounge, falling onto the sofa together in a restless heap like twenty-somethings on a first date. The envelope was quickly discarded onto the coffee table.

It lay there, unopened, as clothes were loosened, as kisses deepened, and as Greg discovered for certain that his favourite shape in the world was Mycroft's arse in tailored Saville Row trousers.

At last, half-dressed and horny as hell, Myke untangled himself from Greg with a sigh. He caught the hands that tried to retrieve him, holding them still.

"Wait - " he panted. "Wait…" His eyes flashed. "I need to get ready."

"For what?" Greg asked, his chest heaving.

"For bed." Mycroft kissed his hands, drunk, backing away from the sofa. "Toothbrush. Contact lenses. I shan't be long… ten minutes. I promise."

Greg's head dropped back against the sofa. "Don't be," he warned, his eyes gleaming.

Mycroft grinned, disappearing into the bathroom. The door shut behind him.

Greg spent a minute or two just breathing, reminding himself he was not twenty anymore. He only got one shot at birthday sex per year. It had to count. He heaved himself up from the sofa with a small groan, locked the door and turned out the lights, then went to the kitchen for a drink to clear his head.

As he walked back through the darkened lounge, the manilla envelope - still lying on the coffee table - caught his eye.

He put down his glass of water.

He tugged the envelope open with his thumb, absent-minded, thinking only of the strawberry and black pepper cheesecake he'd had for dessert.

Inside was a sheath of pages - standard A4 computer paper, folded in half. Greg opened it up.

For a second, he wasn't sure what he was looking at.

He then realised it was Myke - naked, candlelit, tethered by his wrists with silk scarves to the headboard of his bed. Two lovebites were just visible at his throat.

Bewildered, Greg turned to the next page. Another photo showed another Myke, on another occasion, his face close-up and tight with pleasure. The third page was from the same night: on all fours on the bed, digging his fingers into a pillow as Greg took him from behind. Sweat shone on his forehead. His eyes were closed, desperate to come.

With dawning horror, Greg rifled through the rest.

Months of Myke went by in a flash, each photo more intimate than the last. Nausea began to rise as Greg found himself staring, an outsider, at photographs he himself had taken.

They had never been emailed, never sent, never printed - but here they were, weeks and weeks of nights with Myke in his bed.

Not one of them showed Greg.
They were all Myke.

The worst was saved until last. It showed Mycroft sitting on the bed after a shower, early afternoon a month ago. He was cross-legged and draped only in one of Greg's shirts. His entire face was open with his smile. It was Greg's favourite picture of him in the world.

Beneath it, in capital black letters, were a typed cluster of words.

£500
BAKER STREET
PLATFORM 10
1ST JUNE
9.15PM

For a long time, there was nothing else in the world but those words.

Then Greg realised, with a surge of fear, that the tap had stopped running in the bathroom.

He got the pages back into the envelope and under a sofa cushion just as the door opened. Mycroft emerged naked, his eyes soft with apology.

"Done," he murmured. "Where were we?"

Greg felt like he'd been castrated - like he was about to vomit. He wanted to drop to his knees and empty everything he'd consumed over the past twenty-four hours across the carpet, and keep emptying himself until all memory of the photos was gone, until time itself had somehow reversed and this was not happening any longer.

He looked at Myke, deathly calm on the surface - inside, about to pass out.

Words appeared.

"It's - fine," he said. He smiled. "Take your time."

Mycroft stepped gently into his arms, reaching up to stroke back his hair. A small smile crossed his face.

"Is something the matter?"

"Just drunk, I think." Greg looked down at the coffee table, where a glass of water he'd poured himself a millennium ago was still sitting. " Might have some - Alka Seltzer maybe… is it warm in here, or is it me?"

He realised, as Myke sleepily began to kiss him, that the extravagant amount of wine they'd drunk was his only saving grace. Mycroft was not operating at full capacity. If he was, he'd have noticed the missing manilla envelope, the shifted sofa cushion and the cold sweat now formed on Greg's brow - not to mention the sudden, total disappearance of his hard-on.

"Come to bed," Myke murmured against his cheek, optimistically unfastening his belt.

In the ringing, stone-cold clarity that followed panic, Greg realised he could only trust the wine to hide so much. Even a drunk Mycroft was smarter than most people on the planet. He needed to get Myke away from the sofa, get him off to sleep, and then in the morning he could start to deal with this utter fucking disaster - how, he couldn't even begin to fucking think - but of the two problems, Mycroft was the much more immediate danger.
As he laid Myke down in the sheets, he sent an urgent and ardent prayer to any god that would listen. It was one he'd never thought he'd need to make with Myke - but right now, he take all the divine assistance he could get.

Someone up there - some tiny, benevolent scrap of the universe - took pity on him. Myke, horny and intoxicated, seemed to appreciate his efforts no less than usual. At last, Myke pushed him over onto his back and climbed astride him, riding him slow with flushed cheeks and desperate wordless groans, and he made a concerted effort to finalise the performance. It wasn't easy, but he managed it.

Drunk on sex and wine, Myke slumped into his arms. He quickly fell to sleep.

Greg stared at the ceiling until three AM.

In that time, he came to a single and inescapable conclusion.

They were screwed.
It was Wednesday.

"Tomorrow as well?" Mycroft asked, concerned.

Greg was standing at the back window of his office, phone in hand. He hadn't shaved in two days. He was trying to tell himself that was the reason his reflection looked so bloody ill.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Honestly, I am... it's just a finance thing. Apparently every paper clip and post-it note has to be accounted for, or there's no budget for any of us next year."

Mycroft sounded reluctant. They hadn't laid eyes on each other since breakfast on Monday morning; it was starting to show.

"Could this be... delegated, perchance?" Mycroft said. "To someone I find far less attractive?"

Greg's heart heaved.

"M'sorry. Apparently the Chief Super wants me there brandishing the whip. Doesn't think they'll take it seriously enough without me."

"I see..." Mycroft sighed. "Well... perhaps I'll take the opportunity to catch up on some neglected matters. I've been remiss lately. I should be grateful..." He hesitated. "Friday?"

"Friday," Greg promised. His brain told him at once that Friday would be the 27th - five days to go. He crushed the thought aside. "I miss you. Desperately."

"I... miss you, too." The pain in Mycroft's voice was not easy to hear. "I've - grown accustomed to having you near to me. Don't make me relinquish that."

Greg looked into his own eyes in the glass - sleep-deprived, desperate and lonely, looking far older than the forty-four years he really was. Somewhere across London, Myke was unhappy. He needed to be there. He wanted to make it okay.

But someone was watching them.

And Greg didn't know how else to keep him safe.

He shut his eyes, drowning all over again.

"Let's just move, Myke..." he said. "You and me. We'll go to Canada. We'll just - ..." He rubbed at the bridge of his nose. " - ... just find a cave somewhere in the wilderness. I'll hunt rabbits for our dinner... it'll be perfect."

Mycroft's voice tightened. "How is it you make that sound so beautifully viable?"

"It's because I - ..." Love you. Oh, holy shit. "... - because you're wonderful, that's why. You're amazing and I don't fucking deserve you."

"Greg..." Wonder, wordless, touched Myke's voice. "You sound exhausted. Tell me you're alright."

For half a second, Greg almost explained.
He stared at his reflection in the window, face fraught with despair. He imagined saying the words. *We've got a problem. I fucked up and I need your help. I'm so sorry. Someone's got photos. They're all of you.*

Fear clenched at his throat - black, clawing fear. He couldn't do it.

"I'm just sick of work… that's all," he said. He rested his forehead against the window, waiting for the nausea to ebb. "Taking me away from you. It's not what I want."


"I…"

"Name a place. Just - let me see you."

Greg tightened his fist in his pocket, closing it hard around the keys of the car he hadn't dared to drive all week. He'd never wanted to see Myke more.

"I… can't," he said. He had to rip the words out with both hands. "I wish I could. Please, please believe me. I just - "

There came a knock on his office door. It opened before he could shout. He put a hand over his eyes, wondering when the universe would leave him to be a burning, miserable wreck in peace.

"I - have to go, Sally," he said into the phone, despairing. "See you when you get back."

He hung up on Mycroft's response.

He turned to find Sally in the doorway. She had a cardboard tray of coffees and a raised eyebrow.

"Not you," he said. The eyebrow raised further. "Well, obviously not you… different Sally… she's - … we met at - … what d'you want?"

"Flat white for you," she said. "And Roy from Computer Crime is here... said you wanted a word?"

"Christ, two o'clock already…. yes, I did. Send him in."

A minute later, Roy bumbled into the office. Whenever he ventured outside the walls of Computer Crime, he always looked adorably out of place - like a happy sheep just wandering the corridors. His hand-knitted jumper gave him an oddly mumsy appearance amongst all the sharp suits and office wear. He never seemed to notice that he stood out - or, if it did, it didn't bother him.

He gave Greg a bright smile as he arrived, graciously accepted the offer of a chair, and sat down.

"How can I help, inspector?"

Greg sat down behind his desk, fortifying himself with a sip of scalding hot flat white.

"Your professional advice, to be honest… I've got a case at the moment and I'm out of my depth. Anything much more techy than a DVD player is beyond me. The help would be a godsend."

"I suppose that's what we're here for," Roy said, cheerful. "What can I do?"

Greg had spent most of last night mentally preparing for this meeting. It was a risky lie. In theory, Roy could check a few records, make a phone-call or two, and find out it was hogwash. Greg was hoping he wouldn't feel the need.
He couldn't think of where else to turn. Last resorts were the only ones left now.

"Just give me some pointers, really… tell me where I should be looking… I've got a witness who had some pretty crucial evidence on her mobile phone - photos, mainly - a few bits of video - and she's come to us worrying that she might have been hacked, and that the stuff is now in the wrong hands. What's the likelihood of that?"

Roy gave him a lopsided smile, raising his hands in air-quotes. "Hacked," he said.

"What d'you mean with the…?" Lestrade mimicked the gesture.

"Well… digital security is fairly watertight these days. Definitely enough to meet the needs of the average user. The only problem is that people forget to use it. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, when the Average Joe or Jane is talking about falling victim to 'hackers', it means someone guessed their password… or maybe they left their emails logged in somewhere they shouldn't. Lost their phone on the tube without a pass code. That sort of thing. It's not about hacking at all - it's just a lack of vigilance."

Greg pulled a notepad across his desk as Roy spoke, uncapping a biro. Reluctantly, he wrote down a first possibility. Guessed password. Beneath it, he added a second. Left phone lying around unlocked.

"Because I know already," he said, "that she's going to swear to me on the lives of everyone she's ever met that she didn't tell anyone her password, and that she didn't leave the thing on the bus… what's the next possibility? What's the likelihood of someone actually cracking into the thing remotely?"

Roy pulled a face.

"It's not impossible," he said. "I mean, you'll have read about celebrity sex tapes in the newspapers…"

Greg had. He regretted to say he'd had a surreptitious google for a couple of them, too. He was suddenly experiencing a lot more guilt about it.

"For a major organisation," Roy said, "especially a criminal one, it's not beyond the bounds of possibility to get into a mobile phone. I mean, we put a man on the moon, inspector. We're a smart species. But footage is more frequently stolen from online accounts used by the phone than from the actual phone on which they're filmed. I mean… taking from the account is just case of guessing or cracking the password, then you're in. Breaking into the actual phone is much, much harder."

"Online accounts - so - back-ups, you mean..."


Greg made a third note on his pad. Online accounts.

He then made a fourth, purely mental note inside his head - read next mobile phone manual cover-to-cover before touching the bloody thing.

"And if someone wanted to access an online account…?" he prompted.

"They'd need the account ID," Roy said. "The same one used by the phone - usually an e-mail address. And the password, too."
Greg didn't even know what e-mail address he'd been using on his phone. He sure as hell hadn't told anybody it.

"And what if they didn't have the password?" he asked.

Roy pulled a face. "There are pieces of software... password crackers. They work by flooding the system with thousands of attempts at guessing the password - sometimes millions - making hundreds of attempts per second until they get it right. But most big cloud providers are wise to those now. There are plentiful features in place to prevent it."

"So what I'm hearing is that if someone did hack her phone, it was someone with a lot of time and resources on their hands..."

"And probably a good reason to do it," Roy added. "Simply put, inspector... most people needn't worry about these things at all. We all think we're much more interesting than we really are. The truth is that cyber criminals, monsters and the internet bogeymen we all fear would find very little to interest them on the average mobile phone... a politician, perhaps, or a government official might be a different matter. Especially if bank details can be gained. But ordinary folk like you and I simply aren't worth the time and the effort. All that trouble just to peek at our holiday snaps... it's illogical."

Greg listened in a daze as he wrote, rubbing his forehead.

"So... balance of probability..." he said.

"Someone knew her account details," said Roy. "Or, she left her phone unattended and unlocked long enough for someone to get into it."

Greg scribbled it down loosely, watching the words form in his own red ink. His brain was working over it already, trying to piece it together - but it hurt. It made no sense.

"But... someone would need to know," he said, almost to himself. "They'd need to know there was something to find in the account... otherwise, why go looking?"

"Quite," said Roy. "I mean, this is why people target celebrities... their accounts are guaranteed to be jampacked with the good stuff. Other celebrities, lavish lifestyles... unwise souvenirs of the latest sexual escapade."

Greg did not write that part down.

"But for most of us," Roy went on, amused, "it's just business as usual... I mean, nobody would want to steal photos of my Dungeons & Dragons sessions. I'm sure you're the same, inspector."

Maybe Dungeons & Dragons was the safest option in future, Greg thought. It would lead to fewer high-blown gay affairs with government officials, but cause him a great deal less trouble in the long-run.

"Well... thanks for your help on this, Roy... as I say, I'm a bit out of my depth..."

"If you have the phone, I can always take a look? Just drop it by my office."

"Thanks, she's... being a bit shifty with it at the moment. I'll see if we can prise it out of her hands."

"You know where I am," Roy said, cheerfully.
He tugged his jumper down over his stomach and left.

For a while Greg sat with the notepad and pen, drawing strength from his coffee. He wrote quickly and freely, outlining to himself what seemed like the main possibilities.

Firstly - and the option that Greg felt most inclined to disregard - was that he'd left his phone somewhere, unlocked, and some Curious George had gone snooping. They'd accidentally hit the motherlode and decided to turn their luck into fortune.

On the grand scheme of things, it was looking unlikely.

If his phone wasn't in his hand, it was safe in a pocket or a drawer - and he locked it out of habit. He didn't leave it at front desk while he made a cup of tea. And where was the motive? Did people really nosy around abandoned phones, just in case there was something juicy to be found? It was a stretch he couldn't justify.

Direct theft, then, was improbable.

As to online accounts, Greg couldn't be certain he even had any. His phone was nearly four years old. He used it for calling, texting and photos, no more. If he didn't know the log-in details, it wasn't possible that he'd shared them by accident.

He turned at last, and with the greatest of reluctance, to the possibility now looming more and more real in his mind by the minute: that he wasn't dealing with some chancer here. This was someone prepared - someone professional.

What had Myke called them? All those weeks ago now - sitting on his bed in the dark, that first night in his flat - 'the shadows whose faces I have seen... the eyes that never close.'

Seven days ago, if Greg had been asked who was out there, watching them, he'd have cheerfully said no-one. They were keeping things private. They were safe, just the two of them.

He was now keenly aware that he'd been wrong.

Lethally wrong.

It was as if a pair of huge, inhuman eyes had suddenly opened on the wall opposite his desk. Every movement he made, the eyes were there - staring down at him, studying him, watching him with a fascinated glee. He'd felt their sinister weight for five days now. At home, too - when he slept, when he showered, when he cooked - there were the eyes, taking it all in.

It felt like those words were written everywhere. They haunted his head - BAKER STREET, PLATFORM 10, 1ST JUNE, 9.15PM. They were typed in black ink upon his soul.

He couldn't stop thinking about it. Someone had loaded paper into a printer and hit 'print'. Someone had adhered his address to the envelope with care. Someone had bought a stamp and slid it into a postbox. It made him feel sick.

And Myke had warned him - tried to reason with him, all those weeks ago in The Beaumont. Now, for the sake of his stupid pride, he was facing the consequences. Everything Myke had feared was opening up before them, and it was all Greg's fault.

It was like a monster had ripped the roofs off his flat, off his office, and was peering down at him in fascination - his fragile little world laid out like a doll's set, greedy eyes raking through it.
Greg stared down at his pad of paper, despairing at the word he'd circled in red at the bottom.

*PROFESSIONAL?*

The optimistic question mark did nothing to lighten its severity.

An arrow, jagging away from it, read: *MYKE ENEMY.*

There, for Greg, the trail would go cold.

He couldn't follow that path into the darkness - he didn't have a fraction of the knowledge he would need. He didn't have the contacts. He didn't have the resources. He could only try and placate the predator who'd come stalking down between the trees.

There was £500 in bundled twenty-pound notes sitting in his office safe. Beside them was a manilla envelope. He hadn't been able to bear keeping it in the flat. It made him feel too sick to sleep.

One week from now, he thought - then it would all be over. He would hand over the cash, dust his hands of it, and walk away.

He only wished he'd listened to Myke from the start.

Maybe then, none of this would have happened. They could still be what they'd been on Friday night - drunk on each other, happy and safe, the only two people in the world.

As it was, he could barely even bring himself to text.

He couldn't stand the thought that someone out there might be reading what they wrote - tracking their movements. Haunting their steps. It made him feel violated. Since the weekend, nausea had never been far away. It wasn't going any time soon.

He just had to get through to Wednesday.

He tore the page from his notebook, folded it up into his pocket, and out of habit checked his phone.

There was a message waiting for him.

It was a photograph - a casual shot of Myke's wrists. They were resting upon a black leather dossier on a desk, cuffs slightly angled to reveal the gleam of silver cufflinks in pride of place.

Greg's heart heaved as he looked at the photo. His hand shook around the screen.

It took every ounce of his fortitude to delete it.

No sight could have made him prouder, once.

Now, all he could imagine were those cold predatory eyes, widening with glee as they too studied the picture.
Traffic

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Inventory successful?
M xxx

Straight to sleep, I assume... good night. Sweet dreams.
M xxx

God preserve my sanity with this traffic.
M xxx

Are you alright?
M xxx

A reply finally came just after noon. Mycroft felt it arrive five minutes into a two-hour meeting, deep in his pocket where discreet retrieval was impossible.

As the meeting progressed, his attention stretched as thin as a supermarket carrier bag. It neared breaking point as it became clear they would over-run considerably. At last, with three o’clock in sight, a ceasefire was finally called. Nothing had been achieved.

Discussion over the date of the next meeting took a further twenty minutes.

Mycroft left the room without a backward glance.

Stepping immediately into a side corridor, he slid his phone from his pocket and read the message he’d been craving for three bloody hours.

Sorry… crazy day. Chief super on warpath x

That was it.

For some time Mycroft stood alone in the empty corridor, looking down at the phone in his hand.

He found himself reluctantly analysing the data-set with which he'd been presented.

The brevity - the infrequency - the lack of detail. It had been much the same all week.

There were conclusions to be drawn.

If they'd belonged to someone else, he might have called them obvious conclusions.

Thursday was expense reports day. Normally, Greg couldn’t be more open to distraction. Messages and photographs flowed like fresh water, excitement rising for the weekend - plans drawn up, promises made.

Today could not be more different.

Something had changed.

He didn't know what; but he hated it.
I have become a teenage girl, he thought to himself, fingers shaking. Fragile. Needy.

A numbness was setting in - late, he thought, but nonetheless appreciated. The therapist had called it a 'door slam'; a shutting-down of emotion with which he was not prepared to deal. She'd asked him if he was allowed to cry as a child. He'd paid off the account balance, cancelled his future appointments and not returned.

As he pocketed the phone, Mycroft knew all too well that a door had been closed.

He just couldn't be sure which side of it he was facing.

He returned to his office, cold, and worked without distraction until five.

As Sophie arrived with the usual coffee tray, out of habit he checked his phone.

Are we still ok for tomorrow? I miss you x

Mycroft stared at the message, lost.

What the hell game was this? He rubbed between his eyes, trying to reconcile two completely contradicting sets of data now available to him. It was unfathomable. Sentiment, that vicious disadvantage, had begun to thrum in him at full strength, and it left him despairing - exhausted.

The temptation to play hard to get was overwhelming.

Reminding himself that he was fourteen, not twenty-one, he composed a reply. Sophie poured out his coffee for him as he did.

Yes. I should be finished by 7pm.
If you're quite sure you'll be available?
M xxx

It was a little salted, he thought - but not undeserved.

I'm so sorry. I have been a crap boyfriend this week.
Will make it up to you somehow I swear x

Mycroft's eyes widened as he read the reply - one word of it, in particular, several times.

"Out - " he said.

Sophie, ever patient, put down the sugar tongs and left without question.

As the door shut on the sound of her heels, Mycroft picked up his office phone and swiftly dialled a memorised number.

"Lestrade," came the tired greeting.

"Boyfriend?" Mycroft asked at once, startled.

Greg made a noise like a fan stuttering to a halt. "Myke - …" he breathed. "God - I forgot you had this number... hang on. Two seconds. Let me shut the door."

There was a scrabbling sound and a creak. Distantly Mycroft heard him call.

"Sally - keep everybody out of my office for a while, will you? Pretend I'm out."
There was a slam, a moment's pause, and then the phone was retrieved.

"I'm here," Greg said. He sounded every bit as desperate to talk as Mycroft had been all day. "How are you? I've missed you. Is this your office number?"

Mycroft stared at his own warped reflection in the coffee urn, bewildered.

"Where - …" He had to say it. He couldn't hold it in. "Where have you been?" he demanded. "I almost considered sending someone to check on you. Dear God, Greg... I've - ..."

"I'm sorry," Greg said, desperate. "I should have text - I know I should, I'm just…" His voice cracked a little. "I've had a rough week. But it's good to hear your voice. Tell me how you are - tell me everything..."

For a moment, Mycroft could only marvel. Wonders will never cease, he thought.

"How progresses the inventory check?" he asked, guarded.

"Crap," said Greg. "Loads of stuff missing and I couldn't care less. Counting biros, for God's sake… I'm not meant to be here. I should be with you."

Mycroft leant back in his chair. It span a little on its axis.

"Well, we... have tomorrow," he said.

"And all weekend," Greg said. "I promise."

"All weekend?"

"All of it. It's yours. Listen… how about I come to you for a change? I'll bring food with me. Seven, you said?"

"Home by half past..." Mycroft found himself rubbing one temple with his fingertips, trying to figure out where this had come from. Not a word all day, now raptures. It made no sense. "Are you - certain? I'm happy to come to you."

"No… let's go to your place." The start of a fragile grin entered Greg's voice. "I'm curious to see it. All this time, and I've never been to your - … I mean - that's - if you'll have me there..."

Mycroft sat forwards in his chair.

"Of course I will," he said. He heard his voice strain slightly. "I'm just - surprised, I suppose…" He wrapped his fingers around the desk edge with a frown, hating the urgent thump of his heart. "You seem glad to hear from me. I was starting to think - ..."

"No," Greg said, suddenly. Mycroft stopped. "Don't think it. Not for a second. I'm - … Christ, I'm so sorry. I never wanted you to think that. I've just had a fucker of a week, and I've - ..."

Greg audibly swallowed.

"Let me prove it," he said. "Let me come round tomorrow. Half seven. We'll have the weekend all to ourselves. I'll show you nothing's changed."

Something - some tiny, discardable suspicion - made Mycroft wonder.

He didn't know if it was truly there or not. He'd already proven himself a paranoid mess today. He
didn't want to further that impression, neither in Greg's mind nor his own.

All the same - he'd heard what he had heard. He had to check.

He primed himself, his brow furrowing just a little in the coffee pot reflection.

"Why would something have changed?" he asked, with care.

"It hasn't," Greg said. There was a pause, half a heartbeat. "Not for me."

Mycroft looked down at his fingers on the edge of the desk. He eased his grip, releasing a held breath.

"And you would tell me," he said, quietly. "If it had."

"Let me prove it hasn't," Greg murmured. His voice rang with truth.

Mycroft closed his eyes. He hadn't realised until this moment how very tired he was.

"Tomorrow, then," he said.

He heard Greg smile. It was as tangible a sound as a laugh or a sob. "What d'you want for dinner?"

You, Mycroft thought. "I'm... amenable to most things," he said.

"Shall I surprise you?"

Please do. "Nothing that can't be followed with Haagen Dazs," he said.

Greg laughed. "That gives me plenty to work with..." he said. His voice softened. "Dinner in bed?"

Mycroft felt a smile begin, in spite of all his doubts. "You seem to have this planned out."

"Not all of it... just a few parts."

"Oh?"

"I don't want to spoil it for you. And it'll give you something to think about tomorrow..." Greg paused, gently. "To stop you worrying."

Mycroft's smile faltered. He rested his head back against his chair, wishing this conversation was taking place within touching distance. It had been a week. He'd grown accustomed to Greg's company; he'd grown accustomed to other things as well.

"Don't give me reason to worry," he advised, "and I shan't."

"I'm sorry - honestly. I never meant to."

"And text me back, will you?" Mycroft said, annoyed. "To use a tried and tested phrase, Greg... don't make me beg."

A little mischief curled within the voice on the phone. "I don't think that was the exact phrase."

"Mm. Perhaps I've omitted a vital word."

"Does the PM not like you swearing in the house?"
"Frankly, the PM can like or not like it as they please… until their clearance level exceeds mine, I'll swear as much as I fucking like."

Greg's laugh rang down the phone. Mycroft found it filling him from within, bright and glad, and everything was alright again. Paranoia, he thought. Seeing things that were not there. Of course nothing had changed.

"I'm sorry I've been shit," Greg said again as they smiled together, miles apart, close once more. "It's… just this week. I'll be better next..."

"Promise me?"

"I promise."

"Have you - thought anymore about…?"

"Oh… no. Not so much, to be honest." Greg hesitated. "I'd - still tell Rach first, if I did. But I don't know… maybe I'm enjoying our privacy right now. It's good, just you and me. And you know what they say… the only thing that can spoil a good day is people."

"Hemingway," Mycroft said, startled. "A Moveable Feast.'"

"Hemingway," said Greg, baffled. "Of course. I knew that."

Mycroft marvelled for a moment more, astonished by Greg's uncanny talent for surprising him today. His coffee had gone quite tepid now; it was worth it.

"You'll always have my support," he said, at last. "Regardless of everything… whether you wish people to know, or you're content as you are, I'm behind you."

"That's - …." Greg took a moment. "... good to know. Thank you, Myke."

"My pleasure."

"I - really don't want to go. There's half an office still to count, and I just want to sit here in my chair and talk to you all night..."

Mycroft realised he'd wound some of the desk cord around his fingers. He let it go, unsettled.

"Will you call me when you're home?" he asked.

Greg hesitated, unsure. "I - don't know how late we're going to be."

"I don't mind."

"No, I mean... it could be past ten, if we don't - "

"Greg ... I don't mind." Mycroft picked up his lukewarm coffee, taking a reluctant sip. "When we're apart, I routinely work into the small hours… you know this. It's not a problem."

"'kay." Greg's voice was a little small. "If you're sure."

"Does it so astonish you that your boyfriend wants to wish you good night?" Mycroft asked, prompting another laugh and a squeak of Greg's chair.

"My - "
"That was what you just promoted us to by text message, wasn't it?" Mycroft said. "I'm quite sure I read it correctly."

"I - guess I did..."

"Now is the opportune moment to withdraw it, if you wish... before I get attached."


"I think I already have." Mycroft lowered his eyes, taking a sip of coffee. "Rather deeply."

"Myke..."

"You need to go," Mycroft said, softly. He felt his heart tense. "Tend to your inventory - before I send a car for you and deprive you of a budget next year. Call me when you get in tonight. I'll be here."

"Myke, I - need to tell you -..."

"I know," Mycroft said.

"No, it's - I - you don't understand. I really, really need to -"

"Greg... I know." Mycroft's throat muscles worked; his resolve held, somehow. "Not on the phone," he said. "Not the first time."

"Myke..." Greg was no longer breathing. Mycroft knew that edge to his voice. "Holy shit."

"Go," he said. "Be with your team. They need their fearless leader. We'll... speak later. Don't forget about me."

"O-Okay," Greg said, tight. "I -... 'bye, Myke."

Mycroft shut his eyes. "Goodbye."

The line cut off.

There was a timid knock on wood and a creaking sound. "Sir?"

Mycroft opened his eyes with a silent sigh. He sat forwards in his chair. Embrace me, Gaveston, he thought, as I do thee... why should'st thou kneel? Know'st thou not who I am?

"Come in, Sophie..." He drained the last of his coffee. "I do wish you wouldn't linger behind doors. If I want you to hear a conversation, you'll hear it."

It was an hour's walk between New Scotland Yard and the flat.

Greg took it just to think.

His estimate of an hour soon become an hour and a half, then two, as he found himself stopping to watch London go by. It was almost eleven, but the city was alive - the pounding heart of the country, pulsing with noise and lights and people. London had long ago dispensed with night and day. It had too much going on for that - too much to do.

Greg turned his car keys in his hand as he walked, not daring to touch the other pocket. It
 contained his phone.

He hadn't checked it in hours now. His last text had come in not longer after eight.

*Hey G how is life treating you? Recovered from birthday hangover yet? Was thinking sunday lunch at pub this weekend. Dad had checkup with consultant today, says he is doing really well so thought we should celebrate... Graham and I can pick him up and maybe you could meet us all there? Let me know. Lots of Love xoxoxoxoxoxox*

He hadn't replied. He didn't have the strength.

More and more, it felt like he was carrying an undetonated bomb.

Someone could be reading everything - whoever they were. Keeping up a daily digest of his texts, his calls, reading the little happenings of his life like from some grotty magazine. It was why he'd been so glad to hear Mycroft's voice coming from his desk phone. It felt like they'd been able to talk in private for the first time in days, and it had filled him with a feeling he now realised he couldn't give up. That feeling was his life now. He didn't want to let it go.

But he couldn't text - couldn't call… not without the fear. It was driving him crazy. It was making Myke worry. He couldn't let it go on.

He stood at Oxford Circus for a while to think, watching the traffic roar by and the people pouring over the crossing in waves.

He found himself wondering how many of them carried secrets - things that must never come to light. He lit a cigarette, leaning against the window of the closed Nike shop.

He came to the conclusion that all of them did. Every human heart had its shadows; everybody feared their illumination.

Plenty of them would kill to prevent it. Greg had looked hundreds of those people in the eye, *thousands*, but never quite understood the compulsions they'd been under. Wasn't disgrace surely better than a jail sentence for murder?

Now, he wasn't sure.

His phone began to vibrate gently in his pocket.

Reluctantly, with a fresh prickle of nausea, he slid it free.

*Home...?*

*M xxx*

Greg had never wanted to hear a voice so much in his life. He found himself gripping the phone white-knuckled, hating it, hating whatever black poison was now in it - whatever claws were curled around it - all he wanted to do was text, to call, to say 'I miss you', without the terror that someone was listening. If only he could - …

And the idea blinked, suddenly, into being.

It took Greg's breath away for a second. He thought about it quickly, wildly - then slowed down, forcing himself to grind back over the very basics of this.

It meant they could text at least - and call… and there would be no more new material to worry
about. Just what had already been taken. He could stop fearing those eyes that never closed. It seemed like a drastic step, but now he'd thought of it, he could not let it go.

Fine, he thought. That's the plusses. Now do the downsides.

His mental wheels span in empty space as he stared into the rush of traffic, trying to come up with one. He wouldn't be able to call Myke goodnight, and he'd promised. He would lose his pictures, he thought - all his contacts. He would have to start again.

But then, starting again looked pretty good right now.

In a trance, his decision made, Greg stubbed his cigarette out on the wall. He joined the crowd of people waiting to cross.

He knew he should stop and think again. There had to be a consequence to this that he hadn't foreseen. Right now, he couldn't see it. He could just see an end to the longing and the loneliness of the last six days.

The traffic played out its familiar sequence, then slowed to a halt. The green light blinked on. People surged to cross.

Greg walked with them like a ghost, his eyes fixed on the other side.

Halfway across, in the path of the waiting number 63 bus, he let the phone slip loosely from his pocket. He felt it knock against his leg then rattle off across the ground.

He walked on, head forward, begging nobody to pick it up for him. The London crowd - ever-reliable - marched on without a blink. No-one had even seen it drop.

He stopped on the other side of the crossing to watch.

The other arm of the traffic went first. Greg lit a cigarette, letting it calm him.

Something in his brain was screaming at him to run back and get the thing. The human instinct to protect his mobile phone was almost as strong as the instinct to survive, and right now he could see it lying in perfect alignment with the bus's right-hand wheel. He couldn't do this, could he? Surely things wouldn't be so easily solved.

No, he thought. Not solved.

But he could stop them escalating. And he could feel safe with Myke again.

He could rip the problem out at the root, then just deal with what was there - not spend every day and night worrying it would spread.

The traffic set off. Half of his heart screamed in panic, but he found himself paralysed to the spot. He couldn't stop it now. He'd made his choice. This was happening.

As the bus wheel rolled over it, Greg saw the phone buckle and crack - then burst. A shower of glass and electronics was swallowed up by the advancing wheel. The bus's engine roared, triumphant. There was a flash of red, a stretched perfume advert, a rush of pale faces huddled beyond the windows - then the bus drove off into the night.

As Greg stared at the shattered wreckage of his phone, smashed to smithereens on the road, his hand shook on the cigarette. He dragged on it, hard.
Vans, cars and taxis flattened the debris as they drove across it. He watched them rolling it into nothing - a few glittering shards of glass, like black sand, and no more.

Greg hadn't come in nearly a week.

This felt pretty fucking close though.

It occurred to him, as he walked the final stretch towards home, that he couldn't call Myke to say goodnight - and he didn't have Myke's address. There was no way of asking for it now. He'd just have to hope it found its way to him before tomorrow night.

He was sure it would.

Things were working out for the better, after all.

The surge of elation from seeing his phone explode into nothing had filled him with hope. Someone still had the photos - they still wanted the money. But they wouldn't be getting any new material.

And they wouldn't stop him seeing Myke.

That was what mattered.

Wasn't it?

Chapter End Notes

Mycroft's uncredited quote ("Embrace me, Gaveston, as I do thee. Why should'st thou kneel? Know'st thou not who I am?" ) is from the first scene of the literary perfection that is Christopher Marlowe's Edward II.
At five to twelve the next day, Sharon on Reception reached for the phone to set it to redirect. She wanted to eat her cheese salad and check her Facebook messages in peace.

As her glossy scarlet nails laid upon the handset, it started ringing.

She sighed, and picked it up. This had better not take long.


The male voice on the other end was sleek, crisp and endlessly polite, in the way that only the ultra-powerful ever were to her.

"Good morning… I'm attempting to track down Inspector Lestrade. He rather seems to have fallen off the face of the planet. Has he been in the office today?"

"He has," said Sharon. She'd quite forgotten the cheese salad on her lap. It was an arresting voice, she thought - one that commanded attention despite its softness. "He and Sergeant Donovan headed out quite early on an inquiry, then they were back at about eleven... I think he might have gone out for some lunch?"

"Ah," said the voice. "Hence why he's not answering his desk phone."

"Yes - you could try his mobile, maybe? Would you like the number?"

"Sadly, I've tried it a number of times now. But how kind of you to offer."

"Weird," she said. "He's usually good at watching for calls. Can I take a message for you? Ask him to ring you back?"

The voice deliberated for a moment. "Would you kindly give him details of an address for me, Sharon? I'm sure he'll make the connection… if he doesn't, he hardly deserves to call himself a detective."

Sharon found herself smiling, oddly charmed by the voice. She reached for a pen and carefully noted down the address that it gave her - Chester Square in Belgravia. Fancy, she thought. Inspector Lestrade knew some interesting people.

"And what name is it, please?" she asked, the pen hovering.

"Let's not make it too easy for him."

"Okay. I'll leave it on his desk for him - I'm sure he'll be back soon."

"Thank you, my dear. You've been supremely helpful."

They said goodbye; Sharon replaced the receiver with a quiet click. She set the phone to redirect and turned to her cheese salad at last, stirring it with the plastic fork as she wondered.

It was only after a while that she realised the voice had called her 'Sharon'.

She couldn't remember telling him her name.
Mycroft replaced the receiver, and laid his head in his hands.

It was day two of over-reacting like a hormonal teenage girl.

This could not continue, he thought. Life was… unruled enough without this.

In a span of short seven days, Greg had gone from the solid bedrock on which he could rest all his happiness, all his needs, to a man whose disappearing act would serve him well upon the stage.

Mycroft had finally admitted defeat and gone to bed at three AM. By that point, he'd mortified himself with three missed calls - three - and sent more text messages than he cared to remember - all to hear a simple 'goodnight'. It was pathetic. Even then, he'd not been able to get through. He'd woken at six, exhausted, and his first act of the day had been to check his phone. The empty notifications list had seared upon his eyes like a brand. Nothing had been achieved today - nothing except paranoia and doubt. Greg was, once again, incommunicado; and Mycroft was in freefall to despair.

And yet he'd seemed so happy to talk in person, Mycroft thought. So… himself.

"Get attached," he'd said. "Please."

It made no sense.

The week's celibacy was not helping. Mycroft was wound up, stiff-backed and fragile; he'd felt it all day. Something was going to break soon. He hoped it was only furniture.

The door of his office opened with a timid squeak of a floorboard. "Sir…?"

Mycroft rubbed his eyes. It was only noon, he thought - too early for despondency. He would have to pull himself together. He looked up from his hands to find Sophie in the doorway, bearing a post-it note on one finger. His weary brain made the necessary connections.

"No," he sighed. "It won't do. Tell Schneider he can rig as many polls as he likes. I'm not a fool and I'm not sanctioning it."

She blinked, confused. "No, sir... I've just had an update on the handset you asked me to trace."

Mycroft's brain sharpened a little. "And?"

"It flatlined shortly before midnight," she said. "Judging by the last message it received, it was in the vicinity of Oxford Circus at the time."

Mycroft's eyebrows arched.

"Flatlined?" he said - and then, "Oxford Circus?"

"Yes, sir. An immediate cessation of all signal, though the battery was at 62%."

Mycroft considered an initial five possibilities, discarded three, then settled on one as the more likely of the two. It would explain a number of points. It made his heart-rate rise a little, hopeful and fragile.

"Thank you, Sophie..." he said, in a trance. His brain, exhausted, made a faint and whimpered plea to him. "Might I trouble you for coffee?" he asked.

She nodded, graciously, and backed out of the room.
Mycroft gazed for a while into the fifteenth-century painting he had mounted above the filing cabinet - Jan van Eyck's *The Just Judges.*

The proof of it would be tonight, he supposed.

Half past seven would bring answers.

As Greg left Carphone Warehouse on the Strand, holding a white plastic bag, he had a feeling like things were a small step closer to better.

He got a cajun wrap, a coffee and an almond slice from Costa, and ate them on a bench outside the office overlooking the river. As he did, he read the manual of his new phone cover-to-cover in painstaking detail.

He was back upstairs by half past twelve. Sharon flashed her eyelashes at him over the front desk.

"There was a call for you, boss… a man leaving an address. Chester Square? Left it on your desk for you."

"Oh really?" Greg smiled. "Did he leave a number too?"

"No, just the address. He said he'd been trying to track you down."

It was a wonder he hadn't been bundled into a limousine, Greg thought. He let himself into his office, sat down in his chair and picked up the address before he'd even removed his coat.

Belgravia. *Yowsers.* Fairytale flats with multi-million-pound price tags. Mycroft really wasn't messing around.

Did they even *have* takeaways in Belgravia? He might have to get something further afield, and smuggle it in.

He unlocked his new phone with his brand new passcode, then gazed at the screen for a while, bewildered by options. It was a mark of modern phones, he thought, that it took ten minutes to figure out how to actually call someone. When he'd worked it out, he carefully keyed in a number he knew from memory, held it to his ear, and waited.

"Hello?" came the confused voice.

Greg smiled at once. He'd missed her voice. "Hey, squirt. Guess who lost his phone?"

"Oh my *God,* " Rachel cried, "there you are! I was worrying you'd been taken hostage by gangsters or something… how *are* you? Is this your new number?"

"Just bought it," he said. "Can't figure out how to add contacts yet, so I thought I'd call… sorry I've been off the radar. Work has been a kick in the groin this week."

"No, no, I'm just glad you're okay! Wow… I worried I'd upset you or something… listen - you don't have to come on Sunday if you don't want. I know you're not… with Dad - "

"I'm working Sunday," he lied, "if it makes you feel any better - but thanks for the offer. We need to meet up though. Soon."

"Oh… right." She hesitated. "Would you - still be working if Dad wasn't there?"
Greg didn't like lying to her. She was, like their mum, very good at spotting deception - and, like their mum, very good at pretending she hadn't.

"Still working," he said. "M'sorry, Rach... duty calls. How about a night next week?"

She brightened. "Sure," she said. "How's Wednesday? The first?"

Something cold and quiet stirred within Greg's ribs.

"I - can't do Wednesday," he said. The words rolled across his mind like an old-time news tape. **BAKER STREET, PLATFORM 10. 1ST JUNE. 9.15PM**. "I've got a thing on - but... Thursday, maybe?"

"Thursday... yeah, Thursday's good. Come round for tea?"

"Great. Shall we call that a plan?"

"Plan," she said. "Glad you're alright, anyway... how's Sally?"

Greg repressed a sigh. They were going to have this conversation sooner or later, he thought. It was better now than to let her get her hopes up.

"Listen... Rach," he said. "You... know there's no me and Sally - right?"

"Oh - no! I know."

"It's not a thing."

"I know."

"She's not my type," he said. "We work together. And I respect her too much. Alright?"

"No, that's cool. I just - ..." She hesitated. "... - want you to be happy, G. S'all I want."

Greg's stomach hollowed a little.

"Rach..." He almost said it. The words got halfway up his throat before he realised he didn't know which words they were, or how to say them - and he was suddenly afraid of how she would react. They couldn't do this now. The words slid back down. He gathered up a smile. "You're - sweet, but... I am happy. I promise."

"I know, I just... think about you sometimes, on your own..."

"I've got friends... workmates... I'm not on my own, Rach."

"You are when they've all gone home," she said.

The words settled over him gently, like dust or snow.

"I like my space," he lied.

"G... I - didn't mean to make you sad."

"Everybody worries about me," he said. He realised he was smoothing the post-it note with Myke's address between his fingers. "I'm not - sad, squirt. And I'm not on my own. I'm going out tonight, strangely enough... seeing a friend."
"Yeah?"

"Yeah. So don't worry about me." He paused, imagining her face. "You sound like Mum when you worry."

There came a smashing sound on the other end of the line, followed by a wail and a distinct volley of barks.

"Oh, Christ…" Rachel muttered. "That's for me, G. I've got to go - see you Thursday?"

"See you Thursday. I'll be round after work."

"Love you," she said, and hung up.

"Holy hell," Greg murmured as he stepped out of the taxi in Chester Square that night. He paid the driver and the cab sped off, leaving him gazing in wonder at the palatial row of cream-fronted houses.

This was unreal, he thought - like something from a film. Each property was immaculate with an identical glossy black front door, set back from the street and with a lantern above so that callers could be seen. Even the iron railings that trimmed each home were pristine - not a speck of rust, not a fleck of paint missing. From where he stood, he could see no fewer than three blue heritage plaques - including on the house beside him, which had apparently belonged to Mary Shelley. The topiary bushes up on the balconies were in better shape than every playground, school and doctor's office he'd ever been to in Spitalfields combined.

He wondered whether, if he'd come here three months ago, it would all have been too much for him.

One of the capital's most prestigious addresses - and he an East End boy, arriving by taxi with a takeaway curry and a backpack containing some clothes and a toothbrush.

He'd have felt rather grubby about it, he thought. Like he should be smuggled in the servant's entrance before the neighbours saw.

As it was, he felt a strange pride as he sauntered along the row of houses. He studied the post-it note in his hand, scanning the house numbers as he passed.

Mycroft's looked no different to the others. He admired it for a second all the same - this was the first time he saw the place.

He climbed the steps, rang the bell, and waited.

It was a minute before the door was answered. Greg started to wonder if he was at the wrong house - if he was about to be greeted by some dowager duchess in her curlers - when the door gave a clunk, and eased open. Soft, honey-coloured light teemed out into the darkness.

Mycroft appeared in the doorway: shirt-sleeves, pale-grey tailoring, under-eye shadows and no tie.

Relief flooded Greg's chest; he smiled.

It was not returned.

Greg held aloft the carrier bag he'd brought.
"Chicken jalfrezi," he said. "I'm... here for Netflix and chill."

A reluctant smile crossed Mycroft's grey expression.

"Are you indeed," he said. "How sweet. I'm just struggling to put a name to the face. Remind me?"

Greg winced. He knew he'd deserved that. "Can I... come in?"

"By all means," Mycroft said. He held the door open, stepping back.

The hallway beyond was spacious, tiled, and dominated by a mirror that even European royalty would covet. In the manner of most grand homes, there wasn't a lot of furniture around. An antique chest-of-drawers to the right of the door existed purely to hold up a priceless vase. There was a sofa beside the staircase, too - elegant enough, Greg thought - but he was always unnerved by sofas not pointed at televisions. They looked like they were loitering at a party to which they'd not really been invited.

"How are things?" he asked, as Mycroft closed the door and took the bag of food from him.

"Fine. Food first? Or tour?"

"Let's go for food," Greg suggested. He tried another smile, which again went unreturned. "Build up excitement for the tour. I can't wait to see the stables."

"You'll be disappointed, I'm afraid," Mycroft said, leading the way across the spectacular hall and down a short flight of stairs. "The stables are at the other house."

The kitchen was nearly as big as the hall, all stainless steel and gleaming black granite, with a breakfast bar that seated six. There was a pantry visible through an archway, and a door to what Greg suspected was a wine cellar. Everything was breathlessly clean.

Mycroft moved through it as if he'd never really looked at the place.

"Want a hand?" Greg asked, as Mycroft put the bag on a counter-top and began to retrieve plates from underneath.

"No, don't worry," came the distant assurance. "It only takes one pair. How was work?"

"Nothing much to tell." Greg paused, aware of the quiet. "Chief Super started ringing my desk phone at a minute to five... I dodged out and took the back staircase down..."

Mycroft had started opening bags. "I applaud your quick thinking," he said, cracking the lid from a carton. He licked a spot of sauce briefly off his thumb.

Aside from answering the door, he still hadn't looked Greg in the eye.

"How about you?" Greg tested, with a small smile. "Good day?"

"Of sorts," Mycroft said. He looked pale, Greg thought. The shadows under his eyes were far more telling than his short answers. "Some days, the universe conspires to make my life harder..."

A faint prickle of guilt crept up in Greg's stomach; he pushed it down.

"It's a relief to reach the weekend," Mycroft decided at length, not dividing rice between two plates.

"You... sure I can't help with anything?"
Mycroft smiled humourlessly. He did not look up. "I'm quite capable of serving food."

It was a sting; Greg knew it. He was starting to divine the cause of the stiffness. He hadn't spent his adult life weaving between a string of passive-aggressive, emotionally-damaged women without learning how to tell when he'd fucked up.

If this was Cindy, he'd have dug his heels in - told himself that she could grow up, talk to him about it, or forget it.

Things were different now, though.

This mattered more.

He came closer across the kitchen, his footsteps quiet on the expensive stone tiles. Mycroft continued to plate the food with a stoney focus.

As Greg laid his hands on Myke's shoulders, he felt an almost imperceptible shudder pass through the muscles there. He began to rub them, slow and sorry.

Mycroft stiffened a little. He said nothing.

"Are you alright?" Greg asked, careful.

Mycroft took a moment to reply. "There's - wine in the fridge," he said.

Greg bit the corner of his lip. "That's a 'no'..."

Mycroft paused. He laid the serving spoon aside, placing his hands upon the counter.

"Barely a word all week," he said.

Greg's heart sank.

"Now you're here like Prince Charming," Mycroft murmured, lost. "Rubbing my shoulders. Asking about my day. What the hell happened to calling me?"

Greg looked down; he'd been so glad to get rid of the phone. It had been such a relief that the broken promise of goodnight seemed small and expendable beside it. He wished he could explain to Mycroft properly - but he'd kept it for too long now. His only option was to keep lying.

It would all be over soon.

He reached a hand into the pocket of his jeans, drawing out an as-yet-unfamiliar shape.

He laid the phone at Mycroft's elbow on the counter-top, and waited.
Mycroft looked down at the phone for some time. He was silent as he processed this development, his shoulders as hard and unyielding as the kitchen counter-top beneath his hands.

"New," he remarked.

"Lunch-time today," Greg said, quietly. "Carphone Warehouse on the Strand."

"And the old one?"

"Smashed to bits on Oxford Circus..." Greg placed his hands back on Mycroft's shoulders, trying to repress the flicker of guilt that crept across his heart. "I didn't even realise it was gone at first... ground to powder by traffic by the time I got back."

Mycroft exhaled slowly under his hands, saying nothing.

Greg's heart ached. "Have you slept?"

"Recently?" said Mycroft.

It was answer enough. Greg's innards twisted with guilt. He began to rub Myke's back, receiving a restrained shudder in response.

"I wanted to hear you last night more than anything," he said. "This afternoon, when Sharon said you'd called... I tried tracing the number..."

Mycroft visibly bit the side of his cheek.

"Blocked," he said. "Whitehall."

"Yeah." Greg hesitated. "You - thought I'd..."


His head hung. He breathed hard, leaning over the counter in silence as Greg worked at the knot with his thumbs. A strained quiet fell.

Greg felt his stomach prickling with unease as he rubbed Myke's back.

This was not what he'd meant to happen. This was in fact the opposite of everything he'd intended.

After all the problems they'd endured so far, he'd just wanted things to go right. Myke was perfect - too good for him - and he couldn't bear the thought that he'd fucked it up, all for his stupid pride. He should have taken the stupid security features, all those months ago. He should have let Myke keep them safe.

But it was too late for that now.

There was an uneasy conviction starting in the back of Greg's brain - somewhere quiet and dark, where he kept all the things he didn't quite want to look at.

He knew he was making decisions too fast to be sure they were the right ones. But he couldn't stop.
It was like a domino, he thought, crashing into all the others - that first panic-stricken instinct to hide the letter under the sofa cushion - now he didn't dare look to see how they were falling. He was just rushing along with them, hoping he was hitting the right ones.

He'd thought of contacting Sherlock - thought about it a lot. The world's only consulting detective would have fixed this in minutes. Probably not even bothered getting up off the sofa.

Sadly, it would have been the single fastest route to Mycroft to finding out.

Either through brotherly compassion, or a gleeful inclination towards mockery, Sherlock would almost certainly have informed Mycroft. Greg couldn't have expected him not to - not when so much was at stake.

The miserable truth was that, as the days kept passing, it was becoming more and more impossible to say something.

There's a problem, was one thing. There's a problem and I kept it from you, was another.

It was only getting worse with time.

Greg couldn't see a solution - he could only keep going with this mess he'd made. Pay the money, hope it came to nothing, smash the phone and end the surveillance. It wasn't much of a plan.

But then, he wasn't a Holmes.

He'd just made the mistake of falling in love with one.

"Myke, I'm… sorry," he said. "I didn't ever think you'd - ... it's just been - … this week…"

Mycroft broke at last. He put his head into his hands, shaking.

" - paranoid bloody wreck all week," he bit out. "Like some fifteen-year-old - and now it turns out you're wholly blameless."

Greg's stomach coiled. I am a shithead, he thought. I deserve everything that's coming for me and more.

"Shhh…" He reached for Mycroft, wrapping his arms around his lover's torso from behind. "It's... just been a crap week. For both of us. That's all…"

"Don't patronise me," Mycroft muttered into his hands.

"I'm not," Greg murmured. He gathered Mycroft close, kissing the side of his neck and holding him as he shook. His heart was contorting with guilt. "M'just - trying to thaw you out a little. I'm sorry."

" - fawning after you like a milkmaid - " Mycroft managed, mortified. "Barely slept - "

"I'm sorry… m'here now..."

" - this wretched place, alone, every night..."

"Myke..."

" - and I haven't come in a fucking week. I can't concentrate at all. Keep ripping chunks out of the staff."
"I'm sorry, Myke… I'm so sorry…" Greg hugged him slowly, stroking his hair with one hand. Myke's distress was starting to dissipate from his shoulders, dissolving away fragment by fragment. Greg could feel it unweaving. "I'll make it okay again," he whispered. "I promise…"

The food was going cold on the counter top. They could microwave it, Greg thought. Hell, they could buy new. They couldn't reheat this moment.

He held Myke closer - his boyfriend, he thought - held him tight.

I'm so sorry, he thought. Just let me make it right. Then maybe you'll understand.

After a moment, Mycroft's arms wrapped hesitantly over his own. His tired grey eyes fell shut.

They were quiet together for some time, standing beside the counter and the half-served food.

"What did you mean… 'this wretched place'?" Greg asked, after what felt like hours. "It seems nice."

Mycroft sighed, making no sound.

"It - suited me, once. The space and the solitude. Now it feels soulless." He hesitated, reaching joylessly for a cold samosa. "I live in an empty hotel."

"It's… maybe a bit clean."

"It's cavernous. Sterile. I - hate it." Mycroft ate the samosa, going quiet for a moment. "I'm sorry," he muttered at last. "For the - paranoia. I didn't mean to - …"

"Myke…" Greg had never hated himself so much. "Myke, you've got nothing to - "

"It's just that I've - in the past… well, I suppose we've all run afoul of someone blowing hot and cold, but… I've been there before, Greg. I'm too old for it now. Twenty years ago, perhaps I'd be game. But not now… not this side of forty."

Greg felt his throat tighten.

Someone had hurt Myke - played games with him. Like Cindy, he thought. He'd never contemplated it until now: that there had been others before him, and they'd all been and gone. It made his heart give a sickly, desperate thump as he tried to fathom how someone could do that to a person like Myke - clever, gorgeous, enthralling Myke.

He loathed himself at once for even being a reminder of someone who'd do that.

He secured his arms tighter around Myke's waist, closing his eyes.

"I'm not the letters on the screen," he said in Myke's ear. "It's - my voice, but it's not me. This is me. Right now. Right here, holding you. Telling you I'm a loser because I made you worry, and I hate that I did that. But I'm not blowing hot and cold on you. I couldn't if I tried - I'm crazy about you. Because you're fucking amazing. I'm just… a prick who doesn't deserve you."

Myke's expression twisted with unwilling humour. "You - aren't a prick."

"I am, Myke. I made you worry again, after I swore to you on the phone that I wouldn't."

"You lost your mobile," Mycroft said, shaking his head. "It's - fine. You couldn't have known I was - …" He sighed, bracketing a hand across eyes. "Paranoid and horny and clingy as a limpet. I'm
sorry I mistrusted you."

"You're not paranoid," Greg said. "And you're not clingy." He hesitated. "I… can't speak for
'horny', but - "

Myke laughed, tight. It was his favourite sound in the world, Greg realised - he'd missed it
desperately.

"I'm really sorry," he murmured, holding Myke close.

"As am I."

"Can we... be okay now?"

Myke smiled a little, leaning their heads together. "Yes," he said. After a moment, he added:
"We're getting better at this."

Greg closed his eyes. He breathed Mycroft's scent deep into his lungs. "I'm - going to drown you in
texts this week. I promise. You'll have blocked me by Tuesday for some peace."

Mycroft smiled, his eyes soft. He reached for another cold samosa, pulling it carefully in half.

"I… shan't hold you to that. But, if you did… perhaps it would soothe my fractious heart. I'd be
grateful."

He held half the samosa up to his shoulder. Greg ate it from his hand, licking the last few pastry
flakes from his skin. He let his tongue graze a little longer over Myke's fingertips than necessary.

Myke made a faint, tight sound.

"You are pent-up, aren't you?" Greg said.

"I've been unbearable," Mycroft told him, without doubt. "Angry over nothing... glad about
nothing."

"Office covered in scorch marks?"

"Office and staff. Frankly it's a miracle we're not at war with half the planet."

"You'd win," Greg said. He splayed his palm gently on Mycroft's lower stomach, leaning past him
for an onion bhaji. He dipped it in jalfrezi sauce, then held it still for Myke to eat, watching with
tenderness as the blue-grey eyes flickered shut.

Myke ate from his fingers, safe in his arms. His expression suggested that no food had ever tasted
better.

"Good?" Greg murmured.

Mycroft swallowed. "Good."

Stroking his stomach, Greg reached for a shard of poppadom. Into the sauce it went, then up to
Myke's mouth.

The domesticity was nice, he thought. He could do this until dawn. It made him forget all the mess
that was waiting for them outside these walls.
"Have you - really not come all week?" he asked.

"God help me." Mycroft snapped the poppadom with his teeth, chewing. "Do I take it that you have?"

"Not guilty, your honour... I committed a lot of crimes this week. Self-pollution wasn't one of them."

Mycroft huffed. "I admire your restraint."

"And I question yours." Greg let his hand splay a little lower - resting over the fastening of Myke's trousers. It caused an immediate jump and an intake of breath. "Jesus, Myke... you're horny as hell..."

"Entirely your fault," Mycroft reminded him.

"You shouldn't get into this state..." Greg said. "You - have needs. And your staff don't deserve to suffer."

As Greg started to tug free his shirt, Mycroft drew in a sharp breath. "What are you doing?"

"Something you need," Greg said, loosening the last of the shirt. He slid his hand back to the trouser fastening and snapped it open, producing a hissed exclamation from Myke. "I - fucked up... I'm really sorry. Let me make amends."

He slid his hand without hesitation past trousers and underwear, wrapping around Myke's hardening cock in a single, smooth movement.

Myke's cry echoed off the immaculate space.

He bucked in Greg's arms, arching. Greg held him still.

"Shhh - " He kissed Myke's neck and nipped him, gently, causing another susurrating cry. "I'm here."

Myke had begun to pant already, swearing in gasps as Greg stroked him slowly.

"M'right here," Greg whispered against his neck. He loosened Myke's trousers with his other hand, easing them to fall. "Your gentle rough. Here to muss you up."

Myke let out a whimper, flushed in the face. Desperation twisted at his features. "God - Greg..."

No teasing, Greg thought - not today. Neither of them could handle teasing today. It had been a god-awful week, and this was about to get intense. He wasn't sure if anyone had ever been fucked over a kitchen counter in Belgravia before. If not, they were on the verge of history.

He nudged Mycroft gently against the edge of the counter, caught his hands and guided him to lean forwards. Mycroft bent to his will without a flicker of resistance - gasping his name, pushing back against him. He bit softly at the side of Myke's throat, gentling him with a hush. He then reached for the buckle of his belt.

He undid it slowly, making sure Mycroft could feel what was going on. From the noises he was receiving in response, nothing could have been more welcome right now. The belt came undone, then the button and zipper of his jeans. He eased his prick free with a hand, shuddering a little at the contact - it had been a long, horrific week. But it was over now. It was going to be okay.
With his other hand he pressed - gently, but firmly - in the centre of Mycroft's back.

Myke bent to the insistent press as easy and beautiful as a willow. He submitted, panting, arching his back a little as his chest and cheek came flush against the counter-top. The white dress shirt had crumpled and hitched up above his lower back. There was nothing for him to grip - nowhere to brace. His hands splayed in desperation against the cold smoothness of the granite.

"Greg..." Myke breathed, near-feral. "Greg - please."

Greg kept a hand firmly in the centre of his back, pinning him in place, as he reached for the bottle by the electric hob. Myke twisted beneath him.

"What - ...?" he gasped.

Greg uncapped the olive oil bottle with his teeth. He spat the cap aside; it skittered off beneath the fridge. He poured the oil, liberally, across his free hand, not caring as it spattered the floor. No tiles should be that clean. He was improving the place. Without preamble he slid his oiled fingers down the cleft of Mycroft's arse, found the tight pucker and circled it - firm, insistent spirals.

Mycroft's whole body jerked. He lashed out with a ragged, desperate cry, sweeping a plate from the counter as he struggled to find a grip. It skittled into a second; both smashed against the floor. Greg pinned him again with one hand, panting, holding him in place as with his other hand he eased a first finger inside. Mycroft bucked back against him in desperation, gasping.

"Fuck... fuck - !"

As one finger became two, Myke clawed at the counter top. His whole neck arched and he begged. Greg kept him pinned, heart pounding at the sight. He was going to be remembering this for weeks - months. No more composure, he thought. No more icy exterior. No more Belgravia diplomat.

Just his lover, desperate to be possessed; to be weak for just a little while; to be eased down over a spotless kitchen counter and taken care of by someone who loved him.

Three fingers - a little harder, a little rougher now. He held back until the point that Myke had lost all control of language, and even the exultations of "fuck" had been robbed of their form. He then nudged gently at Myke's inner ankle with his foot, coaxing the pale thighs further apart. With a hitched gasp, Myke obeyed.

One single stroke - slow, relentless. Myke lashed another plate from the counter as he was penetrated, heaving with it, crying out. Pleasure, white hot and perfect, wracked his features. It took most of Greg's strength and composure to keep him pinned in place on the counter. The presence of the dress-shirt helped - it gave him something to grip. He forced himself to concentrate on Myke, keeping him still, so as not to come on the spot.

This shouldn't be so hot, he thought - but then it was, and it was what they needed. They could cuddle the whole weekend. They could lie in each other's arms, watching films, kissing and whispering the full two days away. But right now - in this moment, now - they needed to come, and it was everything, and it was perfect.

"Please," Myke managed, as Greg buried him to the root. He swallowed, trying to arch, sweat glistening on every inch of his visible skin. "Greg... "

Greg placed one hand on Myke's back; the other, he braced against the counter-top.

Within three minutes, Mycroft was making the high-pitched and frantic gasps that said he was about to come. Greg didn't slow down; he didn't ease. He couldn't. He'd spent a week fearing
monsters under his bed, like a child - scared to text - scared to reach out - powerless, lonely and desperate for Myke, just to see him, to touch him, to hear him create these noises.

He tightened his grip in Myke's bunched dress-shirt. Myke bucked back against him, helpless, in a desperate and wordless plea for more. Greg kept on, unrelenting, each thrust deep and hard and perfectly in control.

As he came, Myke's howling cry rang the perfect empty house to the roof. He arched beneath Greg, clawing at the counter so hard that Greg expected to see channels of granite furrowed up by his fingers.

The cries finally quietened into deep and weakened gasps. Mycroft was left trembling from the nape of his neck to his ankles, still spread apart by Greg's feet. As he stirred fitfully against the counter, he let out a sound like an injured animal.

The whimper jogged Greg sharply back to sanity. He'd never been so close to coming in his life - but the sound cut through layer after layer of sex-induced fog, straight to the heart.

"Are you alright?" he gasped as he withdrew - a little too quick, wrenching another helpless noise from Mycroft.

"I'm - ... I'm fine…"

Greg didn't believe it yet. He gathered Mycroft up from the counter, panicking a little. Myke sagged bonelessly into his arms - weak as a newborn kitten.

There was nowhere to sit in here - nowhere but a stool at the breakfast bar, and in this moment, Myke had neither the dexterity nor the strength to manage one of those. Greg's legs could not keep them both up any longer. He took the decision to ease them both to the floor, avoiding a smashed plate, a slowly leaking bottle of olive oil and a scattered carton of limp green salad. He sat back against the refrigerator, cradling Myke against his chest. He stroked his hair; he whispered gentle nonsense to him. The minutes drifted by.

At last, Myke's breathing started to deepen. His pulse began to settle.

"What... did you use for lube, dare I ask?"

"Olive oil." Greg kissed the top of his head, monumentally relieved to hear him speak. "I'll - get you another bottle."

He winced a little, glancing round the wreckage of the kitchen.

"... and some new plates."

"Do no such thing." Mycroft nestled into his chest, brushing a kiss over his neck. "I'm going to have them mounted over the fire."

The bubble of relief made Greg's laugh rather more pitched than he'd intended. Mycroft snorted, shaking with amusement against his chest, and for a few minutes they laid on the floor of Myke's kitchen as they laughed. Some poor cleaning person was going to find this in the morning, Greg thought. What a surprise that would be. They would be seeing Mr Holmes in a different light - that was for sure.

As the laughter subsided, Mycroft gave another sigh - soul-deep and full of honesty.
"I don't want to live here anymore," he murmured. He laid his head on Greg's shoulder. "That was the most... genuine experience I've ever had in this place. And you haven't even been here for an hour."

"Think of what carnage I'll have caused by Monday," Greg said. He smiled a little into Myke's hair as his boyfriend laughed. "The place will be a fucking bomb site…"

He kissed Myke's head; he ran a hand down his back.

"Buy somewhere close to me, will you?" he asked, soft.

Mycroft stirred in his arms. He leant up to kiss Greg's cheek.

"You haven't come," he noted, stroking Greg's stomach.

"I was worried I hurt you," Greg confessed. "I - had to check you were okay."

"That was quite the opposite of hurting me," Myke said, his eyes gleaming. His hand splayed at Greg's navel.

"You - were making quite a bit of noise towards the end… I wasn't sure if - ..." Greg felt his stomach muscles twitch as the stroking eased lower. "Myke - "

"Mm?"

"D'you… happen to have some kind of bedroom hidden away in this mansion? Kitchen floor is hot in theory, but... "

"The prick says yes, but the back says no."

Greg winced. "In a sentence."

Mycroft took his hands. As he got to his feet, he gave a distinct and ungainly wobble - it was the least gracious movement Greg had ever seen a Holmes make. He leapt up at once and caught Myke in his arms.

"Easy," he advised. "You - took quite a - ...

Mycroft steadied himself with his hands on Greg's chest. He cast a wry glance across the scene around them. "You've desecrated my kitchen."

"I have," Greg confessed - he gazed into Mycroft's face, adoring the wildness and the joy that he found there. Myke looked fifteen years younger in the space of fifteen minutes. He was a different person. "I don't think I can tell you I'm sorry… not for that."

Mycroft's eyes flared.

"Bedroom next," he said. He grabbed Greg's hand, pulling him towards the door. "Then we'll start in the lounge."

It was only afterwards that Greg got a proper look at Mycroft's bedroom. His first arrival, and the sublime but exhausting half hour that followed, had all been a blur.

It was an enormous room. Physical space was London's costliest, most impressive show of status, and always would be. The room itself was decorated in restful shades of taupe and cream,
panelled walls and a carpet so plush it might just function as a second place to sleep. The master bed was a vast island of pillows, feather-down and Egyptian linen, floating in this ocean of wealth. They'd hurled most of the cushions off it in the first few minutes. From the thickness of the walnut footboard, Greg wondered if a button around here somewhere would produce a television. He already knew how they were spending tomorrow.

It was a beautiful space.

It was nothing compared to the man in his arms.

Mycroft raised his head from Greg's shoulder, languid. He stroked a kiss over the slight edge of stubble on his jaw.

"Alright?" Mycroft murmured.

Greg smiled. He knew he'd done a good job when Myke started skipping words.

"Mmm." He leant down, catching Myke's lips. They kissed for a while, softly, too exhausted to do much but breathe and rest in each other. At last, as Myke eased away, Greg murmured against his lips, "Promise me once more I didn't hurt you."

"I promise..." Myke cupped his jaw, gazing into his eyes. "I've never needed anything so much in my life. I should hire you out to the rest of Whitehall. The country would flourish."

Greg smiled, his eyes softening. He stroked his hand over Mycroft's lower back.

"Exclusive to you, m'afraid." He felt his heart expanding. "Is that okay?"

"Yes..." Mycroft sighed, kissing him gently once more. "Of course it's okay."

"We should... probably order more food..."

"Mm... I doubt the food we have will still be edible. Painted across my kitchen floor as it is."

"In my defence, I didn't actually spill a thing." Greg paused, thinking. "Except the olive oil... the plates were you."

"While I was being thoroughly fucked," Mycroft added, "from behind, across a counter, by you, after a week of lonely celibacy."

The words reminded Greg of something he'd heard earlier. It came drifting to him out of the post-coital haze - Rachel's voice. He couldn't believe she'd only said it that afternoon. It felt like weeks ago. "I just... think about you sometimes, on your own..."

"I'm sorry you were lonely," he said. "I mean it."

He swallowed a little, living again that awful fear he'd endured all week: the thought of someone reading their texts, tracking their movements, maybe even watching across a darkened street as Mycroft exited a car alone.

"I fucked up. I'm sorry. I should have just... I don't know - moved in here for the week. At least we'd have been able to sleep together. Have breakfast together. I... really screwed up."

Mycroft was looking up at him, strangely soft. Something passed across his features. Greg watched the flicker of his eyes as he discarded the thought, found a smile, then slid gently out of bed.
"I need to smoke," Mycroft said.

The loss of skin-to-skin contact was like having an arm removed. Greg sat up against the pillows, aching a little, watching as Myke moved around the enormous bed. He was still wearing the dress-shirt. It was now open at the chest, crumpled to hell and bearing a number of olive oil stains.

"I wonder if my new phone survived our reunion," Greg said, remembering with a slight lurch.

Mycroft idled across to a dresser by the gossamer-draped window.

"I pushed it to safety," he assured Greg, opening up the top drawer. He retrieved a packet of Marlboro from inside. "My last scrap of rational thought... you're welcome."

As he lit one, Greg watched him in silent fascination. The look of concentration was oddly arresting. He was a mixture of everything, Greg realised - power and fragility, sentiment and reason, vulnerable as an orchid and vicious as a viper. He didn't know how many people had ever seen Mycroft like this - half-naked and post-coital, his hair in disarray, lighting a cigarette by a window at half eight at night. He didn't want to ask. He didn't want to know.

Mycroft looked up from by the window, registering the fascinated gaze with a faint smile.

He held out the packet.

"Marlboro," Greg explained, with an apologetic look. "I'll - get mine from downstairs in a while."

Mycroft's mouth curved around the cigarette.

"Fuck off, 'Marlboro'..." he purred. "Too refined for my 'gentle rough', is it? Are Marlboro not the brand of choice in the East End?"

"You loved that," Greg said, "and you know you did."

Mycroft leant back against the dresser, smirking too. He exhaled a slender plume of smoke, dragon-like and glorious.

"I did," he said. He eyed Greg closely, stroking a thumb along the cigarette. "My first crush was the Marlboro man, you know."

Greg almost laughed. "Really? Cowboys?"

"Mm. Bear that in mind for Halloween."

"Are you serious? You should have told me this before your birthday. I could have done the works... kidnapped you from Whitehall on a horse, tied you to a railroad somewhere... what a wasted opportunity."

"Alas," Mycroft remarked, smoking. He reached up to massage the side of his neck. "How do you feel about Chinese food in this moment?"

Greg's stomach twisted. "God - yes... is there even one near here?"

Mycroft smiled. "Ken Lo," he said. "Three minutes walk down Ecclestone Street."

Greg knew he shouldn't be surprised. If other rich people were anything like Mycroft, they spent half their lives fucking and eating things that were bad for them. "Where's your phone?"
"Charging in my office," Mycroft said. "Yours will be nearer."

Greg pushed back the sheets. He stretched as he sat at the edge of the bed, wondering if there would be time for a shower before food.

"I hope I'll be given the privilege of your new number at some point," Mycroft remarked, still smoking at the window.

Greg smiled over one shoulder at him. "I'll be honoured to present it to you."

There was something he needed to ask. It was vital - beyond vital - but now that the moment had come, it was hard not to be afraid. He'd spent the day rehearsing in his head how to ask about this. It didn't make it any easier.

"Listen," he said. "I've... been thinking."

"Ominous," Mycroft noted. He blew another smoke plume.

"Nothing bad," said Greg. "If anything, you get to hear me admit I was an idiot… which I'll admit is happening a lot these days..."

Mycroft took an expressionless drag on the cigarette. "I'm listening."

"My new phone... I - was thinking I'd leave it with you on Monday," he said. "You can take it to the boys in the lab. Get them to work their magic on it - security features. All the necessaries. I know I kicked off about this stuff before - and I'm sorry - it's just... well, things are different now. I'm shouldn't have forced you to take the security off my old phone. I was a shit, basically. I - acknowledge that in full. And I wouldn't want to put you in danger... not for anything."

There was no reply.

He glanced across at Myke, hesitant.

Mycroft was looking back at him from by the window. He had the strangest expression upon his face. Greg could only describe it as the look of rapid, unwelcome thought.

For several horrible seconds, he was sure that Mycroft knew.

He'd read the truth somehow in Greg's voice, his choice of words, a loose thread on his shirt. Something had given it away. It was all about to blow up, and it would be over, and he'd have ruined it all.

Then Mycroft dragged on his cigarette, looked away, and said,

"I don't want to fight... not tonight. Not ever again, frankly. So I shall preface this by saying that I am genuinely, sincerely sorry."

Of all the reactions Greg had anticipated, this was not one of them.

He stared at Mycroft, wondering what the hell he was about to hear.

"What's - wrong?" he managed.

Mycroft reached for the window behind him, opening it with a crack. He flicked the ash from his cigarette out into the night.
Then, drawing in a breath, he said,

"The security features were... never removed from your phone."
Disturbance

Greg's brain had gone immediately into freefall.

"But..." he said. It made no sense. "But then - how did - ..."

Mycroft's hand shook on the cigarette. "Your pride matters to me," he said. "Desperately. I wouldn't see your integrity violated for anything in this world, but this was... national security, Greg. I am this country."

He looked down, pale, his features tense with regret.

"Communicating with an unsecured device - especially the way we have... it would have blown a hole in the nation's defences the size of the moon. It would have levelled us to dust. I'd have been assassinated before the week was out, and every member of your contact list would have found themselves in an underground bunker somewhere in Eastern Europe being tortured for information about me. You don't - ... you couldn't have - ... this was not about you. It was not about me. It was about what I represent, and I am intensely, sincerely sorry."

Greg heard the words. He heard all the sounds that formed them. Somewhere between his ears and his brain, all their meaning had been lost.

All he could see were the printed photos and the blackmail note typed beneath them: BAKER STREET, PLATFORM 10. 1ST JUNE. 9.15PM.

"Everyone with access to that data is screened," Mycroft was assuring him, somewhere a thousand miles away. "There are monthly checks. The data itself enters a secure system upon processing and from there it does not leave. Even my authorisation level - "

"But - " Greg's voice came out as a croak. "But I asked - ..."

Mycroft's expression crumpled.

"I fitted your phone with the most advanced security software on the planet," he said. "No, Roy from Computer Crime didn't find it..."

"Then... how..."

"I'm sorry," Mycroft said again. Sincere regret was written deep into his features. He'd forgotten his cigarette - it smoked softly between his fingers, ignored. "I - only hope that you meant what you said," he murmured. "About not wishing to place me in danger. I... understand if you now wish to re-evaluate that."

"No, it's... fine..."

Greg wasn't angry. Not a flicker of it - not at all.

He felt only confusion.

It didn't make any sense. They'd been safe all this time - and yet somehow, the worst was still happening. How was it possible?

"I'm - glad you told me," he managed, pale, as his brain scrabbled for answers it did not have.
Mycroft was unconvinced; he lowered his eyes. "You have every right to berate me."

"No, I - … no I don't. If you'd done what I - … you could have been killed, or - "

"I regret that I lied to you. Deeply."

"You - you needed to, though. It wasn't - I didn't know that - ..."

The phone had been secured. But the photos had still been taken.

There was a way-in, Greg thought. Someone had gotten through.

They had a problem.

"Myke… there's something I - "

Myke had reached his ash-heavy cigarette over to the window. As he glanced down into the street, something caught his eye. He stopped dead.

"Oh, lord God," he said.

Greg froze. "What is it?"

"Get dressed," Mycroft said. "Quickly." He backed away from the window, seized a dressing gown from the back of a nearby chaise longue and threw it across to his lover.

Greg caught it one-handed, his pulse rate spiking. "Why?"

"Because there is a police car outside," Mycroft intoned. "And your sergeant is just about to - "

The doorbell rang.

"Oh, holy shit… what now?" Greg struggled into the dressing gown. It was a size too small and made of mink-coloured silk. "Where are my - … oh fuck!"

"What? What is it?"

"They're in the fucking kitchen! Covered in olive oil - "

Mycroft swore and started hunting through drawers. "Mother of God…” Clothing flew in all directions. At last, he grabbed a pair of lounge pants and hurled them over the bed. "There, quickly - "

Greg dragged them on.

The doorbell was still ringing shrilly throughout the house as he set off down the stairs at speed.

Police lights flared on every window pane that he passed. He could hear knocking from the front door below, and Sally's voice calling through the letterbox. *Holy fuck, what's happened?* Sharon must have passed on the address, he thought. His phone, abandoned in the kitchen, could have a hundred missed calls. This was bad.

The entrance hall was thick darkness as he reached it. Only the flashing of the squad car beyond the windows lit his passage. He skidded slightly on an ornamental rug, grappled for a second with the latch of the door, then heaved it open.
As Sally caught sight of him in the doorway, her face transformed into an expression he would never forget. All sense and reason were wiped from her features. She stared at him, her eyes bugged, taking in with astonishment the mink-coloured dressing gown and someone else's linen lounge pants.

"What are you doing here?" they asked each other at once.

The uniformed officer behind Sally raised both eyebrows as high as they could go.

Greg waited, out of breath and panic-stricken. "Well?" he barked.

The single syllable seemed to jog Sally partway back to her senses. She blinked at him, taken aback. "I'm - here to - … check on the - …"

"You're looking for me, aren't you?" he snapped. "So? What the bloody hell's so important?"

"No," she said in alarm. "I'm responding to the call from next door."

Greg faltered. "Next door?"

"Yeah, we got a call half an hour ago - lady said she heard shouting coming through the air-vents in her basement. Sounded like somebody being murdered. There was nobody else available to respond but me. What the hell are you doing here?"

Oh... bollocks.

"Shouting - ?" he said.

"Yeah... never heard anything like it. She thought someone was getting turned inside out. What's... going on in there?" Sally's eyes strayed in alarm to his bare chest, his hair on end and the stain of jalfrezi sauce across his jaw. "Should I come inside?"

Greg steeled himself.

"I think you'd better," he said, and held open the door.

Sally surveyed with sharp-eyed concern the luxurious surroundings into which she was admitted.

"What's going on?" she demanded, turning to him as the door cracked shut. "This isn't your house!"

Greg lost his mind on the spot.

"Oh really?" he burst out. "God! What a fucking faux-pas, eh? Next you'll be telling me these aren't even my fucking pajamas. Well, give me five minutes to collect my things and you'd better drive me back to the asylum, Sally. Nurse will be wondering where I've got to."

She covered her face.

"What are you actually doing here?" she said.

"I'm visiting a friend," he snapped.

"A friend? You're half..." She nearly said it - nearly shouted the word 'naked' at him - but she couldn't. "... dressed! This is Belgravia. What was all the shouting about?"

Greg stared at her, his jaw set.
It took far too long for her to cotton on.

"You're kidding," she said at last.

Greg folded his arms against his chest, saying absolutely nothing. Sally was now staring at him like he'd dropped out of the sky.

"The neighbour thought someone was being torn apart in here," she said. "What the hell were you doing?"

"Get your notebook out," he snapped. "I'll draw you a diagram, shall I?"

She put her hands over her eyes. "This is - … the weirdest bloody thing that I've ever - "

"Sergeant Donovan," said a voice from the stairs.

Greg felt it shoot, like a lightning bolt, straight down his spine.

He shut his eyes.

"My deepest apologies," the voice continued, sleek. "You haven't even been offered a drink."

As Mycroft stepped off the stairs, now immaculately attired in casual loungewear and as calm as a February dawn, Sally's mouth fell open.

"Greg, why don't you compose yourself in the kitchen for a moment?" Mycroft murmured, before anyone could say another word. "Mugs are in the cupboard above the sink. Tea is to the right of the fridge. I shall take Sally to have a seat in the lounge, then we can all discuss this matter as private citizens for a short phone call."

He laid a hand on Sally's shoulder, steering her pale and unprotesting from the hall.

"I believe that you know my lamentable brother," he told her, as they disappeared from view.

The process of making tea was both surreal and strangely calming, Greg found. It also gave him the opportunity to swap into his jeans, and to check his phone - no messages.

He found his way to the lounge by process of elimination. Sally, numb, had been secured in an armchair of her own beside the coffee table.

Mycroft looked up from the sofa as Greg entered the room. He stood up, took the tea tray and laid it on the coffee table. He then caught Greg gently by the arm.

"Be a friend," he advised, quietly, in Greg's ear. "Not a boss. She is very shocked. I need to make a short phone call."

He left the two of them alone, disappearing back into the hall.

Warily Greg took a seat on the couch closest to Sally. She did not look up.

After a few seconds' silence, he nudged the plate of biscuits towards her.

"Have a bourbon, Sal," he said.

Her eyes flickered to the pile. "No, thanks."
"They're Waitrose," he said, gently. He wondered if she was ready for jokes yet. He figured it always helped when they were looking down at a murdered body. "I... move in fancy circles these days."

She looked up at him as if he'd grown another nose.

"That's Sherlock Holmes's brother," she said.

"I know," Greg said.

"And you're - "

"Yeah. I know that too."

"- with him - "

"- yeah."

"- I... I didn't even know you were - well... "

Greg looked down at his hands. "In my defence," he said, "neither did I. Not until - ..." He waved the thought aside, rubbing his forehead. "Look. This is - ... you're now the first person I've told. Ever. Even my family don't know. So just brace yourself. And bear in mind that out of the two of us sitting here, who d'you think is the most mortified right now?"

Her eyes flashed to him, awkward and amused. He gave her a half-smile.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I know it's a shock. I'd... rather you have found out differently too."

He took a deep breath.

"Yeah, I'm gay." His heart boomed it in the silence that followed. "But I'm still your DI. Nothing's changed."

He paused, watching her breathe it out. He pushed his tongue into the side of his cheek.

"And... out of the two possible Holmes brothers..." he added.

She laughed at last, covering her face. "God - don't..." She exhaled into her palms, shaking her head. "Jesus. I didn't even know he had a brother."

"Not a lot of people do."

"What does the guy even do? I mean - look at this place. This is..."

"He's in politics," Greg said, with a half-smile. He nudged the mug of very strong, very sweet tea across the tray towards her. "Don't ask me any more than that, or he'll have to kill us both."

"Yikes..." Sally gazed down into her tea, astounded. Words seemed to have failed her.

It occurred to Greg that there was still a member of uniform outside Mycroft's front door, probably texting everyone he knew about DI Lestrade's mink satin dressing gown.

"Is it... serious?" Sally asked him. "With - ?"

"Mycroft," he told her. His chest expanded a little. "Yeah, it's... a big deal."
She smiled, lopsided, as she took a drink of tea.

"This isn't just me getting my rocks off," he assured her.

Her eyebrows lifted. "According to the neighbours, you were."

It was Greg's turn to cover his face. "Christ," he said. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "We'll -
keep it down, officer. Sorry for the disturbance."

"Holy shit - ...") she laughed, suddenly struck by the absurdity of the situation. She covered her
mouth with a grin. "Is that… his dressing gown?"

"Piss off, Sally. I wasn't dressed."

"God!"

"Christ, no - we weren't - …" He hung his head. "... alright. We were a bit."

"Holy shit," she said again, shaking her head. Her eyes were bright with mirth. He couldn't help
but grin awkwardly back at her, reaching at last for his cup of tea.

"I thought you were here for me," he said. "I don't know, as if something bad had happened..."

"How would I have known you were here?"

"Sharon left me the address earlier. Thought maybe she'd told you."

"Wait - so Sharon knows? Sharon from Reception?"

"No," he said. "She just passed on an address to me from a stranger. That's all. Nobody knows -
nobody except for you, me and Myke. I… kinda need it to stay like that. For now, at least."

"It's… fine, boss." She smiled at him over her tea, promising. "I'm not saying a word."

"Good," he said. She nudged a biscuit towards her. "Thank you."

"I'll - … I don't know," she said, taking the bourbon. "I'll tell them someone had the TV on too
loud."

"And you didn't see me here... right?"

"Right."

He smiled at her, grateful. "That's my girl."

Her dark eyes glinted. She drank her tea, still amused, and they lapsed into companionable quiet
for a while.

Mycroft reappeared just as Sally was getting ready to go. He came across the entrance hall towards
them as they stood by the front door.

"Sally Donovan," he remarked, and they turned. "I thought your name was familiar. Your sister is
Angela Donovan... commercial law, isn't she? With Hudson McKenzie."

Sally blinked at him, briefly astonished.

"Angela," she said, smiling. "Yeah... do you - know each other?"
"Oh, I imagine she's quite forgotten me by now. A very capable lawyer, if I recall."

"Oh - yeah." Sally smiled, abashed. "She… works hard. Too hard, maybe."

Mycroft gave her a sympathetic look. "Still stalled in the adoption process?"

Sally flushed a little, flashing an embarrassed glance up at her boss. Greg, who had never heard a word of this, adopted a firmly neutral expression. Sally pushed her hands into the pockets of her coat.

"Um - yeah," she said. "It's - hard-going for them both. They've been tangled in red-tape for years now. It's… so stupid. They're desperate, and they'd be great parents. But… well, you know how it is… people see 'mental health issues' in the medical file and suddenly it's - … I mean it was *years ago* - she was thirteen - but… well, safeguarding… it's - a hard stigma to shift."

Her voice trailed out, ashamed. She looked down at her shoes.

"It's a shame for Angela," she said. "That's all."

Mycroft nodded, understanding.

"I have a friend who oversees the approval panels," he told her. "He owes me a rather generous favour… I've asked him to take a personal interest in your sister's latest application. He's sympathetic to those who've overcome personal challenges. I imagine she'll receive word of his compassionate recommendation in… oh, perhaps a week?"

For the second time that night, Sally's mouth opened. She gazed at Mycroft as if she were seeing the whole world at once.

He smiled back at her, his eyes gentle.

"Thank you for ensuring my paramour stays in one piece, Sergeant Donovan," he said. "I am profoundly in your debt."

Silently marvelling, Greg took this as his cue to open the front door. Gently he ushered Sally out into the night, swearing himself a personal promise to talk to his staff more often. Sally's stuttered thanks continued until the door had locked behind her.

Silence fell. The squad car's lights, still gently flaring, took off into the night.

Greg turned from the front door, amazed, to find Mycroft still standing on the bottom step.

Mycroft cast him a half-smile, saying nothing.

"You've... never met her sister, have you?" Greg asked.

"Does it prohibit me from easing her path in life?"

"That was kind of you," Greg said. "I mean… really kind."

"'No-one is useless in this world who lightens the burdens of another'," Mycroft said.

Greg smiled faintly. "Tell me."

"Dickens," Mycroft said. "'Doctor Marigold's Prescriptions'. Tragically under-read in our age."
There was quiet for a while as they regarded each other across the hall.

"You came out to a friend this evening," Mycroft told him. His eyes softened. "I am - very proud of you."

Greg considered this for a moment, letting the profoundness of those words settle over him. He looked down at his arms folded across his chest.

"I'm… knackered," he decided, at last. "And hungry - and my sergeant now knows I'm gay - and you… lied to me."

Mycroft's expression flickered; the guilt returned to his eyes.

"I lied for a reason," he said.

"I know," Greg said, tired. He breathed in deeply. Of all the lies told in this relationship, he thought, Mycroft was definitely still in second place. "It's - … I understand why you did it. It's fine."

"No," Mycroft said, softly. "You don't."

Greg looked up in surprise - a little hurt. Mycroft gazed at him from the stairs.

"You're starting to," Mycroft said. "But you haven't all the data… not yet."

He visibly swallowed.

"You cannot yet imagine what some individuals in this world would do, with considerable pleasure, to a person who is cherished by Mycroft Holmes. I can imagine it - in horrifying depth. And I knew from an early stage that I couldn't... cope... with that eventuality."

He swirled his tongue around his back teeth, steadying himself a moment.

"The second option, of course, was to sever our arrangement for your own protection… to extract myself from your existence, and never return. I could not cope with that either. Of the three paths, deception seemed by far the least of three evils. Not the most selfless, perhaps... to do that, I would have left you at The Beaumont that morning and never laid my eyes on you again. I would have let you walk away from me to anonymity - to safety - and to live your life free from my shadow. Unimpeded. Unafraid."

His gaze faltered.

"But my life has contained little that is... mine," he said. "Purely, perfectly mine."

He looked away.

"I made the selfish choice," he whispered. "I lied to you because I could not bear to lose you. I'm - deeply sorry."

Greg's throat had seized almost entirely shut.

He crossed the entrance hall, his steps silent in the darkness. He came to stand before Mycroft on the bottom step.

For a few moments they regarded each other across three inches of space.
As they did, Greg gathered every ounce of his courage.

He couldn't keep the secret any longer. In five nights, a blackmailer would be waiting for him at Baker Street Tube Station. He didn't know how they'd gotten hold of the photos. He knew it was his fault somehow. It was his phone they'd come from. It was his problem, and he'd caused, and it was going to destroy them both.

He needed Mycroft to know, right now. He needed his help.

"I... have to tell you something," he said, his voice tight.

Something broke in Mycroft's expression. He reached out; his shaking hands encircled Greg's jaw.

"I love you too," Mycroft whispered.

Greg's fortitude - moments before, iron-clad - gave way at once.

Tell him, screamed his heart.

Tell him, screamed his brain.

Even as they screamed, he felt the truth die in his throat. He felt it wither into nothing. He stared into Myke's face, the blue-grey eyes gazing back at him, fragile and afraid and desperate to hear those words back.

He couldn't do it. He couldn't tell him.

Not now.

Five days, he thought - then it would be over.

He wrapped Mycroft up in his arms, shaking inside.

"I love you," he breathed. Mycroft sank into his arms, shuddering with relief. "I fucking love you... you're everything and I don't deserve you."

"Take me to bed," Mycroft gasped. "This very second now."

Greg didn't need to be told twice. He leant down, swept Mycroft off his feet and lifted him with ease into his arms, carrying him away up the stairs.
Platform ten was the northbound platform of the Jubilee Line. Its colourful walls, with bright blocks of orange and yellow and grey, chequered with posters for musicals, watches and galleries, did not stop it looking like a tunnel into the abyss. It was, like all tube stations at night, cold, and strung through with an unnatural breeze - as if colossal lungs, deep in the tunnels somewhere, were breathing slowly in their sleep.

Greg arrived at ten minutes past nine.

He hadn't wanted to be here early, and have to linger - drinking a coffee, like he was meeting a friend; reading the paper; twiddling his thumbs on a bench. But he hadn't wanted to be late.

"Where are you going?" Mycroft had murmured, sleepily, as he got up from the sofa on the stroke of nine.

"M'out of cigarettes," he said. "Just going down the road for some… d'you want anything?"

Mycroft smiled at him, eyes dark, now stretched the full length of Greg's couch.

"What's the…” he murmured. "With the caramel…”

Greg smiled, pulling on his coat. "Galaxy," he said. He picked up his wallet from the coffee table, leant low over the sofa, and placed a gentle kiss between his lover's eyes. Mycroft smiled from ear-to-ear. "Don't go anywhere," Greg murmured. "Pick a DVD while I'm out? I'm not sleepy yet."

"Alright." Mycroft watched him go, glowing. "Greg?"

Greg looked back in the door, adjusting his collar. "Mm?"

"Don't be long."

Greg's heart twisted a little. "I won't," he promised.

As he stepped onto the platform, hollow-stomached, he found a number of people waiting there - a few office workers, shattered and clutching briefcases; a group of pepped-up party-goers, chatting and laughing amongst themselves; a young couple kissing goodnight before their tube arrived. He'd wrapped her up in his coat to keep her warm. She was gazing up at him, stroking his jaw, like nobody else existed in the world. Greg's heart slowed at the sight of them.

He drifted over to the tube map to wait, feigning interest in the poster.

He could not suppress the awareness that a monster was about to appear.

Any moment now, he would be meeting one of those people - those shadows, whose faces Myke had glimpsed in the darkness - those professionals whose trade of choice was human pain.

He bit the side of his tongue, sliding his phone from his pocket out of habit.

*Wednesday 1st June*

21.14

*Cloudy & Dry*

He had no signal down here.
It made him feel strangely afraid.

As he eased the phone back into his pocket, he became aware that someone had entered his presence. A figure had come to check the tube map beside him.

Greg paused, lowering his eyes.

When the man beside him spoke, it was barely audible. "You Greg?" he said. It could have been missed as a cough, a murmur.

Greg screwed up his courage, dry-mouthed; he turned his head to look.

Some thug, he thought, his heart pounding - hard-faced, a broken nose and blue eyes, anywhere in age from thirty to fifty - zipper jacket and a Sports Direct t-shirt. It was the kind of cragged, unhappy face that the East End threw up in abundance - the sort of man that Cindy had loved to humiliate him with. Someone unworthy, devious and grotty. He was the kind Greg's father would have called 'a solid-gold gent', who wouldn't hesitate to use a fist to keep a woman in her place.

For a long time Greg looked at him, cold, committing every single detail to memory.

"Yeah," he said, at last.

The guy gave him a thin smile, smug. "You got something for me?"

The accent was Hackney through-and-through - a fellow East End boy. Greg pushed his tongue into his cheek, loathing him from his head to the soles of his shoes.

"The photos," he said.

The man's small eyes gleamed. "Digital, ain't they? Not got 'em with me, mate."

"Then how am I supposed to know they're deleted?"

The ugly smile widened a little. "We will."

'We' was not good - nor was that piggy, shrewd little smirk. Greg kept both thoughts from his face, cool.

"I'm meant to rely on that, am I?" he said. "No offence, mate. But you're not the sort I usually trust."

The guy shrugged, loose. "Take it or leave it."

"Delete them," Greg said, cold, "or what the fuck am I paying you for - the company?"

"Fine. Consider 'em gone. If," the man said, cocking his head, "you got something for me."

Greg envisioned, briefly, how much strength it would take to push him onto the tracks. The element of surprise would help. If he was quick and timed it right, none of the others would have time to intervene. CCTV would catch him doing it from a hundred angles - he would spend several years inside for it - but it would be done.

He couldn't do that to Myke.

He let go of the thought, exhaling it away.
He extracted a folded envelope from his coat pocket, as bile rose in the back of his throat.

"That all of it?" the man said, eyeing the envelope.

It was Greg's turn to shrug. "Check it," he said, as he handed it over. "Show the cameras nice and clear. I'm sure they've had a good look at your face already."

The man's eyes narrowed, crumpling it away inside his jacket at once. "If this is a single quid short..."

Greg raised an eyebrow. "You'll what?"

The dismissive snort reminded him deeply of his father. "S'your funeral, fella."

"You'll kill me, will you? For a quid."

"No," the guy grunted. "We'll just make sure the whole world knows that you're a filthy little fucker, that's all. Me... I'd rather be dead."

"Good," Greg murmured. "Because Mycroft's going to find you."

The guy hesitated, disarmed. His eyes flickered with unease.

"And he's going to obliterate you when he does." Greg lifted his chin, staring into the slouched little eyes. "He'll burn you alive - and he'll burn you slow. I know you're small-time, pal... I know the look of you. I've seen your type a thousand times before. You're a low-life, and you got lucky - once. Got your hands on some dirt. You won't again. So take your money, delete the photos, and leave us alone."

He leant closer.

"And if you contact me again," he murmured, "I'll watch Mycroft tie you to a pyre for me. He won't just make you sorry. He'll make you an example."

The man said nothing, looking uneasy.

"Now go," Greg snarled.

The uneven jaw set. "Don't think so," the man grunted. "You gonna follow me, huh? I ain't dumb."

He jerked his head towards the exit, eyes glinting. "You first. And take your time about it - let me see you go. Skip off home to your cock jockey."

Greg laughed, cold.

"'Cock jockey', huh? Thought it'd be stronger than that... c'mon. I know you can do better."

He tilted his head, crossing his arms.

"How about 'queer'?" he said. "Simple and straightforward. Or 'shirt-lifter' - that's going out of fashion, right? I still kinda like it. And there's 'pillow-biter'... hated that one until I tried it. Now it's growing on me."

The guy took a step back, unnerved.

"Whatever." He started to back away, slow. "You stay there. If I catch you following me - "
Greg sneered, staying right where he was. "Don't flatter yourself, tosspot... Mycroft Holmes moved in with me last Saturday. I'm not following you."

With one last grimace, the guy turned and left. He vanished into the tunnel from the platform, his head down, shoulders hunched, five-hundred-pounds crushed in an envelope in his pocket.

Greg hoped he spent it on something that killed him.

There came a rush of air - the great out-breath that marked an approaching train. Greg breathed with it, listening to it advance through the tunnel towards the platform. He closed his eyes a moment.

*Done.*

*Over.*

'We' wasn't something he'd wanted to hear. But all things considered, it could have been worse - there were professionals, and there were *professionals*. The guy had been neither. A boil on the arse of mankind, maybe - but of all the scary characters to come across, this douche was ten-a-penny. A troll who got his hands on some gold, Greg thought. An ugly problem that was now dealt with.

However he'd gotten the photos, they were gone now - and it was finished.

Greg waited a minute more, watching the young couple wave goodbye to each other through the window. As the train headed off, he turned up his collar and made his way from the platform, heading back above ground with a weary tread.

He stopped at the newsagents on the way home - bought a pack of cigarettes, a Galaxy bar, and a newspaper.

The flat was quiet as he let himself back in. He couldn't hear a DVD playing.

"Myke?" he called, as he locked the door.

There was no reply.

Greg pulled off his coat with a frown, hung it on the back of the door, and headed through to the lounge.

It was empty; the TV was switched off. A half-empty glass of wine had been abandoned on the coffee table.

"Myke?" he called again, concerned.

Leaving the cigarettes, the chocolate and the paper on the table, he made his way to the bathroom - the door was open, and the light was out.

As he turned around, he caught the glow of candlelight from the bedroom door. His heart quickened. He approached, slowly, and glanced through the doorway.

As he appeared, Mycroft stretched a little beneath the sheets; the smile was almost feline.

"There you are," Myke said.

The knot of fear loosened in Greg's chest. He grinned, relieved, and stepped through the bedroom
"I said I wasn't sleepy," he murmured, his pulse picking up a little.

Myke's eyes glittered in the light of candles on the bedside. "Nor am I."

"I got your chocolate for you."

"Did you?" Mycroft stirred, tilting his head against the pillow. "Bring it to bed."

Greg laughed, grinning; Mycroft smiled too. His eyes shone bright in the darkness.

"This is our sixth night together," Greg said, as he approached the bed.

"Are you tired of me yet?"

"Don't… ever say that." Greg sat down on the edge of the mattress, gazing at the example of human perfection now lying naked in his bed - *our bed*, he thought. He brushed his fingertips through Mycroft's hair, and his lover's eyes gently closed. "You're… so beautiful. I'm the luckiest son-of-a-bitch in the world."

Mycroft sighed with joy. He stretched once more beneath the sheets.

"Lie down with me," he murmured. "Please."

Greg smiled, pushing off his shoes. He left them by the bed, lifted up the sheets and eased himself beneath, shuffling over to join the warm and entirely naked body that drew itself so willingly into his arms.

They kissed as Myke gently stripped him of his clothing - slowly undoing buttons and belt, parting fabric, easing it away until they were skin-on-skin, no barriers between, and Myke was shivering reflexively in his arms. He coaxed Myke onto his back, hushing him, cradling his face in his hands as they kissed in the candlelight.

*Cock jockey*, he thought.

What a world - where some washed-up, grubby-fingered toad from Hackney thought he had the right to throw insults at Mycroft Holmes.

As he kissed Mycroft's throat, trailing soft kisses along the paths that he knew well, listening to Myke's faint whimpers of pleasure, Greg hoped the money was already spent. May it keep the toser warm. If it bought him a fraction of happiness like this - even for five minutes - it was more than he'd ever deserve.

"Greg..." Myke's voice came tight in the darkness. "Oh - …"

"I love you," he breathed. Mycroft gave a full body shiver, overcome for a moment. His hands gripped gently at Greg's shoulder blades, needing him, weak beneath him.

"God…" Myke swallowed, flushing. "Greg?"

"Mm?" He flicked his tongue softly behind Mycroft's ear, adoring the shudder it produced. "M'here… I'm right here."

Mycroft stirred; his breath shallowed. "Take me. Please."
Greg eased his hands gently lower beneath the sheets, following the long, smooth lines of Myke's sides.

"You want me inside you?" he murmured. Myke's desperate quiver was answer enough. He reached for the bedside, still kissing Myke's neck. He didn't need to look. The oil was right where they'd left it last night. He closed his hand around it, uncapped it with his thumb, and drew back the sheets.

Myke breathed slowly as Greg coaxed him with his fingers - the flush in his cheeks deepening, and darkening, and his moans rising softly in pitch. At last, as three were easing in and out of his body, he shuddered and reached down between his parted thighs, catching Greg's hand - his fingers curled tight around Greg's wrist. His head fell back into the pillows and he swallowed. He began to rock down on his lover's hand, easing on his fingers like a toy. Pleasure wracked his features. Greg clenched his free hand firmly in the sheets, forcing himself to breathe.

"Oh, God…" Mycroft shivered suddenly, tightening. "P-Please…"

"Shhh…" Greg leant down to kiss him, hush him with his lips, even as he eased Myke's thighs gently apart and pushed close to him, nuzzling his cock carefully into place. "Now…?"

"N-Now - ..." Myke's mouth opened at the first gentle push, gasping. "Ohh - God ..."

It was so easy, Greg thought - so familiar now, so comfortable with each other, so good - no pain - no discomfort. Only pleasure. Myke responded to his every touch as if nothing in the world had ever felt so perfect before. This rhythm - this gentle ebb and flow they had found together, their favourite way, steady and slow thrusts - it was a heartbeat deeper than his heartbeat. When there was this, there was only Mycroft - only his lover, and the desperate signs of pleasure that he gave: whimpers of Greg's name, the tremor of his thighs and gentle pleas for more, the fretful arch of his back against the mattress.

"S-Soon - …" Myke gasped, his expression twisting as Greg pushed inside him - white, Greg thought. Pure and perfect. That pleasure no-one else could find. "Oh God - "

"Come," he breathed. He eased himself deep, holding himself within Myke's body as he reached down, wrapping his hand around the swollen erection pinned between their stomachs - gripping, slowly and steadily pulling in rhythm. "Come around me… full of me."

Mycroft jerked, his breath hitching. "Full of you - ..."

"Full of my prick," he soothed. He could feel his breath shallowing - that soul-deep coil winding tighter and tighter. Myke's whimpers alone were going to tip him over the edge. "Full of all of me."

Myke bucked down against him. "I - I… o-oh Greg... "

Three more strokes, and a last gentle rock of his hips - Myke stiffened and sobbed and stretched, twisting beneath him, whimpering his climax as frantic heat ruptured between Greg's fingers, wet and slick. Greg shuddered with it, panting. Myke's body gripped and pulsed around him and he arched his head back, his last few shreds of control swept away from him. He couldn't wait. He sheathed himself, deep and slow, swallowing with desperation as he felt Myke grind gently back against him, wanting him to come - easing him that last little bit of the way.

The feeling sizzled through him, and the white wave washed him clean.

As he came round in his afterglow, he found Mycroft stroking his hair.
"Holy God..." he managed, thick-throated. Myke gave a low chuckle and a sigh, stirring beneath him.

"Mm..."

"How does that get better every time...?"

"Every time, I'm twice as attracted to you..." Mycroft stretched beneath him, giving a faint shiver. "Hold me?"

They wrapped together beneath the sheets, as closely as they could. Greg hadn't worn anything in bed for five nights now - this made the sixth. In the morning, they would have their sixth breakfast together. Then, after work, he would cook their seventh dinner and wait for Myke to get home.

For a while, there was quiet - the afterglow, each other and the candlelight.

Greg realised a lump was forming in his throat.

He swallowed around it, wondering what it was.

It was happy ever after, he realised - the thought that it was all okay, and that he was loved. There would always be someone to wake up beside. Someone to miss him. He hadn't even felt like this on his wedding day.

It was monumental.

It felt like it just might be everything.

He brushed through Myke's hair with his fingertips, unafraid to let them shake. Myke gently pressed a kiss beneath his jaw.

"Need to tell my sister," Greg found himself saying, in a rush. The sudden clarity was almost as powerful as orgasm; it left him close to tears. "I - want her to know..." He swallowed. "She worries I'm lonely. I need her to know I'm not."

"I'll be here," Mycroft promised. He cupped Greg's jaw, reaching up to kiss him. "I'll be right here."
Monday morning. Greg hummed as he locked the door of his car, admiring her for a moment with the coffees balanced in the crook of his arm. He'd not decided what to call her yet. Myke had suggested Alva - it was growing on him.

"Morning!" came a call from across the car park. Sally was stepping out of her Citroen, beaming from ear to ear.

"Morning," he grinned. "Good weekend?"

"Top notch," she said, locking her door and walking towards him. As she appeared from behind his car, he realised she too was carrying coffees. They laughed - identical Costa orders, even down to the size.

"How's your sister?" he asked as they headed up the stairs together.

"She's great." Sally's eyes flashed as she smiled. "They... got a letter on Saturday. Straight onto the adoption register. Social services are going to start looking for matches."

He grinned, bumping her on the arm. "Auntie Sally."

"Can you… tell him from all of us - "

"I will."

"Seriously Greg… you can't imagine - "

"I can. He's getting good at miracles." He keyed in the building's security code, casting her a look of amusement. "See? I'm smiling on a Monday. Who knew that was ever gonna happen?"

"I'm glad he makes you happy." She held the door open for him. "I mean it. It's... really good to see."

Greg smothered his grin. "Yeah... I'm glad, too. C'mon. Let's find out what carnage has befallen London in our weekend's absence."

They left the flat at half eight on Tuesday to discover the landing below piled high with boxes.

"Mrs Dobson must be going," Greg remarked - he couldn't say he was sad. He wouldn't miss the baby, anyway. "Wonder if the place is bigger than mine… maybe I'll move down."

"It's been taken already," Mycroft said.

Greg looked around in surprise. "Really? How do you know?"

Mycroft gave him a refined smile. He was immaculately attired for work, not a hair astray. The memory of his more disheveled state this morning in the shower would stay with Greg all day.

"Your new neighbour will be rather stoic and unsociable, I'm afraid," Mycroft said. "And he certainly won't come with a crying baby. A large arsenal of firearms and a wide array of martial arts training, perhaps... but not a baby."
Greg's eyebrows lifted slowly. "Security?" he said.

"Yes." Mycroft paused, checking his expression. "Yuri is the height of discretion. You shan't even know he's there."

"Yuri," Greg said. He did his best not to find it funny. "So... he won't be popping up for sugar, then."

"No. He shan't."

Greg pressed his tongue into his cheek, mischievous. "Is he cute?"

Mycroft's eyes flared darkly. "He's six-foot-five and can kill a man at three-hundred feet - which is the sole reason I employ him."

"Right." Greg smiled. "Well, I'll... get him a pot plant, then. Bottle of wine."

Mycroft ran his tongue behind his teeth. He idled his way back along the landing towards Greg, past the open boxes of pots, pans and children's toys, his coat hem swaying around his knees with each step.

He slid his hands either side of Greg's waist. With one firm push, he eased his lover back against the wall.

"You'll be astonished to discover that I don't handle jealousy well," he murmured, as he pinned Greg in place.

"Really?" Greg grinned, feeling his heart rate accelerate. "Then it's a good job I'm in love with you."

Mycroft's expression was a perfect mixture of adoration and displeasure. He pressed their foreheads together, surveying Greg intently across half an inch of space.

"Yuri's place will be a floor below us, unseen," he intoned. "Your place is rather more immediately below or above me, and never the two shall meet. I hope this arrangement of things suits you."

Greg smiled, resting his hands at Mycroft's waist.

"I couldn't care less who's in the flat below," he murmured. "You know that. As long as you're in mine."

Mycroft smiled a little, somewhat placated. His eyes flickered to Greg's mouth.

"Do not fuck Yuri," he warned.

"Alright. What's the Russian for 'do not look at me, Yuri, Mr Holmes will have your eyes'...?"

"Ne trogatyte menya, Yuri. Mr Holmes povredit vam glaza." The Russian flowed from Myke's lips as easily as if he'd spoken it all morning, faultless and husked. "Although," he noted, switching without a beat, "considering that he holds a double-first from Cambridge in Mathematics and Philosophy, his English is as good as yours or mine... he's also paid more than most financial executives."

A memory stirred in Greg's mind - a man on a folded chair, guarding a penthouse suite door.

"Does Yuri read Classic Cars?" he asked.
Alarm sharpened Mycroft's stare. "Precisely how concerned should I be?" he inquired.

Greg grinned, shaking his head. He raked his fingers up into Mycroft's hair, scruffing it onto end.

"Not," he said. "Not at all. Not for a second. I'm crazy in love with you and I couldn't give two fucks about anyone else. You've installed security under my flat. That's basically a proposal. So the answer's yes, Myke... I will. You get the marquee, I'll book the band, Sherlock'll give us both away and you can introduce me to the queen over vol-au-vants."

He pulled Mycroft close.

"You're all I ever wanted," he murmured. "Throw as many heavily-armed Russians at me as you want. I'll hurl them all aside to get to you."

Mycroff breathed in, slowly. His eyes burned into Greg's.

"You joke," he said. There was something in his expression that Greg had never seen there before. It looked profound. "You're - being facetious with me."

"Some of it," Greg murmured, "yeah." He stroked his mouth over Myke's. "Sorry I've messed up your hair, treacle."

Myke ran his tongue behind his teeth with a stifled laugh. "Mm... fix it for me in the car."

"I will," Greg promised. "Can't send you off to work like a scruff."

Mycroft's eyes flared. "Dinner?" he said, gazing at Greg, searching his face.

"It's half eight, Myke. Just had my weetabix."

"Tonight," Mycroft said, amused. "Dinner... together." He nuzzled for Greg's lips. "Let me take you out."

Greg felt his chest tingle. He responded weakly to the soft stroke of kisses across his mouth. "Didn't you have - tonight - ?"

Mycroft groaned. "Bugger... cabinet meeting..." His hands eased beneath the hem of Greg's shirt, stroking up onto his chest. "Tomorrow, then."

Greg arched a little into the hands, his pulse hitching.

"Gas safety inspection," he managed. "Any time between six and nine."

Myke persisted, kissing him. "Thursday."

"Work drinks," Greg said. "Paul's retiring. Have to show my face."

"Heaven preserve us. Friday, then..."

"Friday," Greg said. He smiled, shivering a little as Myke's hands soothed back down his chest, withdrawing from beneath his shirt. "I... think that's a date."

"I think it just might be," Mycroft said. He passed a hand backwards over his hair, attempting to smooth it flat. "Did you like The Nightingale?"

A private room, full of candles - a chef who knew Mycroft by name - wine that tasted like someone
had corked what it felt like to fall in love. They'd played with each other's fingers over the table, talking and flirting as if no-one had ever hurt them before. Mycroft had spent every second of that night fucking Greg with his eyes. It had been less a meal, more like three solid hours of foreplay.

Even if they'd eaten nothing, it would have been the best night of Greg's life - if not for the manilla envelope that had then ruined everything.

It was days since he'd thought about that, he realised. Already it seemed like something that had happened to someone else, a long time ago.

"The Nightingale?" he said. "Sure... that'd be amazing. Are you certain?"

Mycroft smiled, pleased. "The Nightingale it is. Only... don't let me drink quite so much this time, will you? I barely remember getting home."

Greg grinned, hiding his unease. "Yeah... let's make that for two..."

As they got into the car, Mycroft tended to his hair in the rear-view mirror. Greg smiled to himself, starting the engine.

"Can you text in cabinet meetings?" he asked, as they set off.

"Urgent matters only, of course."

"Does me being bored and alone count as 'urgent'?"

"Naturally."

"Good." Greg grinned, switching on the radio. John Mayer's Your Body Is A Wonderland - he liked this one. He sang along, softly, as they drove towards Whitehall. Mycroft sat beside him in the passenger seat, quietly amused, answering e-mails on his phone.

They were almost there when a thought occurred.

"Why Yuri?" Greg asked, with interest.

"Slavic form of George," Mycroft said. "Originally, 'he who works the land'... his family are from Saratov. Father is ex-KGB."

"No, I mean why now? You've been staying with me for weeks, and never had him there... unless he was hiding in my laundry hamper the whole time."

"He would not fit. I assure you." Mycroft pocketed his phone. "My security have noted a minor increase in the traffic surrounding my name... nothing substantial, but it can't hurt to return to best practice."

Greg felt something cold and quiet slither down the back of his neck.

"An increase in - ...?"

"Inquiries about me. Online chatter. Likely linked to Sherlock’s latest triumph... that nonsense with the Crossword Builder. Do you still read John's blog?"

"My... own life's mental enough these days. I don't need Sherlock's antics to keep me entertained. So, you mean - people are looking into you? Like - dangerous people?"
They'd come to a stop in a secluded side street near Whitehall, facing the locked back entrance of a restaurant. Mycroft regarded him with a small smile, one hand on the car door.

"As a rule," he said. "Yes. Frankly I'd be concerned if they weren't looking into me."

"And there's - been more of that lately?"

"Not an unusual occurrence," Mycroft said. "These things tend to ebb and flow... a small spike of interest is no cause for concern."

Correctly interpreting the look on Greg's face, he added,

"This is... quite ordinary. Parr for the course. It's certainly nothing for you to dwell on. I pay professionals to do that for you."

Greg managed a smile, still unconvinced. "You're safe though... right?"

Mycroft lifted an eyebrow at him, bemused. "We are safe," he said. He opened the door. "Don't fall asleep without me. I shan't be later than ten."

"Alright... have a good day. Text me."

Mycroft leant over, cupping Greg's jaw with one hand. He kissed him, gently; Greg caught his hand.

They kissed a little longer - stolen, perfect seconds.


Mycroft opened the car door. A moment later, it had slammed and he was gone - striding away down the alleyway between two shops, the swish of the umbrella timed to his steps. Greg watched him go.

He felt strangely small for a few moments.

He told himself it was nothing - just the usual pang of goodbye.

He reversed Alva back down the side street.

"You're quite certain it said Wednesday?"

"Yes! I swear the letter's here somewhere... and it definitely said Wednesday. Six until nine. I remember."

"You need a filing system," Mycroft said, searching fruitlessly through the receipts, bills, statements and circulars that filled Greg's kitchen drawer. "This was inevitable."

It was Wednesday - half past nine, and no gas engineer had appeared. A long evening of not having sex for fear of the doorbell had come to a close, with Greg on hold to the gas company and Mycroft excavating through two years of correspondence.

"This is a ball-ache," Greg said, rubbing his forehead as a crackly version of Can't Fight The Moonlight played in his ear. "We could have gone out to dinner..."
Mycroft removed another sheath of assorted papers from the drawer, sifting through them in bewilderment.

"There are instruction manuals here for electronica you no longer own…"

"... so? I might need them."

"In what possible eventuality could you need instructions in German for a microwave that went out of manufacture five years ago?"

"I don't know," Greg admitted. "But the day it happens, I'll be ready."

The music suddenly stopped in his ear. He held up a hand.

"Hello?" he tried.

There was a pause.

"We apologise for keeping you waiting. All our operators are busy right now. Please hold the line, and we'll - "

"Bollocks," Greg sighed. He leant against the fridge.

Mycroft was still shuffling through papers, shaking his head.

"At least some sort of chronological order," he marvelled, almost to himself. "Surely that would suggest itself as a very basic system..."

"Yeah, this is why I'm in Violent Crime," Greg said. "Not Admin. Domestic organisation's not my strong point."

"Clearly," Mycroft remarked.

Greg's phone suddenly burst forth with a bored female voice in its early twenties.

"- for calling customer services... my name is Amy, how can I help you..."

"Hi," he said, startled. "I've been waiting on a gas engineer all night to come and do a safety check at my flat, but there's been no sign. Wondered if you could chase that up for me."

Amy could barely restrain her enthusiasm. "Yes of course... I'd be happy to," she intoned. "Can I take your account number?"

Greg's brain short-circuited.

"My... account number," he said, staring across the kitchen at Mycroft, who gestured him graciously toward the chaos of the open drawer. "Erm... can I offer you my name instead? How's that?"

"Sorry. I need your account number."

"Right." Greg wondered if he could just live without gas and central heating. It might be easier. "So - I don't have that information immediately to hand..."

She suppressed a sigh. "Well, if you want to give us a call back when you have the details... and there's another number you can ring to find those out, if you don't know them... do you have a
"Could you just… put me through to that other number?"

"Sorry. I'm not able to do that. The number is 0845 - "

" - wait - hang on - " Greg scrabbled across to the table, grabbing a stray piece of paper from by the cereal boxes. She was marching on through the phone number with brutal efficiency. "'Scuse me, could you just - "

Mycroft appeared at his side, holding out a pen.

Greg took it. "Thanks," he said, then turned back to the phone. "Okay, hello? Excuse me - can you start that number again? I've got a pen now, I'm ready to - "

Mycroft had reached out a hand.

He tapped, mutely, at the piece of paper Greg was trying to scribble the number on.

It was the letter from the gas company. Greg blinked, reading the first line. *Dear Mr Inspector Lestrade, this is to confirm your appointment with our gas engineer from 6pm to 9pm on Wednesday 15th June. Please ensure that the property is accessible and…*

Greg looked again at the date.

Today was the eighth.

He hung up on Amy and her third attempt at giving him the number.

Mycroft uttered a sigh, saying not a word as Greg returned the phone to his pocket.

"So… good news," Greg said. "We have not missed our gas safety appointment."

Mycroft looked as if he wasn't sure whether to throttle him, hug him or fuck him.

"... and I now know my account number," Greg added, holding up the letter.

"Well, thank goodness," Mycroft said, tart as a third-place jam at a village fête.

Greg winced. He braced for further impact, suspecting he was going to have to negotiate his way back into his own bed tonight. "Sorry," he said. "I… messed up. Could have sworn it was this week..."

"How exactly did you become a detective?" Mycroft asked him, fascinated. "Was it collecting coupons from cereal boxes? Or did you complete a sticker album?"

Greg felt the tips of his ears wither slightly.

"I'd... say I must have filled a recruitment quota somewhere," he mumbled. "But I wasn't gay at the time, so..."

Mycroft processed this, his head on one side. "You have been idiotic," he said. "Acknowledge that."

"Yeah, that's... fair to say..."
"You've forced me to endure an evening fully-clothed and entirely sober."

"I know... I'm sorry."

"Tomorrow, you will buy a calendar and magnetise it to the fridge. It can then serve as your brain in the event that yours stops working."

Greg tried an apologetic smile. "The frequent event?"

"Hopefully less so from now on..."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

"I know you didn't," Mycroft said. His expression softened at last, reluctant to relinquish his annoyance but unable to do so in the face of Greg's puppy-dog eyes. He gave a small smile, his eyes brightening. "Now, come here."

They hugged beside the open drawer. Mycroft rubbed his back, petting him with the fondness one would have for a wayward Labrador who'd just knocked over the bins.

"Am I at least your idiot?" Greg asked him, repentant.

Mycroft smiled against his temple. "I never said you were an idiot," he murmured. "I said you had been idiotic - a temporary state, one now restored to balance."

"I'll buy a calendar. I promise."

"His & His?"

Greg smiled a little, softening. He was enjoying Myke's hands on his back. "Murder investigations next to two AM nuclear negotiations with China," he said. "Could only be ours."

Mycroft gave a soft chuckle and a sigh, brushing a little of his hair back on itself.

"This... *domesticity* is... rather addictive," he marked.

Greg smiled. "I know," he said. He kissed Myke's shoulder. "Thank you for putting up with me. I'm always on the ball when it counts."

"You are," Mycroft admitted, fond. He nuzzled at Greg's ear. "Shall I handle tedious but vital admin from now on?"

Greg thought about it.

It would mean handing over a lot of power. For two years since the divorce, he'd done all that himself. It had been a hell of a learning curve - and clearly he'd not *mastered* the art of household management yet - but all the same, this didn't feel like that kind of relationship.

He didn't want to be kept.

He looked up at Myke with a half-smile.

"No," he said, to a flicker of surprise. "I know you're better at this stuff, but... you shouldn't have to. We're equal. So I'm gonna step up my game - get a calendar, take a leaf out of your book... I'm sorry I dropped the ball this time. But I'll be on it next time, I promise."
Mycroft's expression was full of wonder. He smiled, thinking something that made him go briefly quiet.

"Good," he said at last, soft. Humour crept into his eyes. "A tasteful calendar. No firemen or kittens."

Greg nodded, thinking. "Wildlife, maybe," he said. "Great views of Berkshire... stately homes."

"Sensible," said Mycroft.

Their eyes glittered together, bemused.

"I love you," Greg said.

He would never get over the look of amazement that caused - the glow of joy. Mycroft for a moment was completely disarmed. He lost half a decade from his face when he heard those words.

"I love you too," he said, marvelling.

Greg grinned, looking down at his feet. "Good. So... now that's done…"

Two minutes later, his back hit the bed. By eleven, Myke had thoroughly forgiven him.

Thinking about you x

The Red Lion was busy for a Thursday night. With most of a Scotland Yard division taking up the tap room, people were shouting to make their orders heard at the bar.

The faint ding of a message in reply was lost in the noise, though Greg felt it vibrate against his chest. He pulled the phone back out of his jacket, pleased.

What are you thinking?

M xxx

He could imagine Myke stretched out on the sofa at home, surrounded by paperwork with a half-watched film playing in the background. He'd responded to the text at once - bored, Greg guessed. Up for distraction.

Greg replied with a smile as he commenced his second pint.

Thinking i can sneak off in twenty… shown my face now. home with you by nine. Horlicks and a book? x

It still made him a little giddy to use that word with Myke. 'Home'. There was no sign of the novelty wearing off. If anything, it only gave him more of a kick each time.

"Greg?"

He looked up as he hit send, surprised to find Sally picking her way through the crowd towards him. His sergeant was in jeans and heels, beaming. She was leading by the hand a woman who Greg had never met, but he recognised at once.

She could only be Sally's sister. Tall and statuesque, with her striking black hair arranged in a veil of braids, Angela had all the confidence of a commercial lawyer - paired with her little sister's smile.
Greg put his phone aside at once, standing up with a grin.

"This is my sister," Sally said, as they reached him. "Angela... this is my DI."

"Inspector Lestrade," Angela said, delighted. She enfolded him into a hug of expensive perfume and genuine warmth. "We meet at last... Sally's told me so much about you."

"God, really? That's a bad start. In that case, you'd better call me Greg."

She laughed. Sally grinned between the two of them, thumbs hooked in her jeans. "Greg's friend is the one who..." she told her sister.

Angela's eyes lit from within. "Yes... I understand that I owe you a rather large drink, Greg..."

"Oh - God," he said, waving his hand, "no. You don't have to do that. Honestly I didn't contribute a thing. He's just... one of those people, you know? Knows a thousand other people..." He grinned, awkwardly, wondering exactly how much Sally had said. "Friends who owe him favours... I dread to think what I owe him by now."

They both laughed. As Greg lifted his pint back to his mouth, he caught a telltale buzz from the inside of his jacket.

"I have to admit," Angela was saying, as the two sisters joined him at the table, "I couldn't quite place the name... Michael Holmes, was it? I'm not sure I remember where we met."

"Mycroft," Greg said, retrieving his phone. "And yeah - but he said you might not remember him. Don't worry about it."

'Horlicks and a book'. Interesting new code.

M xxx

Greg commended himself on not grinning at once. He kept a neutral expression, typing his reply one-handed as Sally peered across the crowd.

"D'you think she needs a hand?" she said.

"No, I think she's alright..." Angela replied. "Here she comes now."

Like netflix and chill but for shattered forty-somethings. I'll show you later how it works. think you'll like it x

Greg glanced up as he hit send.

Kelly from HR - still not called Laura, or Lauren - was winding her way through the crowd. She was expertly carrying three glasses of wine in her gated fingers. How she managed such a feat in a pencil skirt and heels, Greg didn't know. Women were magicians.

As she approached the table, he flashed her a startled smile. He hadn't realised she and Sally knew each other.

"White," Kelly said, placing it with a smile in front of Sally. "And rosé..." For herself, at the empty fourth chair. "And... last but not least... red."

She leant down, kissing Sally's sister unmistakably on the lips. Greg's eyebrows lifted three inches - and then it all fell into place.
"Ohhh," he said, "right! Angie - and the dogs... and you're..." He laughed, shaking his head. "Sorry, I'm a bloody fool. Of course you're Kelly's partner. And you're Sally's - sister-in-law, right? And Sally, you're... saddled with an idiot for a DI. Christ. I never made the connection."

Kelly grinned, settling into a chair beside her wife. Angela gave her a fond look over her glass of red wine.

"I hear a friend of yours is to thank for changing our lives, Greg... and where is he, pray tell? The man needs a significant drink from us this very second."

Angela smiled, brushing her braids back over her shoulder. "I said 'rather large drink', but the sentiment stands..."

Greg grinned, sheepish. "He's not here, m'afraid... I'll pass it on for you, though."

"Oh no, really?" Kelly said. "What a shame... Michael, isn't it?"

"Mycroft," he said. He felt his phone buzz inside his jacket, as if Myke was responding to the sound of his name. It made him smile. "It's unusual, right? I think it's a family tradition - surnames... God knows."

"Sally said he works in politics?"

"Something like that, yeah. Don't ask me what, though. Still can't get my head round it."

"He sounds like a fascinating man," Kelly beamed, running a finger over the curve of her wine glass. "How did you meet?"

Greg smiled, wondering why he felt suddenly so happy. "Work at first," he said. "And I know his brother, so... drinks last Christmas..."

This felt good, he thought - talking about Myke. He was enjoying it.

He was enjoying it a lot.

He liked the thought that their names were linked in people's minds - a unit, a coupling, Greg and Mycroft. He liked that there was a story about how they met. It didn't feel like he was just talking about a friend. It wasn't scaring him as much as he'd thought it would.

He spotted, as he took a drink, that Kelly and Angela wore matching rings - left hand, third finger. The quiet boom of his heart was lost in the packed pub.

"You should have brought him along, Greg," Sally said beside him, casting him a fond smile. "Meet and greet, you know..."

"Yeah," he said - he found himself smiling back at her. It was revelatory, he thought. "Maybe I should."

He looked down into his beer, imagining it: Myke on the chair beside him. Probably brandy, he thought. Work mates at The Red Lion on a Thursday night. Laughing, telling people how they met.

"He's... buried under paperwork right now," he said, with an apologetic grin. "Stuck at home."

Surprise flashed across Kelly's face. "At - ..." HR, he thought. Of course she'd spotted it first. "You - live together?"
Greg's heart contracted as he realised what was about to happen.

He found himself suddenly standing on the verge of a moment that had been coming for nearly thirty years, staring into it, right on the edge. He realised he wasn't afraid.

He looked into Kelly's eyes. *HR*, he thought. Specially trained.

"Yeah," he said. "He's - my partner."

Beside him, Sergeant Donovan smiled into her glass of wine. Kelly's face opened up in delighted surprise.

"Greg, I... didn't realise - "

His heart was pounding faster than if he'd just come. The rush was no smaller, the slight shake in his hand familiar too - and also the joy. The searing, perfect, sailing joy. He covered his nerve with a smile and a mouthful of his pint, feeling like he'd just been ejected at full speed from a cannon.

"I've been... 'don't ask, don't tell' for a while, I suppose," he said. "Just starting to change it."

He smiled.

"He's - important. I'm not out widely though. So... if you could..."

"Not a word," she promised. *God bless HR*, he thought. He would never say another bad word about their binders. "If you - want any advice, you know where my office is."

"I might take you up on that," he smiled. His phone buzzed again in his jacket, insistent. "Sorry - just a second..."

He slid his phone out from his pocket, unlocking it with a flash of his thumb as Sally asked her sister how her day at court had been.

Two messages - one from Myke, one from his sister.

*Shall I dispatch someone to retrieve you?  
I assume you're not planning to drive after two pints.  
M xxx*

"give me another hour? he replied. *Somethings come up. Will explain at home... how do you know Ive had 2 pints? x"

The other message was from Rachel, streaming with her usual hugs and kisses.

*Hey G... hows tricks? Ive got to come to town and do some shopping on sunday, you want to meet me for coffee? Loads of Love xoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxox*

As Greg read the message, still glorying in the rush of his own honesty, he was struck by a flash.

He was going to tell Rachel, he thought. He was going to tell his sister on Sunday.

It was a much steeper step. Telling a couple of work colleagues was one thing. Telling family was another... especially if it got back to his dad.

But it was true what'd he said - Myke *was* important.
Greg was done treating him like a guilty secret.

*Hey squirt, sounds good to me. tell me when and where. Coffees on me x*

He checked his texts again twenty minutes later as he went to the bar, ordering two glasses of wine and another couple of pints. He always knew Sally was in a good mood when she swapped to pints.

*Your grammar, Mycroft had said.*

*Jameson will be there for you at ten. Don't have more than four, will you? You're accompanying me on a date tomorrow... hangover would be unwise.*

*M xxx*

Greg grinned, tapping in a reply.

*Dont worry. you come first x*

*Is that a promise?*

*M xxx*

*Always x*

"Making a break for it?" Sally asked the next day, leaning round his office door at five minutes to five. Greg grinned, snapping the clasps into place on his briefcase.

"Dinner plans for six. Can't hang around. How about you? Anything good on this weekend?"

"Duvet and a box set, I think."

"Score," Greg said.

His desk phone began to ring. He reached for the receiver, glancing down at the caller's ID.

*CHIEF SUP.*

His hand stopped mid-air. *You bastard,* he thought. *Every Friday.*

"Bolt," Sally told him, grinning, as she circled the desk and reached for the phone. "I'll tell him you're out on inquiries."

"You fucking star. See you Monday."

"Alright," she said, picking up the handset. "Lestrade's office. DS Donovan speaking."

Greg took the back stairwell down to the car park two steps at a time. He'd been looking forward to this all week. They were meeting at The Nightingale - only a short drive, and he could pick up the car in the morning.

Or Sunday - maybe even early Monday.

Greg didn't anticipate leaving the flat much this weekend. He would see Rachel for coffee on Sunday, as he'd promised. Otherwise he'd be seeing nobody but Myke.

As he reached the final landing, he keyed in the entry code without thinking. The door clanked and permitted him exit. He swept through, almost colliding with the figure that stood waiting on the other side.
"Yikes! Sorry, mate… maybe don't stand - "

He then realised who it was.

The Hackney thug - with his zipper jacket and his broken nose - treated Greg to a slow, sickening smile.

"Evenin', inspector," he said.
It took Greg several seconds to speak. His throat had dried up into ash.
"What do you want?" he said.

The car park around them was full of vehicles, ready for owners to come and claim at any moment.

His visitor was well aware of this fact. Nothing else could explain that horrifying smile.

"Just thought I'd come for a catch up," the thug said. "Fancy place to work. But then... you know all sorts of fancy folk..."

Greg drew in a long breath. "Cut the crap," he said, "and tell me what you think you're doing here."
The guy shrugged, disappointed, but acquiesced. He slid a pudgy arm inside his sports jacket.

As he withdrew a second manilla envelope, Greg's heart sank to the earth's core.

"No," he said. "I don't think so, mate. You can put that right back."

The thug snorted. "Tryin' to help you, inspector," he said. "Doin' my best to keep your private life private. Think of it as a specialist service I provide."

"It's called blackmail," Greg said, turning white. "That's what it is."

"Call it what you want," the guy said. "Doesn't matter. You'll wanna know the details at least, I'm sure."

He held out the envelope.

"S'for you," he said, tilting it to show Greg the typed address. Inspector G Lestrade. New Scotland Yard. "Hand-delivered... all part of the service."

Greg took the envelope. He snatched it from the guy's hairy-knuckled hand, feeling his chest tightening in bands as he ripped it open, wrenching out the single sheet of paper inside.

The sole photograph had been taken the night before Greg's birthday - Myke, mid-oral sex, gazing disheveled up the length of Greg's torso.

As Greg read the note that was typed beneath, he let out a bark of laughter.

"You can fuck right off," he said. "Are you having a laugh, mate? You think I have fifteen fucking grand?"

"Nope," the thug said, amused. He nodded at the photo. "But he does."

"What, just kicking about the house? Get back on your bus, dickhead." Greg realised he was starting to shake. "This is over."

He pushed past the guy, heading down the stairs with a numb and silent focus.

"Shame," the thug said, loudly. The mocking Hackney accent echoed around the car park - it bounced back at Greg from every concrete wall. "It'll look like a small price to have paid, when
those photos hit the web."

Greg stopped dead. He briefly shut his eyes. *This isn't happening. This isn't fucking happening.*

"I don't have fifteen grand," he said. "That's just - … I haven't got it. I can't pay it."

"Have to ask your pal for a loan then, won't you?" The thug smirked, his tiny eyes boring into Greg with undisguised glee. "Sure you can pay 'im back somehow."

"That's not happening either," Greg said. He squared his jaw, thinking fast. "Put them on the net then, mate. See if I care. There's plenty of porn out there already, and you still won't make a penny."

The thug shook his head - as if Greg were being slow; as if he didn't understand.

"Pretty famous man, your pal… reckon this might even end his career. Who's gonna take him seriously when his cock's all over google? Me, I'd say that's worth a bob or two of anyone's money."

"You're not asking for a bob or two," Greg snarled. "You're asking for fifteen grand. And I'm telling you straight that I don't fucking have it. You're not fucking getting it. Now get out of my car park before I ring my sergeant, tell her to bring the cuffs, and we pitch you into the cells for attempted blackmail."

The piggy eyes narrowed. "This ain't attempted, inspector. This is working."

"It's not, mate. Not one bit. Now fucking beat it before I remember I'm a copper."

The thug gave a dry snort, amused still by something that Greg didn't know.

"See you on the twentieth, then," he said, mildly. He sloped off down the steps. "Platform ten. Written all the details down there for you... wouldn't want you to forget."

Greg drove to The Nightingale in total silence. He was halfway there before the ability to think returned.

Beside him, in Mycroft's empty seat, were two manilla envelopes - one worn, several weeks old; the other newly-received this evening. He'd gone back upstairs to the safe in his office, told Sally some lie about paperwork he needed to do before Monday. He'd barely been conscious of speaking to her. He felt like the walking dead. They were screwed, and he knew it.

A single course of action now laid ahead.

He thought about it as he drove, white-faced, white-knuckled on the wheel, hardly noticing the other cars on the road.

Even vague ideas about alternatives were impossible. He didn't have fifteen grand. He didn't have anything like that. Five hundred had nearly wiped him out. He could do nothing, he supposed - do nothing, and wait for Myke to discover it on his own, when someone sent him to a video of himself getting fucked on the internet. *Oh shit. Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit…*

Could Roy in Computer a Crime do anything? Probably not. Once the footage was released, that would be it. There would be no cornering it back into a cage. Nothing Roy, or anyone else, could do would be able to stop this.
Mycroft Holmes, power of the British government, was about to be cast into ridicule in every single corner of the known world.

Greg had tried to deal with it. He'd tried and he'd failed.

And now he would have to tell Myke.

"Oh, fuck…" he whispered to himself, overwhelmed as he sat in traffic lights ten minutes from the restaurant. The fear was almost blinding. He should have told Myke weeks ago on their birthday. Just sat him on the sofa and said, *we've got a problem*. Why had he hidden it so long? Why had he thought he could handle this? He was a fucking idiot - that was why. He was the dumbest piece of crap that had ever walked the planet, and Myke was going to turn him inside out for it, and he'd deserve it. He'd made everything worse. He'd fucked it all up.

His phone vibrated at his side.

*On your way?*

*M xxx*

"Shit, shit…" Greg placed his forehead on the wheel, breathing hard to try and calm his frantic heart rate. "Don't hate me. Please, *please* don't hate me…"

*Fifteen fucking grand.*

Would Mycroft pay it? Were you even *supposed* to pay blackmailers? Apparently not. But then, what else was there to do, except take the consequences and watch your whole fucking life blown apart?

By the time he pulled up outside The Nightingale, Greg was quite certain he would not be leaving this place alive. Either his own heart was going to kill him, beating itself inside out as it tried to escape from his chest, or Mycroft would do it for him.

He'd meant to get changed when he arrived. In the end, he left the suit bag on the backseat of his car. He watched as the valet drove it away. He couldn't have walked into dinner with Myke like everything was okay and they were fine.

He was already enough of a wanker as it was. Mycroft would never trust him again. It was all over.

The maître d' looked up from a podium as Greg entered the restaurant, now out of breath and feeling horrifically unwell.

"Holmes," Greg said, ignoring the arched and rather contemptuous expression he was given. "Six PM... should be the private room."

The maître d' looked down at his ledger, checking his records as if he'd never heard such a thing in his life. Three weeks ago, Greg had watched the guy fawn and simper over Mycroft like he were royalty, guiding them with luxurious discretion to the private dining suite as if nothing could have pleased him so much in the world. Without Myke beside him, Greg was being treated for what he was - some rat from the East End in an M&S suit.

He watched, savagery rising, as the maître d' finally found the reservation. The pinched face opened in alarm.

"I - yes, sir - of course. I have you right here. Please - allow me to show you through to the suite straightaway…"
Greg knew the way. He followed the maître d' nonetheless, still holding his briefcase and the two manilla envelopes.

This was it, he thought. It was all about to happen - whatever it was.

As the door opened, Mycroft looked up from the candlelit table - resplendent in pale grey, no tie and Greg's cufflinks. He had his mobile phone held idly in one hand.

He started to smile - then caught sight of Greg's disheveled work clothes. His expression faltered.

"I - thought you were going to change?" he said.

Greg's heart fell. *I thought so, too.*

"I'm really sorry," he said. "I - got caught up at work..." He almost started to tell some lie about the Chief Super, then remembered where lying had gotten him so far. He jumped as a waiter started to relieve him of his coat. "Oh - right, thanks…"

The waiter pulled the coat off for him, taking it away into the back. Greg sat down at the table in a state of near-hypnosis, barely seeing the world around him - the candles, the cutlery, Myke's pale grey silk.

Mycroft stared at him in alarm as he threw his briefcase under the table like they were at Pizza Hut. An eagle-eyed waiter stepped forward and took it, spiriting it away into the back without a word. Another member of staff began to pour the wine. Beneath the tablecloth, Greg held on tight to the two envelopes in his hand - he didn't dare let them go.

Mycroft was studying him intently across the table. He did not seem to like what he saw.

"What is wrong?" he inquired, his voice low, as the wine waiter bowed and stepped back from the table.

Greg picked up the glass in a shaking hand.

He emptied it without taking a breath.

"Greg," Mycroft said, astonished. In that single syllable Greg heard everything they'd shared, everything they'd become, and everything they were about to lose. He put the glass down.

"I'm sorry," he said. It was the only possible place to begin.

Mycroft stared at him, pale, his eyes sharp as blades.

The wine waiter stepped forward to refill Greg's glass.

"Either you were involved in a massive multi-vehicle car crash on the way here," Mycroft murmured, his tone like ice, "or there's something you're about to explain to me."

As the wine waiter stepped back, Greg drained the second glass.

Mycroft visibly pressed his tongue into his cheek. He addressed the room at large.

"Might I have five minutes alone with my partner? We'll call when we're ready to begin."

The staff, as one, filed out in silence. The door shut with a snap behind them.
There was quiet for a moment.

"What in God's name is wrong?" Mycroft said in the silence.

Greg put down the empty glass. He gazed at Myke across the table for a few moments - perfect in grey silk and the candlelight, the source of all Greg’s happiness and contentment for half a year.

Perhaps it had never been possible, he thought. All just a game - one he'd always been fated to lose. Just an East End boy.

Just a chancer.

He didn't belong in this world - private suites and blackmail letters. He'd tried to be in it, and he'd failed. Now it was about to burn them both to bone and ash and dust.

He could think of only three words.

"I love you," he managed.

A fissure of anger flickered across Mycroft's features.

"Explain ," he breathed, "or I will leave, and you can explain to my voicemail."

Greg's heart broke. He could not speak.

In response, he laid the envelopes down upon the table.

For a long time, Mycroft merely looked at them - regarding them the way he would have considered a live snake cast down upon the table-cloth.

As he finally reached for the envelopes, Greg hung his head. He couldn't watch.

In his peripheral vision, he watched Myke study each of them in turn - the address; the broken seals; the ragged corners of one and the crisp edges of the other. It took no more than a few seconds. At last, Myke tugged free the sheath of printed paper that had blown Greg's life to pieces three weeks ago.

He unfolded it.

There was a long, awful silence.

By the time he reached the third photo, Mycroft's hands had begun to shake.

As he reached the last one he put them aside, deathly silent, and ripped open the envelope that Greg had been handed not one hour ago. He unfolded the paper inside. He read the message.

Eons went by in the silence. Epochs began and ended. Twice, Greg wondered if he'd maybe even died - if this was it - if he would be stuck in this moment in eternity, the very second his life had come to a total and utter stop. This was hell, and he would never leave it.

When Mycroft spoke, it was in a voice of frozen steel.

"First of June," he said.

Greg did not reply. He felt like he was about to vomit.
"When did the first of these letters arrive?" Mycroft asked.

Greg swallowed; the words came out barely audible. "My birthday," he said.

Mycroft's hands twitched violently. He folded up the paper, shaking as he did. "Halfway around the world by now," he bit out. His voice gave its first, unhealable crack. "Mother of God, Greg - how could you - "

"I thought I could fix it," Greg managed, his voice tight. "I - thought I could make it go away..."

"You paid this first amount?"

"Yes - but then - "

Mycroft covered his face. "We could have trailed them. Agents - camera surveillance - marked notes - I have legions of paid professionals who - …" He seized up, shuddering. "Instead, you've - kept this from me - for three weeks - and now - "

"I'm sorry - "

Mycroft was standing up.

"Myke, I'm sorry - I should have - I thought if I just got rid of the phone, then everyth-"

Mycroft sharpened suddenly, rounding on him. "Excuse me?"

"If I just - ..." Greg faltered, realising. It was too late now. "... just - destroyed it - then they wouldn't be able to - "

Horror dawned on Mycroft's face. "You purposely - "

"To make it stop," Greg moaned. "To stop them watching us. I didn't - "

"Some of these pictures are months old," Mycroft breathed. He'd turned as white as the tablecloth; he was shaking almost too hard to speak. "You've been monitored since I was in China. And now you - ... you - "

For a second, Greg thought Myke was about to hit him - to haul him up by his collar, slam him against the glass window beside their table and hurl him through it onto the diners below. Greg almost wanted him to. He deserved it. He deserved every broken bone and every shard of glass.

"You should have TOLD me!" Mycroft raged, finally shouting at him. "You should have come to me the second these - ... do you have no TRUST in me whatsoever?"

"I just - ... I didn't - ... and things were going so well and I just - "

Mycroft snatched the papers off the table and ripped through them, furious, his face contorting.

"These are all me," he seethed. "There's not one with your face to - ... God damn it, Greg. I'm meant to be unassailable. A political force. A machine. Now I'm - "

He put his hands over his face. The silence that fell was irrevocable.

When he spoke again, it was with a sudden and lethal calm.

"In three weeks," he said, "you have achieved what some of this planet's most dangerous organised
forces have been trying to do for twenty-five years. You have ruined me."

He turned to leave.

Greg staggered to his feet. "Myke - "

Mycroft reached for the door.

"Myke, please - ... " Greg grabbed for him. His hand closed on Myke's arm. "Please just - "

The punch came out of nowhere. Greg reeled with the force of it, stumbling backwards into the table and hitting the ground in an avalanche of cutlery, plates and glasses. Pain whited out his entire jaw. For the first few seconds, he was sure it was broken. Nothing else could cause pain like this.

Staff appeared, trying to help him out of the wreckage. He could not see. He could not breathe with the force of the strike.

As he fought his way free from the table-cloth and their attempts at help, he felt like his jaw was hanging off. He staggered towards the door still swinging on its hinges.

He banged through it, panicking.

Mycroft, up ahead, was leaving through the main door at speed.

"MYCROFT! " Greg shouted. Through in the restaurant, every single head jerked around in alarm.

Mycroft did not look back. He pushed through the front door and was gone.

Greg felt his knees give way. Two waiters took him under each arm, forcing him back into the private room without resistance. The maître d' arrived to calm him, insisting that this behaviour could not be permitted. He was disturbing other diners. Greg did not fight. He let them steer him back into the room and lower him into a chair.

The general manager of the restaurant arrived not long after with a first aid kit. As the staff painfully cleared up the mess all around, the manager examined Greg's jaw. At last, he pronounced it not broken - then frostily asked Greg if he required a cab.

Greg spent the night in Oxford Street station car park. It cost him £40.

He didn't dare go home. He was afraid of what he would find there.

It was waiting for him anyway the next morning.

He let himself into the building not longer after eight, nervously unlocked the door of his flat, and held his breath as he stepped through into silence.

It was perfectly clean; everything was in its place.

The carpets were hoovered, the floors were swept, the fridge emptied of food past its expiry date. There were empty spaces in the drawers where clothes had once been, empty gaps in the wardrobe where shirts had hung. The bathroom shelf was now lopsided to look at, toiletries clustered all down to one end. Boxes of tea had gone from the kitchen cupboards. DVDs had vanished, leaving holes in the shelf where they'd been ransacked from their alphabetical order. The pair of silver cufflinks, kept so proudly by the bedside in their box, were gone too. The bed had been changed, the sheets laundered, pristine. The windows had been left a little open to air.
It hurt more than if he'd found it all been burned to the ground.

The effect was just the same. A damning, irreversible end - his life charred to nothing.

*This is over,* gleamed the pristine counter-tops. *We are finished,* said the dustless TV screen.

Greg smoked long past nightfall. He didn't eat. He didn't sleep. For most of the day he sat on the sofa, surrounded by the lifeless silence of his immaculate flat, staring into the empty TV screen and feeling like his soul had been bleached of everything that made it human. He couldn't move. He couldn't think what to do.

It took him until just past ten at night to screw up his courage. Fumbling through his phone's contacts with shaking hands, he selected the name at the bottom of his list of 'M's, hit dial, and held it numbly to his ear.

There was a long pause, then a soft and apologetic bleep.

The female voice startled him - sleek, automated, and cold as ice.

"*The number you have dialled has not been recognised. Please recheck the number you have entered, and try again.*" The bleep sounded once more. "*The number you have dialled has not been recognised…*"

Greg's phone slid from his hand.

It thudded gently off the spotless carpet.
WOW I am so ready for coffee! You still around? Got so many bags I can't move... where should I meet you? Loads of Love xoxoxoxox

"Oh shit," Greg breathed. It was noon on the Sunday. He'd been woken by the chatter of his phone across the coffee table, and found himself crumpled on the couch where he'd fallen asleep last night.

He'd now been in the same clothes since Friday morning. In that time, he'd done almost nothing but smoke. If there'd been wine in the flat, he'd have drunk it - but life wasn't that kind to him anymore.

And his sister was now waiting for him in town, like he'd promised.

He staggered up from the couch, clutching his head - he couldn't meet Rachel like this. She'd think he'd been laid off and made homeless. Worse, she would ask if he was okay, and that was the last thing he needed. He couldn't bear to tell her he was not.

He fired off a quick text full of misspellings, promising Rachel he'd be at Oxford Street by one, and stumbled into the shower.

He washed himself, half-awake, almost forgetting to rinse the shampoo from his hair. He was falling apart and he knew it. Myke was gone. There was nothing else left in the world. Clean hair didn't matter. Nothing mattered. He got dressed, had no breakfast and called a taxi. Halfway down the path, he turned back to go lock his door.

Traffic was bad; progress in the taxi was slow.

It gave Greg time to try and remember what normal people normally talked about with each other.

He'd been planning on telling Rachel today. He'd been getting himself ready to tell her the truth - that he loved someone, and that he was happy. Those days seemed like decades ago. Mycroft now felt as distant in his mind as Jack - two faces he had lost; two faces he would not see again.

He just hoped Rachel couldn't tell he'd been crying.

He abandoned the taxi with five minutes left to walk, and made his way along Oxford Street, passing happy shoppers and families like a grey ghost in the midst of the living - not quite real anymore.

As he turned onto Great Portland Street, where his sister was waiting for him in Costa, he realised he still stank of smoke. He'd been on an almost twenty-four hour binge of having a lit cigarette in his hand. The effects were all too clear. He was hungry as well. Since Friday lunchtime, he'd eaten four packets of crisps, two slices of ham, and nothing else - all he'd had in the house.

"Hold it together," he muttered to himself, tight-throated, as he stepped into the shop. "You're fucking fine."

A wall of coffee house chatter and easy listening pop hit his ears. He looked around for Rachel, already regretting the decision to come.

She was over on one of the corner sofas, hemmed in with shopping bags. She had two empty cups of coffee on the table beside her already. She was busily texting on her phone, absorbed, her tongue...
stuck out a little to concentrate. It didn't matter how old she got, he thought - Rachel would always be six-years-old in his eyes, tongue stuck out as she glued purple glitter into the shape of a horse at the kitchen table.

"Is that for me?" he asked, as he placed two fresh lattes down on the table. She jumped.

"Oh!" she said, then: "Oh my God, there you are! Where have you been?" She leapt up, hugging him around around the neck as tightly as she could. "It's so good to see you… was traffic horrendous? I bet you've been crawling for ages."

Greg hugged her back, closing his eyes. She smelt like the perfume he'd got her last Christmas. He found after a few seconds that he didn't want to let her go.

"Got out and walked most of it," he said into her hair. "Sorry I - kept you waiting."

"Don't worry about it… honestly I've been glad to sit down… look at all this lot. And not one bag for me, can you believe?" Her bracelets jingled gently together as she sat down, shuffling across to make room for him on the sofa. "Feels like I've not seen you in forever! What's new? Tell me everything."

Greg's stomach churned as he tried to think of anything he'd done lately that he could actually tell her about. Somehow, the utter collapse of his first serious gay partnership, along with a blackmail demand for fifteen thousand pounds, didn't seem like the kind of thing he could lead with for a casual 'what's new?'.

"Mrs Dobson downstairs has moved out," he settled on at last.

"Oh really? With the baby?"

"I assume she's taken it, yeah... not left it by accident in a drawer or something..." Greg realised, with a sinking sensation, that the mysterious Yuri and his firearms would presumably not be moving in now. "It's... been quiet, otherwise. Not much going on."

"How's Sally?" she asked.

"Fine. Her sister's adopting a baby."

"Oh really?"

"Yeah. Just got on the register, so…" He sought around for anything else to say. "Work's fine. Quiet."

Her eyes flashed with a sudden smile. She reached for her tasseled leather bag on the floor. "I have a bone to pick with you," she said, unclasping the bag and rooting through it. "You've been a bad influence."

Greg waited, concerned. Rachel pulled out a folded piece of computer paper, handing it over.

"There," she said. "What d'you think?"

For one wild second, he expected to find a photograph of Mycroft in a compromising position. He unfolded it warily.

It was a drawing done on the computer.

His niece had helpfully labelled him in the middle - the tall figure in a rounded helmet and a hi-vis
jacket, topped with a bright blue arrow that read: INSPECTOR UNCLE GREG. Inspector Uncle Greg, in all his pixelated glory, had a stick. He was using it to menace what looked like a band of raccoons.

"Bad guys," Rachel explained, her eyes shining.


There was a second, smaller Inspector Uncle Greg stood beside him, also brandishing a stick and wearing a hi-vis jacket.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"It's Sarah," said Rachel. "Your beloved favourite niece, out on the beat with Uncle Greg."

Greg gazed down at the picture, wondering if the sudden blockage in his throat was his heart or his stomach. It could well be both.

"She's mentioned it a few times now," Rachel said. "... 'when I grow up'..."

"No, " he said, momentarily shocked from his misery. "She's thinking about police work?"

"So she says."

"Christ." Greg paused. He reached numbly for his coffee. "Well, tell her to join a decent union, for God's sake..."

Rachel laughed, throwing her head back.

"Yeah, G... I'll tell my six-year-old that as soon as I get home."

It was good to see her laugh, he thought. She was a bubble of normality in a world that had gone all wrong.

"She knows it's not just hitting people with a stick, doesn't she?" he said, folding up the drawing with care. "Because she can do that for free... hell, I'll get her a stick..."

"She says she wants to fight crime. There's a boy at school stole her glitter pens. Graham and I got called in."

"And it's given her a thirst for vengeance, has it?" Greg could only imagine the fire that his niece would be capable of raining down upon evil-doers. London's criminally-inclined wouldn't know what hit them.

"I think she just wants to be you." Rachel smiled at him over the rim of her coffee cup, eyes bright. "She thinks you're some kind of superhero."

Greg felt his heart fall. He gave a weak smile, glancing down into his coffee cup. He suddenly needed to smoke again.

"How's Graham?" he asked.

He'd never been so grateful for his sister's ability to chat. She was one of those people who could do all the work of a conversation, and make it look like it wasn't even work. She told him all about Toby's teething, her zumba class on Tuesday nights, and Sue Next Door's trouble with the council. Dad was well, she said - looking awkward as she said it. She went round every other day now to
check on him. The doctor said he was fighting fit, all things considered.

"He - asks after you, sometimes," Rachel said. "I tell him you're busy with work."

"Just tell him they've transferred me to Orkney," he said. It was easier. "D'you want another coffee?"

"God, I really shouldn't… I've got to find new shoes for Toby yet, and it's nearly two o'clock…"

As he'd first walked in, Greg had found himself wishing he hadn't come. Now he didn't want her to go. He was remembering what waited at home for him - the silence, stripped bare, and all the empty spaces on the shelves. He couldn't stand the thought of it.

But he couldn't think of anything to make her stay.

As she started gathering up her shopping bags, Rachel said to him, "Listen... before I shoot... there's a thing I wanted to ask."

"Yeah?" he said. He hoped it wasn't about their dad. "What is it?"

"Well... you know Sue," she said.

"Sue Next Door." Greg had never met the woman, but got weekly updates on all her trials and tribulations. She sounded like a bit of a nightmare, though he hadn't told Rachel that. "Looks after the kids sometimes?"

"Yeah. Well... she and I were chatting yesterday... and she was saying to me it's been nearly six years since Roger left. And she's been… well, thinking about getting out there again - meeting some people. You know," she said, giving him a knowing look. "Having another roll of the dice."

Greg braced himself. "Rach..."

"I know she's a bit older," Rachel said, quickly. "But it's only by five years - and Sue's lovely, Greg. Honestly. She's really funny, and she's kind... and you wouldn't believe the things she can bake. I think you guys would really get along."

*Is this how low I've fallen?* he thought.

"Just to check," he said. "Are you... trying to set me up, or get me adopted?"

"Greg..."

"You're sweet, Rach. I mean it. I'm just - not sure if - "

"- for a quick chat, you know? Maybe have a cup of tea together..."

"- not really sure if we'd be... compatible - "

"- but you're both so funny! And she'd really get your sense of humour - "

"- honestly, Rach. I'm sure she's great. But the thing is that - "

"- and if you're worried about what happened with Roger, I mean, that whole thing was totally his fault. He was just so emotionally unavailable. But Sue is so lovely, and just the sweetest person - "

"- and I'm already seeing someone," Greg heard himself say.
A damning silence fell.

Rachel's eyes had grown to the size of her coffee cup. "... you're... what?" she said.

Before a second had even passed, Greg knew he was making a mistake. With all the problems he had at the moment, this was the last thing he needed to add to them.

But he could hear his mouth continuing to talk anyway, rampaging away at full pelt as his brain limped after it, screaming at him to stop.

"... and it's... sort of serious," he said, and saw her mouth drop open. "I mean, it's not totally serious - it's just - yeah. It's a thing that's happening."

"Why didn't you tell me?" she gasped.

"Well, I... didn't want to... you know, jeopardise it too early..."

"How long has this been going on?" she demanded. "What's her name?"

Greg ignored the second question. "Since Christmas," his mouth said. Rachel nearly dropped her coffee. His brain let out a wail and collapsed at his feet, weeping at him for the love of their sanity to say no more.

"Since Christmas?" she said.

"Well, Christmas was just - the very start of it, you know? We just had drinks. I mean - we met years ago, but it wasn't - "

A sudden, pale horror crossed her features.

Greg found himself disarmed, taken aback by the sudden change in her face.

"Greg," she whispered.

He stared at her, alarmed. "What?"

"Tell me you've not - ..." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Not… Cindy. Not again."

"What? No! It's not - "

"Oh thank God..." she gasped. "Oh G, I'm sorry... I just - I know you guys were - but she wasn't good for you, G... I mean, the shit that woman put you through - "

"Rach. It's not Cindy."

" - just wanted to put my hands around her neck by the end - "

"Rach, it's not Cindy," he despaired. A few nearby heads twitched in their direction. He lowered his voice, reaching for her hand and pulling it into both his own. "Listen, I'm a thick twat but I'm not that thick. It's not Cindy. Alright? I've barely spoken to her since she kicked me out and kept all my stuff."

Rachel visibly relaxed, blowing out a long breath.

"Thank God," she mumbled.
She then sharpened again, back on the hunt.

"So... if it's not Cindy," she said. "Who is it? Who are you seeing?"

_I should not have come_, he told himself. He should have thrown himself in front of the taxi rather than get in it.

But he hadn't eaten in nearly forty-eight hours, and in that time he'd lost the person he'd loved more than anyone alive, and it had all been his fault. He couldn't think fast enough to lie. He didn't know if he could bear to tell Rachel the truth either. But now she was staring at him for answers, and he had to find her some.

"It's... someone - " He took a deep breath, inwardly wincing. "... - someone maybe I shouldn't have - but it's too late now."

Rachel hesitated, biting her lip. "Married?"

"No, not like that..."

"And - it's definitely not - "

He'd have to tell her, he thought, just to assuage her worries about Cindy. "No," he said. "Definitely not. It's - not an open thing, though. Just been trying to keep it private."

"Right," she said, slowly.

"And it's - ... Christ, Rach... it's such a mess..." He could feel the truth bearing down on him like a boulder, faster and faster, racing along a tunnel towards him, blocking out light as it came to crush him alive. "I - I don't know how to tell you - ..."

His sister had gone pale. She gripped his wrists, gently, her face full of fear.

"G..." she breathed. "Who is she?"

Greg stared into his sister's face.

_He's gone_, he wanted to sob. _I ruined everything and he blocked my number and he's gone. I'll never see him again._

"Rach, it's..."

His stomach heaved. Here it came: truth or vomit. Maybe both.

"Not a 'she'," he heard himself whisper.

Rachel's face opened.

"Oh - Greg..." She threw her arms around him. Her bracelets brushed over his cheeks, jingling together in his hair. "Oh my God..."

As she wrapped him in her arms, he started to cry. _Oh, fuck_, he thought. _It's over. It's all over and I fucked it up._

"What's his name?" Rachel asked in his ear, her voice breaking. His heart broke along with it.

"Myke," he sobbed into her collarbones. Hearing the name flooded him with pain all over again.
He's gone, Rach. He left. He took everything and he's not coming back. "He's - called Mycroft…"

Rachel was now crying too. "Does he make you happy, G?" she whispered.

Greg gave one last sob into her shoulder. She took it as a 'yes', squeezing him tight.

"Then that's good enough for me," she said. She rubbed his back, shaking, pulling a tissue from inside her jacket to tidy up his face. "It's good enough for all of us… you hear? Don't you for a second be ashamed. I am so happy for you."

Greg didn't know how this could possibly get any worse. He took the tissue, trying to push the tears back into his eyes. The other customers nearby were doing a very good job of pretending they'd not noticed a thing. It was mortifying all the same.

"You should have told me," his sister hushed, cupping his face in her hands and brushing back a little of his hair. Motherly love glowed in her eyes. It was like their mum was here again, just for a moment - here in Rachel. Greg's eyes promptly refilled with tears. "You've kept this all to yourself since Christmas… I can't believe it…"

"Don't tell Dad," he begged, shaking.

"Oh, G… that's the last thing I'd do…" She put her arms back around him. "I won't let him hurt you again. I promise."

Greg looked up at her, pale. "Hurt me - again?"

Her expression softened. "Like… with Jack," she said.

Greg did not move. He stared into her eyes, all the pain shocked out of him at once.

"You - knew," he managed, after an eternity. "But you were only - "

Her features creased in apology.

"Seven," she said. She looked away, down at her bangled wrists. "I… heard him talking to you about it."

His mouth flattened. "You heard him battering me to a pulp for it."

"I'm - sorry, G…" She wrapped a hand around her bracelets, uneasy and pale. "I'd have - I mean - I was only seven…"

Greg exhaled. "You couldn't," he said. As she wrapped her fingers into his, and they leant together on the sofa, tear-stained, he put a quiet kiss on her shoulder. "Nobody... could have."

They were quiet together for a while. He felt like he was fifteen again, and she was seven, sitting together in a den at the bottom of next door's garden.

"I didn't know that you knew," he said after a while, weak.

She hesitated, playing with her wedding ring. "He shouldn't have done that to you. He was - … he shouldn't have - …"

"East End parenting," Greg said, hollow. "Knock sense into them as early as you can… then spend your life reminding them what a burden they were."
"I... had to ask a teacher at school what 'faggot' meant. I didn't dare ask Dad."

Greg felt his blood run a little cold. He shook his head slowly. "He'd have battered you just for saying that word."

"Well, he... didn't need much excuse." Rachel sat forwards on the sofa, picking up the last dregs of his latte. She drained them in a single motion. "What does he do, then?"

Greg looked at her, surprised. "Smoke, these days... that's about it, isn't it?"

"No," she said, and flashed him a coy smile. "Your fella."

For a moment, Greg imagined Mycroft's face upon being referred to as his 'fella'. Then he remembered he would never see that face again; his heart sank like a stone.

"Oh, he's... government. Minor official."

"Government?" she said, amazed.

"Yeah. He's... kinda private. Kinda serious." Greg looked down at his fingers, trying to pretend it was a week ago - just to get through this conversation. "He, um... got a brother actually. I might have mentioned him before. Sherlock?"

"Sherlock Holmes?" she said. "The one who solves all the crimes?"

"Yeah... Myke is his older brother."

Her eyes lit up. "Oh my God... has he got those cheekbones too?"

"He got the brains... I know that much." He glanced down at his hands. "They don't look much alike. Myke's... great, though. He's perfect."

And he's gone.

Rachel gazed up at him, her face full of joy.

"When can I meet him?" she asked.

It took Greg a moment to think of something he could say - something that wouldn't snap him in half.

"I'll - think about it."

He stayed out as long as he could with Rachel - finding shoes for Toby, picking up something for Graham's tea, another round of coffees. He insisting on helping her carry all the bags back to the underground. As the tube finally pulled away, carrying Rachel and her smile away into the tunnel, Greg found himself alone at last.

The silence, briefly lifted, settled over him once more.

He'd almost asked if he could come back with her - just to spend the evening with people, with faces around him.

In the end, he hadn't dared.
He'd taken up enough of her time today. He didn't want to be their dad - leeching all her happiness, using it as a balm for his own misery.

It was a long walk back to his flat - but there was nothing else to do. Greg walked the streets in silence, hands in his pockets, hopefully lifting his eyes to every black car that passed. He let himself into the building and proceeded up the stairs, wishing he'd stopped somewhere for food. There was pasta in the back of the cupboard, he thought. That would do. It was all his stomach would take.

As he rounded the stairs onto his landing, he caught sight of the figure waiting outside his door.

All the blood in his body congealed at once.

Sherlock turned to face him, cool. Further along the landing, John looked up from his phone.

Greg felt his life tip over into its final, sharp descent towards ruin.

"No," he said. "Please... Christ, no."

Sherlock flashed him a humourless smile. "Hello, Greg."
"Why are you here?" Greg asked, immediately reaching new depths of misery.

Sherlock folded his hands at the small of his back.

"Rather obvious, I'd have thought... I've been engaged in my professional capacity by my brother."

"Mycroft's... asked us to look into retrieving the photos," John explained, regarding Greg with a look of the deepest apology.

"And to convey to you, if not already clear, the immediate termination of your personal relationship - although..." Sherlock said, looking him up and down with a single sweep of his eyes, "...I imagine that part isn't entirely news to you. Might we step inside? Been waiting a while."

Greg despaired in silence for a moment, wondering if he could just fling himself down the stairs instead.

"There's no hurry," Sherlock added.

As John did his best to make small-talk, Greg reluctantly made tea. He was mildly concerned to note Sherlock conducting a swift but thorough sweep of the flat. He pretended not to see the detective measuring doors with his stride, checking discreetly in drawers and at one point opening a window, leaning out to survey the considerable drop to the street below.

Greg laid the tea tray down on the coffee table, but did not sit.

"I don't know what you think you'll find," he said. "I just opened two envelopes. That's all. And your brother's got those now."

"Fear not, inspector." Sherlock pressed his back flat against the window, squinting along one shoulder towards the bedroom door. His eyes narrowed and he shook his head. "More a case of what I think I will not find..."

Greg was unreassured. He watched, frowning, as Sherlock took a series of careful steps towards the bedroom, then froze rigid as the usual floorboard in the doorway emitted a damning creak.

"Shouldn't you be... interviewing Mycroft?" Greg said. "Asking which of his many enemies is suddenly wearing a new watch?"

"Already done." Sherlock opened the coat cupboard. He gave a triumphant little humph. "And Mycroft is now 'interviewing' his staff... perhaps 'interrogating'... 'incinerating'... hard to guess which stage of the process he's at by now."

"So, it's - someone in Mycroft's staff? One of his people?"

"Only a minute chance," Sherlock said, inspecting the sleeves of Greg's jackets. "Growing smaller by the moment... but if batting them around like mice makes him feel better... you know how it is in the first stages of a break-up, Greg. Seems cruel to deprive him of wholesome occupation."

Greg said nothing, squaring his shoulders.

John averted his eyes as he took a small notebook out of his pocket. "Mycroft had a number of questions he wanted us to ask, actually... let me just - "
"Were you sleeping with anyone beside my brother?" Sherlock said, prompting Greg's eyes to nearly fall from his head. "In this case, a very literal manifestation of the word 'sleeping'... and with the phone nearby at the time."

"No," Greg bit out, immediately close to punching him.

"That's one more theory excised, then... remove it from the list, will you John?"

"I haven't made a list," John replied from the sofa, bewildered. "You haven't told me any theories yet."

"Well, do try to keep up..." Sherlock had found Greg's work coat hanging on the back of the door. He descended on it, checked the sleeve and rifled quickly through the pockets. "Where do you keep this at work, when not wearing it?"

"My office."

"Where in your office, inspector? I'm not a mind reader."

Greg bit his tongue. "Behind the door."

"Always?" Sherlock fanned open the lining, frowning as he examined it in detail. "Two - no, three - snags from a caster. Suggests it spends time on the back of your chair as well, likely when you've just returned from inquiries or from lunch... how many cups of coffee do you make yourself a day?"

Greg sat down on the sofa, too weak to stand anymore.

"I don't know, Sherlock... one. Five. Fifty-five. Does it matter?"

"It may. Where is your phone currently?"

Greg thought about it, weary. "My back pocket."

"Hmm. No back pocket on this coat. Unlikely you'd change a habit so ingrained that you happily risk expensive new technology by sitting on it. More likely the phone travels in your trouser pocket, then. Do you charge it at work?"

"No, I... charge it at home."

"Hmm. Still not conclusive." Sherlock returned the coat to its hook, circled the sofa and vanished into the bedroom. "How often are these sheets changed?" he shouted.

Greg put his head into his hands.

After a moment, John reached out and patted him gently on the back.

"I'm... sorry, Greg. I know this isn't easy."

"You've no idea, mate." Greg listened, miserably, to the sound of Sherlock rummaging through his wardrobe. "So he's - still angry."

John took a moment to answer. "He was... fairly bristly, yes."

It wasn't a surprise.
"I thought I could handle it," Greg said, tired. "Keep him out of it. Never thought it would all…" He sighed, rubbing his face. "... escalate."

"Yes, I... think that's the cause of the anger." John moved a cup of tea in front of him, gently. "Eat something soon, will you? There's not a lot of nutrition in cigarettes."

"Thanks, doc."

"Few hours of sleep if you can manage it, too."

"I'll sleep when I'm dead," Greg muttered. "Won't be too long at this rate."

"Well… if it makes you feel any better, they're not on the internet yet."

"What?"

"The photos," said John. He gave Greg a slight smile. "Mycroft's made a pretty thorough check. No sign of them. Whoever's got them is keeping them close to their chest for now."

Greg stared, dead-eyed, into the glassy surface of his tea.

"Probably for more money."


"I was just trying to fix things," Greg said, weak.

"I know, Greg." John patted him on the back again. "I know."

Sherlock reappeared suddenly in the bedroom door.

"Take theories four, six and eleven off the list, John."

John repressed a sigh. "Done," he said, blankly. "What theories were these? For those of us whose MENSA applications were marked 'return to sender'."

"The phone wasn't accessed by any social visitor here."

Greg, halfway to a first mouthful of tea, looked around in alarm. "Social visitor?" he said. "What are you suggesting?"

"How d'you know?" asked John.

"Because there have been no social visitors here," Sherlock said. "Mycroft's cleaners have done a better job of obliterating useful evidence than you did when you tossed your mobile phone under that bus, Greg. But I've been able to piece it together."

Sherlock glanced around the lounge, his eyes catching and skimming over skirting boards and sunlightened patches on the walls.

"Probably because the place is normally a mess..." he mused to himself. "Coupled with a general inclination to privacy... if you want further proof, John, check his pockets."

"That's… fine," John said. "I believe you."

"Costa coffee receipt," Sherlock went on. "Two beverages. He could have brought his sister here,
but he prefers to meet her in town. I doubt that any social caller except Mycroft has set foot inside this flat for some time. I'll hazard a guess at a year. Could be longer."

Greg broke. He snatched his cigarettes from the back of the sofa, shook out the last two and lit both at once.

"I could have told you all that," he muttered around them.

"Mycroft is inclined to question your honesty," Sherlock said. "As his representative, I must follow his lead. I'll need to make a thorough examination of your division at Scotland Yard now, inspector. Finish your tea and we'll go."

"That's ... no, Sherlock. You're not doing that."

"Why?"

"Because it's Scotland Yard," Greg said, outraged, around two cigarettes. "Because there's nothing to find there. Because the phone was hacked, and that's the end of it."

Sherlock tutted.

"What?" Greg snapped.

"It quite obviously wasn't hacked... that much is clear."

"Clarify it for me," Greg barked, one more smart remark away from a breakdown.

"Mycroft has assured us that the software installed on the device was impenetrable," Sherlock said. "No unauthorized access whatsoever - a technical impossibility for anyone to bypass it. We can find some proof for this in the fact that only photographs and videos were taken, not vital emails, addresses or financial information - the things a hacker or career criminal would make a bee-line for. So, with that helpful elimination made, our net of inquiry shrinks considerably. Someone has accessed your phone in a far more physical and immediate manner."

"In a ... what are you saying?"

"I'm saying," Sherlock intoned, "that someone discovered your relationship with my brother, gained access to your mobile phone, downloaded the plentiful evidence they found therein, and is now on their way to a pretty fortune."

The bottom dropped from Greg's stomach. "You're not serious," he said.

"I am entirely serious."

"But ... discovered? How could -"

"Is it impossible that the two of you were seen?" Sherlock inquired.

The cigarettes, ignored, continued to smoke themselves in Greg's hand as he thought.

He didn't think they'd been seen.

But then, had he checked and double-checked every other face that night in Heathrow Airport? Had he always looked up and down the street before he got into Myke's car? They'd run through Hyde Park together, feeling anonymous and free. Maybe they hadn't been at all. They'd been careful - perhaps not careful enough.
It wasn't *impossible*, he thought.

"So - you mean… this is someone we *know*?" he said.

"Most probably," said Sherlock. "Work, perhaps. Family. Other social contacts. But fear not… John and I shall work through them one-by-one with an iron rod until somebody breaks."

Greg was still reeling. The faces of everyone he knew whirled before him in a storm. He watched them flicker past his eyes, helpless.

"But how could they - "

"With ease," Sherlock said, "if they put their mind to it... which we can assume they did. Anyone who has ever witnessed you unlock your phone will have the passcode. Anyone who has ever spotted you leaving your desk for five minutes will have had an opportunity."

"No, I mean - how *could* they?" Greg said. "I don't *know* people like that. I don't know anyone that much of a vicious wanker."


His eyebrows flashed.

"And for what it's worth, inspector, if you hadn't so *spectacularly* annihilated the evidence, we would be at case closed by now. Everyone home in time for tea and hot buttered muffins."

Greg's jaw set. "What are you talking about?"

"Oxford Circus," said Sherlock. "That phone was our star - and only - witness. It could have told us everything. Which of the photographs had been downloaded, sent or transferred, in what manner, on what date, at what time... and, crucially, to whom."

Greg realised he had wasted his last two cigarettes. He took a drag on the stubs of them both, clamping down on the shake in his hand.

"I thought we were being watched," he muttered. "I was trying to do the right thing."

"You were wrong," Sherlock said. "And now…"

He sat down, with a slight flare of his coat, and sank into the seat with a sigh.

"The timeline of events, if you please. Neglect no detail."

He closed his eyes.

Greg realised that on the sofa beside him, John was ready with notebook and pen.

He ground out his cigarettes in his overflowing ashtray, deciding to indulge the sudden and savage inclination towards honesty.

"Not one?" he said. "In that case, Sherlock, I first fucked your brother in the early hours of Christmas Day, having drunk about twelve pints of your bloody mulled wine. I don't remember what hotel, so don't ask. I *do* remember he left claw marks in my back that I still had at New Year."

John began to choke into his tea. Greg, unrepentant, thumped him on the back. Sherlock cast John a small frown and waved the details aside.
"A little forward in time," he said. "The letter - the first letter. When did that arrive?"

"May 20th," Greg replied, cold.

Sherlock's expression flickered. "The day before Mycroft's birthday. Interesting."

"The day of my birthday," Greg said. "We're a day apart."

Sherlock's eyes opened, bright blue and startled. After a moment they lapsed shut again. "Even more interesting. You did not open the letter immediately."

"No. I opened it when we'd gotten back from the restaurant. I thought it was... I don't know, HR forms. Something to sign and post back."

"Write that down," Sherlock said to John, quietly. John did so, eyebrows raised. Sherlock took a pensive breath in. "Your first thoughts upon realising the nature of the letter?"

Greg looked away, quietened. He didn't want to be back in that moment. He knew exactly what he'd first thought, and what he'd feared. He hated it now.

"How to hide the bloody thing from Myke," he muttered.

"Did you have any immediate instinct as to its sender? Even an irrational one."

"I don't know. Just... someone after Myke. These 'dangerous people' I've heard so much about."

"Mm. And you disposed of the phone not long after."

Greg sighed, gripping his hands together. "Yes."

"You came to a decision with my brother that he would move into your flat whilst he sold the house in Chester Square. Possibly for longer."

Greg hung his head. How could so much have changed?

"Yes," he intoned.

"Tell me about the individual you dealt with on the first of June."


"Jibes?"

"Use your imagination, Sherlock."

"If we were relying on imagination, I wouldn't have made the trek from Baker Street, inspector. What manner of jibes?"

"Well, there was 'cock jockey' at one point," Greg said, annoyed.

Sherlock frowned a little. "Directed at whom?"

Greg restrained himself. "Does it matter?"

"Obviously," Sherlock tutted. "Or I wouldn't have asked."
"At Myke. As in 'run home to your -', if I remember right."

"What else was said of Mycroft?" Sherlock asked, as John struggled to scribble faster.

Greg threw his thoughts back almost two weeks, trying to remember any small clutch of words in the blur that made up that horrendous memory.

"Hardly anything. Gave the guy the money - he was pretty smug about it. Couldn't stand the look on his face so I threatened him… told him Mycroft would find him. Said Myke would burn him alive. He didn't like it."

"He 'didn't like' it? How?"

"I don't know, he just - looked scared, I suppose. Unnerved. He scuttled not long after."

"Unnerved," Sherlock said. "Surprised?"

Greg stared at him, despairing. "People are normally surprised when you threaten to burn them alive. Try it some time."

Sherlock dismissed it with a hum, settling himself with his fingers steepled once more. "Perhaps we'll return to that. Who mentioned my brother by name first? You or him?"

"I - don't remember."

"Try, please. This is important."

Greg racked his brains. "I did, I think."

"Mm. This 'gentleman' then left with the money. Did you follow him?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I - … don't know."

"Astonishing, how accommodating people will be towards a parasite. The second letter - delivered by the same individual?"

"Yeah… he was waiting in the car park when I left work on Friday."

"What did you discuss?"

"Not much," Greg said, stiffly. He rubbed his wrists together with a sigh. "I just… saw 'fifteen grand', and went blank. Told him I couldn't pay it."

"And how did he respond?"

"He told me Mycroft could." Greg shook his head, slowly. "Said it would seem like a small price to pay when the photos hit the web."

"Mm," Sherlock intoned. He leant back in the chair, his eyes closing once more. After a moment, he said: "What is it?"

Greg stared at him. "I didn't say anyth-"
"John, what is it?"

Greg looked around at John, whose face opened from a puzzled frown into surprise. "I was wondering, that's all," he said. "It seems like quite a price hike. Five-hundred to fifteen-thousand... pretty steep. And that's - quite a small amount to start with."

Sherlock's thin lips curved. "Does it suggest anything to you?"

John shook his head, thinking. "They're... getting bolder, maybe? Now they know that their victim is prepared to pay?"

"Boldness might explain a demand for an additional five-hundred," Sherlock murmured. "Perhaps even a thousand. But a nearly three-thousand percent increase? That's not boldness. That's a revaluation. They got their hands on some new information."

"What information?" Greg asked, alarmed.

"Your next appointment with your blackmailer's charming spokesperson isn't until the twentieth," Sherlock said, ignoring him. "This gives us eight days. There are a number of theories I would like to test before then."

He unfolded himself from the chair with the sudden sprightliness of a gazelle. John hurried to pocket the notebook and pen, downing the last of his tea in a gulp.

"I will need a full list of your social contacts, Greg," Sherlock said. "Anyone with any conceivable access to your mobile phone - leave no name off the list."

"I'll - see what I can do."

"See rather hard, will you?" Sherlock paused in the door, smiling at him coldly. It reminded Greg at once of Myke. "Sentiment may have clouded your judgement thus far, inspector... but I'm afraid any further indulgence would be unwise. Good day."

He swept out.

John hesitated in the doorway and looked back at Greg, torn between sympathy and gentle sternness.

"He'll see sense," he promised - somewhat optimistically, Greg thought. "Food, please... something with carbohydrates in it, at the least. Go easy on the cigarettes. We'll sort this out."

He left, too.

Cigarettes, Greg thought. What a fantastic idea.

He waited five minutes for them to be gone, then fetched his coat.
"Hey. It's me." Sally sounded more than a little tense. "Where are you?"

Greg immediately regretted his decision to go out for lunch.

"Why?" he asked, concerned. He'd decided to reward himself for surviving all the way to Wednesday by taking his cigarettes and a pasta salad to St James's Park. It looked like it was about to kick him in the face.

"You've got a visitor," his sergeant sighed down the phone.

Greg's heart contracted painfully. *Could it be?*

"Who?" he asked.

"It's your brother-in-law," she said. Greg's stomach sank. "He's got Boy Wonder with him, too..."

"He's not my - ..." Why did I tell so many bloody people? Now he had to find the strength to tell them all it was over. Rachel kept asking if Mycroft wanted to come to Sarah's seventh birthday party in July, while Mycroft's phone was still claiming its number did not exist. The nightmare showed no signs of stopping. "What does Sherlock want?" Greg asked, suspecting nothing good.

"He says you authorised him to search the office," Sally intoned.

Greg covered his eyes.

"Apparently it's a private matter of 'great personal interest' to you," she added.

"I didn't say *anything* about - …" Greg withheld a sigh. He tipped his lunch into the bin beside the bench, pulled out his cigarettes and lighter, and pinned the phone against his shoulder.

"Right," he said, sparking up. He would smoke on the way. "I'm coming... tell him just to sit at Reception and not touch anything. I'll be there in ten minutes. Don't let him talk to Sharon."

Greg arrived to find Doctor Watson talking to Sharon, who was happily showing him pictures on her PC of last year's Christmas Staff Party.

"That's Paul," she was saying, as Greg blew in through the door. "He was in Accounts until recently... just retired... isn't he funny with his red nose? Always a joker. You should have seen where it ended up by eleven."

"What are you doing?" Greg interrupted, putting both hands down on the desk.

Sharon shut up at once, shrinking away behind her screen. John had the decency to at least look abashed.

"I said no," Greg told him. "Didn't I? This is crossing the line. My staff are working. And I'm not - ..."

He hesitated, suddenly noticing a vital absence.

"Where is he?"
"Where's who?" said John, the picture of innocence. He cottoned on. "Oh! Sherlock - I'm not sure… I think he wandered off to find a bathroom."

Greg's expression darkened.

"Stay here," he warned - then, changing his mind, said, "Actually, no. Get in my office and stay there. Stop distracting my receptionist. I'll go round up Derren bloody Brown."

Once he'd ensured John was secured in his office, seated safely beside the rubber plant and twiddling his thumbs, Greg began the hunt.

He finally located Sherlock after a ten minute search, startled to hear laughter coming from Computer Crime.

"And of course, the chances of rolling three critical fails in a row..." Roy was saying to a chuckling Sherlock at his desk, both of them greatly amused. "I mean, even with a Dex mod of plus seven, I was going down. I was going down hard. Oh man, that was one wild campaign... never play a half-orc rogue. That's all I'm saying."

"Oi," Greg said from the door.

Sherlock turned, delighted. "Ah, Greg!" he said. "Roy and I were just trading dice stories."

Greg bit his tongue. "Dice stories?"

"Dungeons and Dragons," Roy explained, brightly. "I had no idea you'd played before, inspector."

Greg stared directly into Sherlock's eyes, wondering what fresh hell was in construction here.

"Sorry?" he said.

"For your birthday," Sherlock prompted him, with a chirpy and unrelenting smile. "Last February... you remember, Greg? 'Escape From Goblin Mine'. I suppose you were pretty drunk by the end... probably couldn't make out your character sheet for half of it."

Greg repressed a sigh.

"That's - ... yeah. Not my cup of tea in the end. Come on, Sherlock... let Roy get on with his day. He's a busy man."

Sherlock graciously extended a hand across the desk.

"Marvellous to meet you, Roy. We'll have to put a game together at some point."

"Oh - definitely! You're welcome too, inspector. The more the merrier."

As he escorted Sherlock upstairs in the lift, Greg muttered under his breath,

"I didn't know you were a Dungeons and Dragons weirdo. Should have guessed."

"I am not," Sherlock intoned. "Fantasy fiction is the refuge of the floppy-minded and the whimsical."

"Then... what were - ...?"

"Ascertaining if he knows your birthday." Sherlock pulled up his sleeve, checking his watch. "He
does not. You noticed that he gave no discordant reaction to a hypothetical February birth date? All quite straightforward. Not vital, but worth knowing."

"So…?"

"All just forming a picture, inspector." Sherlock hummed, covering his watch again. "Twelve minutes. Should have been more than adequate time."

"For what?" Greg asked, as the lift doors opened.

"A thorough search." Sherlock stepped out, looking quizzically up and down the corridor. "Which way is Human Resources?"

"Over my dead body. That's the way to Human Resources."

"But then how will I speak to Kelly?"

"Christ, could you just - … why would you need to - and what 'thorough search' took twelve minutes? I don't understand!"

"Your office," Sherlock said, distracted. He squinted up the stairwell with mild interest, elaborating in a single word. "John."

Greg realised. He pinched the bridge of his nose, wondering what he must have done in a previous life to deserve this. Genocide, he thought. Poaching endangered animals.

"You're not going to Human Resources," he muttered. "Kelly's not a blackmailer. It's not Roy, either. None of my staff are. And there's nothing in my office."

"With all due respect, inspector… I'll be the judge of that."

"No, Sherlock. You're in my territory now. You can listen to me for a while."

Greg stepped in front of him, blocking Sherlock's gaze with a firm resolve not to be ignored. The pale blue eyes flickered to him with a blink.

"Nobody wants this arsehole found more than I do," Greg intoned, fiercely. "Believe me. But these people aren't - … it's just not possible, alright? This isn't the kind of place that a master blackmailer lies dormant for years, just waiting for something big enough to come along. Go and search MI5. Go harass Mycroft's receptionist for Christmas party photos. You're clearly looking in the wrong place."

Sherlock listened with an impassive stare, reading Greg's words with a detachment Greg knew he should have expected.

"Surely I should look in every place, inspector? If indeed you want this 'arsehole' found as swiftly as you claim."

Greg crumbled. "I do," he sighed. "You're just - … you're asking me to believe something I can't. It's Mycroft with all the murderous enemies. Not me."

Sherlock looked away, considering Greg's hypothesis for a moment. He lowered his voice as an intern shuffled past, carrying a box of papers up the stairs.

"Take it as a mark of your character," Sherlock said. "You can't imagine jettisoning your integrity for a mere pittance like £15,000. It's noble of you. But as you and I are both aware, humanity at
large does not share your scruples. Anyone can be a blackmailer, inspector. All it takes is three things: motive, access and opportunity. Nobody has broken into your flat or been invited there - that much is clear - and so access likely happened here. Opportunity is always rife. As to motive, I'll invite you to look me in the eye and claim £15,000 isn't a pretty enough prize to imbue even the softest heart with dark ideas."

It was true; Greg hated that it was. He'd seen murder committed for a dirty look, a scratchcard, a misheard mutter. It chilled his blood to contemplate what some people would do for fifteen-thousand pounds. Blackmail would be nothing - a drop in the ocean.

But the people here?

Roy, with the jumpers knitted by his mum? Kelly - now on the verge of motherhood, thanks to Mycroft - Sharon? Sally? It couldn't be possible.

It just couldn't.

Then he remembered again, with an uncomfortable lurch, the sight of the man with the broken nose, waiting for him on the car park stairs; Mycroft's face as he'd unfolded the photographs; his sterilised flat, reset to a state of grace it had never been in, all memories bleached away without a trace.

He sighed, breaking down. He gave in.

"Look, just... do what you have to," he muttered. "Do it discreetly. Come tell me what you find. And don't sign me up for any more Dungeons and Dragons, Sherlock… my life is a pitiful mess as it is."

It was a little under twenty minutes later that there came a knock on Greg's office door. He looked up from the report he'd now read three times without seeing a word of it.

"Come in," he called, weary.

The door opened. Sherlock appeared in the gap.

"John and I have completed our enquiries," he said. John was hovering behind him in the doorway, hands in his pockets. "We will be leaving the premises now, inspector. Thank you for your time."

He went to shut the door. Greg jumped up from his desk.

"Wait - hang on, Sherlock. What did you find?"

Sherlock paused, his eyes sliding to the desks nearby, the people sitting at them bent over keyboards and files. "A number of things," he said.

"Then get in here," Greg said. "Both of you. Sit down."

They did so, seating themselves cautiously beside Greg's pot plant. He shut the door with a snap.

"So?" he said, waiting.

There was a pregnant silence.

"What did you find?" he asked.
"I… should save my considerations for my brother," Sherlock replied, carefully. "Mycroft is my client."

"Seriously?" Greg said. "This is my office. Those are my workmates. I took those photos and I got the letters. I want to know what you found."

Sherlock and John considered this in silence together, studying each other's faces as they held an unspoken conversation. John seemed to be pushing to tell. Sherlock was trying to hold.

"I know he's your 'client'," Greg sighed. "But this involves me just as much, guys. I'm… half of this. I've got a right to know."

He leant back against the front edge of his desk.

"How about if I ask you to take on the case as well?" he said. "I'll be your client. Will you solve it for me?"

Sherlock and John discussed the matter without words for a moment more.

At last, a decision was reached. Sherlock turned his eyes to Greg.

"Can you come to Baker Street tonight? Eight PM. I need to mull a few things over in the meantime."

A cold, quiet sensation settled in Greg's stomach. "Is - that when Mycroft's coming to see you?"

"Yes." Sherlock hesitated, reading the inspector's face closely. "As dual clients, you should... both be present."

Greg folded his arms. He thought quickly, trying to suppress the rising, gripping sensation between his ribs. It would be the first time they'd encountered each other since Mycroft had nearly dislocated his jaw in The Nightingale. He didn't for a second suspect it would be a happy reunion.

But he wanted to know what was said.

It wasn't anybody here. He knew it beyond doubt. He just couldn't trust that he knew it until he heard Sherlock say it.

"I'll be there," he said at last. He had the strangest sensation that he was going to regret it. "Just… before you go - do you know who it is already?"

"No," Sherlock replied. "Not yet. But I will."

"Right…" Greg supposed it had been too much to hope. Sherlock was a miracle worker, but they needed more than a miracle now. "Is there anyone I should… I don't know, watch? Not that I think it's any of my guys..."

The bright blue eyes flashed.

"You should watch everyone, inspector. All the time, and ceaselessly. Never close your eyes. Only then will you be safe."
221B Baker Street.
Where it all began, Greg thought.

As he passed under the awning of Speedy's Café, just before eight, he glanced up at the windows. He half-expected to see Christmas lights.

It felt like a lifetime ago: mulled wine, the lights low, festive pop on the CD player. It was the first Christmas since Sherlock had come back - 'come home', John kept saying. Wrapping paper everywhere. Bowls of crisps and nuts on every surface. Molly had a new boyfriend, and Mrs Hudson had too much sherry, and Greg had been fondly aware of everyone there together: the Baker Street circle, all these unconnected souls drawn together by the force of one man - by Sherlock, returned to them all at last.

Most of the others, Greg knew very well.

Only one person had been something of an unknown: Sherlock's brother, Mycroft.

He was known to Greg by name and by sight - but in many ways he was a figure, not a man. Mycroft had always struck him as the human equivalent of a question mark, cold and unfathomable, and Greg couldn't help but feel scruffy in his presence. The crisp suits, the handmade loafers and the immaculately-groomed hair all brought Greg's inner East End boy straight to the surface.

Then, somehow, they'd ended up sharing a sofa.

They'd started drinking together with a mutual belligerence, and a certain shared cynicism for all the Yuletide trappings. They'd traded a few underhanded remarks about Molly's new boyfriend - Mycroft's razorwine wit had Greg snorting into his wine. He was like Sherlock, Greg thought, but… switched on, maybe. And a little scarier - not that it was necessarily a bad thing. A few more glasses and Mycroft was laughing at his jokes in return, leaning in to brush a stray mince piece crumb off his sleeve. Those long legs, one casually resting over the other. The column of his throat. The fascinated gleam in his eye. And his voice - every syllable measured, crafted, skillfully pronounced to make the hair rise a little on the back of Greg's neck, and he found himself wondering what that voice would sound like when it swore. Mycroft was pouring him more wine.

"I had no idea you were so arresting, inspector…"

Is he flirting with me? Greg had thought, boggled.

Then he'd heard himself flirting back - shamelessly, some of it. They were left much alone by the rest of the party, who seemed to think the two scrooges were just fine together on the sofa in the corner. Mycroft had grown steadily more flushed and more languorous, his voice picking up a distinct edge of velvet, his eyes gleaming darker and deeper as the hours whiled by, and his gaze had barely left Greg's face - only to flicker down over across his shoulders, to his mouth, or to the open collar of his shirt.

Next thing Greg knew, he'd been waking up in a hotel room in Knightsbridge on Christmas
morning, as Mycroft placed a substantial glass of scotch on the bedside.

And now somehow it was June.

Greg hesitated for a few minutes on the doorstep. He didn't know what he was about to find inside. Part of him hoped they would just lay eyes on each other and it would all be okay - that love would win out, and they would get through this together. Stronger as a pair, unafraid.

Part of him knew Mycroft Holmes a little better than that.

He knocked on the door, steadying his nerves.

Mrs Hudson was surprised to see him. He tried not to read too much into that. As he ascended the stairs to the flat, he was aware of how damn loud his footsteps were, how every single step creaked and groaned beneath him. He braced himself as he stepped slowly through the door.

John looked up from the newspaper by the window. There was nobody else around.

"Ah - good. You're here. I'll just - …" He gestured Greg to an armchair. "Have a seat, and I'll - …" He hurried out onto the corridor, calling up the stairs. "Sherlock? Greg's here."

"Two minutes," Sherlock called from the floor above.

Greg took a seat, feeling strangely like he was about to be executed. He checked his watch. It was two minutes to eight.

"Would you... like tea?" John said, tentatively. "Coffee?"

Greg raised an eyebrow. "Something stronger?"

"Bit early, isn't it?"

"I have a feeling I'll need it."

John gave him a sympathetic smile. "I'll make tea."

As John busied himself in the kitchen, Greg tapped his fingers on the arm of the chair and did his best to ignore the rising instinct towards panic. Every slam of a car door made him twitch - every creak of the stairs.

"There we go," John said at last, putting down tea beside him. Greg knew already he wouldn't drink it.

He checked his watch. It was now two minutes past eight.

John headed back out onto the landing. "Sherlock?"

"Yes! Fine! Just coming..."

Greg picked up the boiling hot mug, simply to give his hands something to do. He'd never wanted tea less in his life.

John idled back into the lounge, biting his lower lip.

"He's… just bringing Mycroft down," he warned.
Greg's heart tensed. "He's here already?"

Footsteps squeaked across the floor above, out onto the landing, and then slowly creaked their way down the staircase. Greg lowered his eyes, suddenly fascinated in the pattern of the armchair. He blew across the surface of his tea and told himself that if it all got too much, there was a window behind him - a swift strike with the elbow should do it. He could cannon-ball out of the thing and be halfway down Baker Street, riddled with broken glass, before anyone could stop him.

Sherlock entered the room first - slowly, carrying something with care.

Greg braced.

No second figure appeared.

After a few seconds, he risked a guarded glance upwards. He watched as Sherlock laid a laptop gently on a table set out in the centre of the room.

There was a video link open, displaying no visual feed - instead, the skittering of acid-green audio waves.

Greg breathed out. He eased his grip a little on the mug. Relief, palpable, coursed through his veins.

It was matched in potency only by the wash of disappointment.

"Mycroft… can you hear me?" Sherlock asked.

The laptop hesitated for a moment, audio levels flickering.

"I can," said the voice.

Greg brought the mug, with a slight shake, to his mouth.

"I only hope your enquiries are proving more fruitful than mine, Sherlock," Mycroft intoned, weary and displeased. "Security checks have come clear on every single member of my department. No unexplained financial deposits, no evidence of the files on any device... I'd be interested to hear what you suggest I do now."

Sherlock took a seat. He gathered his feet beneath him on the chair, apparently oblivious to the tension that had them all in its grip.

"As expected," he said. "I've afraid you've been labouring under an assumption for the past five days, Mycroft. Luckily, John and I have been rather more productive."

Greg could almost see ice clouds forming in the air around the laptop. "Enlighten me, brother mine."

"You won't find your blackmailer among your terrified staff… nor among your enemies."

"I will," Mycroft breathed. "I assure you."

"You won't," Sherlock said, "for two reasons - chiefly, that they are not there to find, and secondly, that it is not your blackmailer."

There was a taut, confused silence. Greg realised his undrunk tea was burning the pads of his fingers and put it down.
"Explain," Mycroft's voice said from the laptop.

"This individual commenced their scheme with a single focus. It since has widened… but in their original plan, you played very little part, dear brother." Sherlock smiled a little, casting his eyes across the lounge. "It was all about our good friend Inspector Greg here."

A strange cold spread across the front of Greg's chest.

"What do you mean, 'all about me'?" he said.

"Five hundred pounds? Small change to the British government. Barely worth asking for. But a significant demand to make of someone on a police salary… I had my suspicions before we even spoke, at which point you helpfully confirmed them."

Sherlock sat back in his chair, giving a satisfied smile.

"'Cock-jockey','" he crowed.

"Excuse me?" said Mycroft, alarmed.

"There are many, many foul names I would like to call you, brother mine - but never one of such limited creativity. Clearly wielded by one whose knowledge of you came from only what they saw in those photographs. It was the one thing they knew about you: your relationship to Inspector Lestrade. Anyone with any other knowledge of you could have selected from a whole host of vile little epithets… but no, Mycroft. It's quite clear. To whomever acquired those photographs, you were at first a complete unknown. It was Greg they wished to hurt."

"So this is - ..." Greg found his lungs oddly tight, as if the air were too thin. "This is - someone who knows me."

"You told me you 'unnerved' the man with your audacious little show of anger," Sherlock said, tilting his head. "Never pleasant to be threatened with being burned alive, I'll warrant you - but to be surprised by it? It suggests the poor soul hadn't realised they were playing with fire. You were the original target, and I'm sorry to say you were perceived as no threat. But you then invoked my brother as your shield - named him - and 'Holmes' is a rather recognisable surname these days... in doing so, you doomed him."

"The price hike," said John, suddenly.

"The price hike," Sherlock murmured. "Clearly, research was done on this new name you had supplied to the blackmailer. A net worth was crudely guessed, and the price of silence recalculated accordingly. Don't feel bad, Mycroft. It's a natural assumption that within a couple the more powerful of the two is most likely to spawn a blackmailer - particularly if you have an ego the size of Bulgaria..."

"So it's one of his contacts," Mycroft said, sharp.

Greg's jaw set. Somebody he knew - someone he spent time with - someone he trusted - had gotten hold of his phone, entered his passcode and raided it for dirt. It made him feel sick.

He wasn't interested in being sneered at for it.

"I'm sitting right here," he snapped. "And how the hell was I supposed to know?"

The voice in the laptop crackled with annoyance. "You might have vetted your social circles more
"Are you serious?" Greg demanded. He realised he'd just shouted at an inanimate object - it only made him angrier. "Are you suggesting I should have asked people when I met them if they ever planned to blackmail me for money?"

"I'm suggesting you should have been more vigilant."

"Piss off, Mycroft. I only know one person cold and calculating enough to do this. And funnily enough, you're in the clear."

The audio levels on the laptop spiked wildly. "My cock is about to be plastered far and wide across the internet," Mycroft near-shouted, "and you feel there's something to be flippant about?"

"You know this is exactly why I didn't tell you, right?" Greg raged back. "None of this is my fault! I didn't ask someone to blackmail me! But I bloody knew you would - "

"- not your fault? Are you implying that this is in some way my - "

"- didn't dare come to you, so thanks for proving - "

"- one of your wretched work-mates, and I will not accept for a second - "

"It could be family," Sherlock interjected.

John put his face in his hands. Greg stopped, mid-sentence, and changed fire from one Holmes brother to the other.

"What was that?" he demanded.

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. "It could be family. Nothing excludes - "

"No," Greg barked. He was not interesting in hearing this. It was not being discussed. "No. It couldn't be family."

"Why not?" the laptop asked.

Greg felt every last flicker of colour drain from his face. He turned, shaking, to the device.

"Which one, Myke?" he asked, voice hollow. His fists clenched. "The six-year-old? The invalid who just had a heart attack? The only person who cares about me in the world, or my dead mum? All just as likely as each other. Go on, then. Pick a name and explain to me what the actual fuck you - "

"Your father," Mycroft snapped. "It's obvious."

"He wouldn't fucking blackmail me, Mycroft. Aren't you supposed to be smart? You think he'd still be alive if he'd seen those fucking photos? They'd have found him dead still holding the fucking phone. Go on, then - who's next? Rachel, is it? Or Toby? He can't talk yet, but sure, go ahead and make a case for him. Or what about the bloody dog? I'm sure Boofle could have cobbled a ransom demand together while they were all asleep... printed it out, popped it in the post - "

"Sherlock, " Mycroft snarled. "I haven't the time or patience for another second of this. Who is it?"

Sherlock looked briefly disarmed.
"John and I are pursuing a number of possibilities," he said. "The destruction of the original phone makes things - "

"Not good enough," the voice in the laptop seethed. "I didn't ask you for possibilities. I asked you for answers. Now find them, and stop wasting my time."

The line went dead. The online window closed with a soft flash, shrinking neatly into nothing.

Greg found himself shaking. His fingers had locked into fists.

"Are you alright?" John asked.

It took Greg a moment to reply. "M'fine."

"You… don't look it."

"It's not my family," Greg snapped. "It's not my work mates, either. It's - … this isn't happening."

He looked up at Sherlock still curled up in his armchair, feeling like he hadn't slept in weeks - like this whole thing had been happening now for months. He couldn't go on.

"What did you find today? Just… tell me straight."

Sherlock hesitated, his eyes flickering to John. "Sergeant Donovan has… eight thousand pounds of credit card debt," he said. "Holidays and clothing. Your receptionist is sexually attracted to you and quite convinced she'll have you at some point. Roy resents his mother's care home fees and thinks you're overpaid. Kelly from HR initially believed you were something of a 'lech' - recalled her figure in great detail, but not her name - feels rather guilty about it now. Oh, and Paul from Accounts absconded to retirement with a number of pieces of computer hardware… suggests a general interest in easy money... possibly scratchcards. Possibly his cousin's wife. Possibly both."

Greg reeled, deathly silent. He could still see Sherlock through the fog of it all - regarding him across the coffee table with quiet, rare apology.

"Motive, access and opportunity," Sherlock murmured. "I'm - afraid they're in plentiful supply. The problem shall be narrowing it down."

He hesitated.

"Your… sister's husband's promotion was rejected last week," he said. "And they haven't paid their council tax bill since - "

"Don't," Greg bit out. "Just… don't."

Sherlock opened his mouth. John leant forward quickly.

"Don't," he said.

Sherlock faltered; his mouth fell shut.

Greg got silently to his feet.

He didn't look back as he left. They didn't follow. He walked silently down the stairs, let himself out of the front door and set off down Baker Street, as cold and numb as a stone.

Bludgeoned by thought, he saw nothing that he passed on the way. Faces fazed before him - his
work mates, his family, Mycroft. In the utter absence of his brain, his legs carried him home. They walked him to his door, up the stairs and into his flat before finally giving way.

He then sat against the door in the dark, hands over his face. It didn't block out the thoughts.

He smoked until midnight, drank half a bottle of cooking sherry he found under the kitchen sink, and locked his phone in the medicine cabinet before he could start texting people.

Before he did, he made a single phone call.

"The number you have dialled has not been recognised. Please recheck the number you have entered, and try again. The number you have dialled has not been recognised. Please recheck the..."

That night, he had the nightmare. He barely made it to the bathroom sink in time to vomit.

A few new details. Mycroft still brandished the belt. People were filming it happening now - a ring of fascinated faces, camera phones gleaming as they trained upon him huddled and bleeding at Myke's feet. He recognised them all. Most of his team at work - Sally, with a gleaming silver suitcase - his dad, smoking, bored with the scene - his sister, ignoring his pleas for help - his mum, who was not filming. She stood at some distance behind the others. She watched, crying silent tears, but she did not answer his pleas.

Greg cleaned himself up in the bathroom and turned on all the lights. He pulled the covers from his bed to the sofa, switched on the TV. He needed to hear voices. He needed to see faces that were not staring at him.

It was almost three AM.

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It would do. It would have to. Mycroft wrenched off the cap, filled the glass, drank it and filled it again. It tasted like a funeral arrangement. He filled a third glass, his wrist shaking, and drank it as he paced the empty shelves of the cellar. It was almost three AM.

There was no alcohol of any quality in the house. He'd barely had time to think about such things - cancelling the sale had been enough of a nightmare. It had been too late to cancel the contents. Now here he was, throwing back the sort of paint stripper they sold by the litre in Sainsburys, stalking a cellar beneath an empty house - too angry to be distressed; too distressed to be anything else.

If the swill stopped him thinking, it was all he could ask of it.

It wasn't working so far. He would drink more until it did. For now, he couldn't put out of his head that one of them had decided they were a predator - and that Greg was prey. *'Burn them alive'?

There would be nothing left to burn.

*Piss off, Mycroft. I only know one person cold and calculating enough to do this.*

Mycroft's lip curled. He doused the thought with brandy, poured himself another glass and brooded by the table for some time, trying to let it warm in his hand. It would improve the flavour, if nothing else - not that he was drinking it for flavour.

*Fifteen thousand.*
A laughable figure. Insulting in both its smallness and its grandeur.

If Mycroft had been inclined to see cunning in this blackmailer's motions, he'd have considered it a master-stroke - a demand so enormous that Greg could barely comprehend it, so pathetic that Mycroft had been tempted to pay the thing in one-and-a-half-million individual pennies delivered by lorry. Those two worlds, he thought - legions apart. The gulf between. That *unconquerable* gulf, and a blackmailer clawing their way up between the two, wrenching them apart.

Really, this wasn't about money. The number would rise anyway. This creature would continue greedily increasing it until they pushed too far. It was damn obvious, and Greg should have seen it. This wasn't a matter of mathematics.

It was war, and somebody was going to die.

The brandy, warm, tasted much as it had cold. Drinking it slowly was having no more effect than throwing it down his throat. Mycroft swirled it and downed it, coughing a little. It would kick in soon - then he could sleep. He checked his watch.

He had a cabinet meeting in the morning.

He'd have to smile, and consider, and advise, and sound like he gave a single flying pig whether the country prospered or collapsed upon itself like wet tissue. He couldn't care less for the country in this moment - only one small, unreachable part of it.

Once, being awake at three AM had been his favourite thing in the world.

Warm arms around him. Quiet breathing - the one who loved him, sleeping safely. Sometimes, awake with him too. The sleepy tangle of their limbs. The rasp of sheets; the sleep-husked rumble of Greg's voice against his neck. "You awake, love…?" He'd called Mycroft 'treacle' once. It had taken him a while to make the connection. Cockney rhyming slang. Treacle tart; sweetheart.

Nowhere in the whole world had felt as safe as that bed.

Now it - and Mycroft - were about to become internet pornstars together.

A laughing stock. A joke. Two decades dedicated to a thankless career, and after everything, after a lifetime of hard work, all his power and his influence would be no more the towering bonfire upon which he burned.

Mycroft realised his hand was forming a claw around the brandy glass.

Worse, he was starting to realise something he didn't want to.

After all of it - the betrayal, the lack of trust, the humiliation of going to his little brother; the constant, choking fear with which he'd walked for days now; the misery of moving back into this place alone - after *all* of it...

All he wanted was to go home.

He wanted to go back to that bed. He wanted to be there, with the man who made the whole world go quiet. He wanted to be held.

Tears - restrained, hot and silent - glittered in his eyes.

He swallowed, hard.
"Why didn't you tell me?" he whispered to the empty cellar. His hand shook; empty, he drank.

He would burn it away, he thought. He would burn the pain to nothing - then the blackmailer, and then the world - and if all that didn't work, he would just burn himself. He would ascend the bonfire of everything he'd ever worked for, and let the whole world laugh as he fell into white ash and smoke.

Power was nothing in the end.

He would have traded it all for that cluttered flat in Marylebone - for the bed where he felt safe - for the man who woke him up at three AM just to love him.

And in the end, he was going to have neither.

"You should have told me," he breathed to the silence. He curled his hands over his face. "You - stupid, stupid - …"

Cold, Greg had called him Calculating.

If only, Mycroft thought. If only the cold would come. It had been easy, once - as easy as breathing - termination of feeling had been a way of life. Now, he couldn't do it. He couldn't turn it off any longer.

Brandy wasn't working. Anger wasn't working. Nothing was.

He couldn't drink away the lack of trust. "You know this is exactly why I didn't tell you, right?" He could still hear Greg's voice through the laptop, angry and sharp - as if this were entirely his fault - as if he were some unapproachable monster.

For weeks, Greg had known - held him, kissed him, driven him to work - said not a word. As Mycroft had rearranged the DVD shelf to make room for his own, Greg had been in possession of the letters. Every morning, they'd had breakfast together. Every night, they'd made love. Greg had known what was coming for them, known they were in danger, and he'd not said a word of warning. He'd not trusted Mycroft enough to warn him his life was about to be ruined.

It made him so angry he wanted to smash the brandy glass into shards in his fist. It made him feel so lonely he wanted to burn London to the ground.

He would smash something else into shards soon, he thought.

Some person, who fancied themselves a predator.

Some parasite.

Love was gone. It had belonged to Mycroft, briefly. It had been everything in the world, and it had laid him to ruin, leaving only loneliness in its wake.

Perhaps in time he'd learn to live with that; there would be some cold, colourless existence he could return to. Maybe one day he would wake up to find he'd passed through grief into numbness.

Or perhaps it would destroy him.

Mycroft didn't know. There were too many variables.

He told himself it didn't matter.
Love might be gone; he could still make someone suffer for it.

He rolled the edge of the brandy glass along his lower lip. A tell-tale shake was beginning at last in his grip. The anesthetic was kicking in. The emotions would be neutralised soon, he thought - and then, finally, he could sleep.

Mycroft closed his eyes, breathing it slowly in.

*From hell's heart I stab at thee, he thought. For hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee.*

Chapter End Notes

Mycroft quotes Captain Ahab from Herman Melville's 'Moby Dick'.
"Any sign of them stopping?" John asked, five days later, as Sherlock drifted wearily into the kitchen. Shouting could still be heard from the lounge.

"No sign yet," Sherlock sighed.

John shook his head, fishing the tea bag out of a mug with a spoon. "Is this the fourth or fifth argument?"

"This would count as the fifth," Sherlock replied, "if we take two and three as back-to-back but separate incidents. Though, the content of all five seems to be much repeated…"

Through in the lounge, Greg's voice rose sharply. "What do you want me to do, Mycroft? Throw them all into holding cells until one of them confesses? I'm doing what I can!"

John transferred the tea bags into the bin with a sigh.

"We're getting nowhere, Sherlock. It's the seventeenth. The guy's turning up again in three days and we've got nothing on him."

"It isn't a simple problem," Sherlock muttered.

"I know," said John. "It's just…"

The two voices escalated further - one live in their lounge, the other several miles away in Belgravia, no less angry over audio-link. They'd been fighting for fifteen minutes now. Attempted interventions had been viciously ignored. John, out of ideas, had resorted to tea. He didn't think it was going to work.

"It's hard seeing them like this," he said. "That's all."

Sherlock said nothing. He leant against the fridge with his arms folded, lost in thought.

"Look... do you have any serious ideas?" John asked him, quietly. "One way or another... I mean... even just a vague instinct. Anything to go on."

Sherlock's eyes flickered to his. They hesitated briefly on his mouth before reaching his eyes.

"Too many," Sherlock admitted, after a moment. "No end to the supply of motives. Few restrictions on access. Limitless opportunity. Even the coincidence of the birthdays can be overlooked. I can't narrow down a field so wide, John. And our clients are not assisting in the process."

In the lounge, discussion had moved onto whether Greg was even trying to prevent the utter ruin of Mycroft's career, or if this all played into some plan to sabotage it all along.

John lowered his eyes, trying to think. He worried his lip a little between his teeth.

"Did Greg say he'd made any progress with the mug books?" he asked.

"He assures me he's scrolled through the Scotland Yard database of every known criminal with a broken nose in London. Thousands of faces. None of them right."
"So it's… someone with a clean record?"

"Or someone whose nose was not broken when his record began," Sherlock said. "Perhaps someone towards the back of the database, when Lestrade's eyes were tired. Someone who has sufficiently altered their -"

"Right. I get it. It's… a no-go." John sighed, searching the cluttered kitchen table for inspiration. "What about CCTV from the tube? Did that go anywhere?"

"London Transport won't release the tapes without an official request from the police."

"One of which... Greg is…?"

"He's unwilling to sanction it," Sherlock sighed. "Being, as it is, an investigation of a very personal nature… too many questions asked. Too much risk of it returning to someone it shouldn't."

"Can't Mycroft... force them to release the tapes?"

"Repeat my previous answer to yourself... it is the same."

John gave a faint, humourless smile. He should have guessed.

He reached over to the kitchen table, picking up one of the mugs - Sherlock's favourite. It was printed with the periodic table. No-one else was allowed to use it.

"What do we do?" he said, as he handed Sherlock the mug.

Sherlock glanced down at the liquid inside - green tea, brewed for a hundred and fifty seconds and not one more. His expression gentled as he looked back into John's eyes.

"I'd hoped we could avoid a third meeting with the blackmailer's mouthpiece," he confessed. "Now I feel we must prepare for it."

"Right," said John. ("Because I saw her face, Mycroft, when she found out we were fucking! That's how! It's not Donovan, and if you mention her once more...") "I suppose it'll get you more data, at least. But - fifteen thousand pounds...?"

Sherlock lifted his tea to his lips.

"Mycroft will find it from somewhere," he said. "We'll send it marked. Risky with a professional blackmailer… but with a plucky amateur, probably well worth doing."

"Can we have police standing by?" said John. "Just... grab the guy and bundle him into a van?"

"We can propose it," Sherlock murmured. "They will both reject it. Neither has been willing to involve any professional help outside this room. It is deeply frustrating but unchangeable. This… operation will likely be just the four of us."

John tried a smile, cradling his tea in both hands. "Good job they hired the best, then."

Sherlock's eyes gleamed a little. "Mm. Very good job."

Through in the lounge, the disagreement had advanced from Greg's reckless lack of vigilance to Mycroft's inability to be anything but a prick just when people needed him most.

"What do we do about… them, Sherlock?" John muttered. "I mean... they're tearing each other to
pieces. They'd probably just shout at each other all night if we let them."

"It's feasible," Sherlock remarked. "Say what needs to be said… express any - "

"This is argument five," John reminded him. "Five out of infinity. They're just retraceing the same
ground again and again. They're not going to fix this over an audio-link."

From the look on Sherlock's face, John knew it to be true. They were quiet together for a moment,
listening to the raised voices continuing to argue in the lounge.

It wasn't a discussion. It was just shouted pain, back and forth.

"I don't like seeing this," John admitted after a moment. "It's - difficult."

Sherlock's face softened for a moment. After his return, they had fought bitterly for weeks - John,
distraught at the lack of trust; Sherlock, struggling to comprehend the problem.

"I'm - sorry."

John couldn't bring himself to say 'it's fine'; but he hated the guilt in Sherlock's face. He reached
out, patting him gently on the arm.

"This isn't your area," John said. "Okay… here's a suggestion. The blackmailer's going to be at the
tube station again on the 20th. That's three days. We'll call a ceasefire now - no more contact, no
more arguing, nothing for two days, while you come up with a plan to deal with the blackmailer,
and I'll come up with a plan to deal with Greg and Mycroft. Then we all meet on the 19th to get
things clear. How's that?"

"I suspect I've been assigned the easier task," Sherlock murmured. Through in the lounge, Greg
warned Mycroft for the third time this evening not to even dare bringing his sister into this.

John gave him a quiet smile. "It's alright," he said. "You know me… I like a challenge."

They hesitated, still standing together beside the fridge and holding mugs of tea.

Sherlock put his gently to one side. John shot him a look of warning.

"The rule," he said. "Not near people - "

Sherlock conveniently neglected to hear him. He cupped John's face between his careful hands, and
placed a small kiss between his eyes. John fell quiet at once; his eyes closed. The small act of love
was gentle and fragile as a butterfly, but it seemed to lift a little of the tension in the air. The room
was happier for it: a single spot of bright joy.

As Sherlock drew back, he was smiling. John fought valiantly to suppress his own smile.

"You broke the rule," he remarked.

"So I did," Sherlock mused. "Unless a blackmailer of our own is hiding in the fridge, I think we
should be fine."

John's eyes sparkled.

"I'll go start winding things down for the night," he said. "Wish me luck." He picked up the tea
tray and headed through to the lounge.
Being lonely at home was bad enough. As the days wore on, Greg had found himself increasingly lonely at work.

All the faces that would usually bring him some small bump of joy - passing in the corridor, eating lunch in the staffroom, waiting in line at the photocopier - now brought him only a dull, leaden feeling of paranoia. He could barely make conversation with Sally in the car. He found himself looking sideways at her clothing, trying to figure out whether it was new and roughly how much it cost. Every time Sharon from Reception transferred a call to him, he made a point of being as blunt and uncommunicative with her as possible. He couldn't bear to hear about HR or Computer Crime without his already unstable mood taking a nose-dive.

Within a couple of days, word had discreetly circulated that DI Lestrade was on the warpath. People started leaving him alone after that.

Greg sat in his office most of each day, trawling through paperwork and wishing for a serial killer - a mass-stabbing - anything to occupy his mind.

He was barely sleeping - nightmares. Barely eating. Last night for dinner he'd had a multipack of Mini Cheddars, a bottle of Pinot Grigio and twenty Rothmans. He felt like death.

The only thing he'd done much of was replay the arguments with Mycroft in his head, wounding himself over and over with the most venomous parts. He couldn't stop hearing them.

"You sound really tired, G… is everything okay?"

He couldn't even open up to Rachel - damn Mycroft, flooding him with poison. He couldn't hear her voice without picturing unpaid council tax bills and shopping bags.

"Work," he told her quietly, lying on the couch half-dressed with the phone propped against his ear. The place was no longer clean, at least. It now looked like a hoard of invisible students had moved in. "Tricky investigation," he said. "Not going how it's meant to. People lying to us. It's… wearing me down."

"Is your fella looking after you at least?" Rachel asked in his ear.

Greg stared at his own reflection in the TV screen: unshaven, alone and unhappy.

"Yeah," he said. "He's... very understanding." He swallowed the memory of Mycroft's main arguments last night - how reckless he was, how untrusting, how irresponsible. "Rach, you… haven't told anybody, have you? Not even by accident?"

"No, G… not a soul."

"Not - even Graham?"

"Not even Graham. You… said not to, so… why, G? Have I done something wrong?"

Greg had never hated himself more. He rubbed between his eyebrows, wondering where this would end. He couldn't believe he'd thought it would all be over with £500; it made him feel like the stupidest idiot alive. He was supposed to be a DI. One hint of emotion and all his reason had been jettisoned out the window, along with his sense of honour.

He was starting to suspect this wouldn't end until he hadn't a friend to his name, until he'd pickled his liver and smoked his lungs inside out, smashed his career to pieces and been outed on the internet anyway.
In truth, he almost didn't care about the photos now. If they got out, they got out. It couldn't ruin things anymore than they already were.

But then, most of the pictures weren't of him.

It was Mycroft who had the reputation to uphold, and Mycroft who would suffer - Mycroft who'd be humiliated.

Greg realised, with a sluggish thud of his heart, that he still hated that thought - no matter how much they were fighting. He didn't want Myke to suffer. He didn't want the world to laugh at him. It didn't matter how much poison Mycroft spat at him, how many friendships were now blackened with suspicion, how many horrific accusations came his way - he wanted Mycroft to be safe, and to be happy.

It was all he'd wanted, all along. It was why this whole mess had happened.

"G?" said a faint, distressed voice in his ear.

Tears were beginning in his eyes, hot and tired. Greg pushed them silently away. He was too exhausted to cry.

"Sorry, squirt... I know it's not - ... I know you wouldn't. M'sorry."

"Promise me you're okay, G... you sound like you're falling apart -"

There came a knock at the door.

Greg stiffened, going quiet to listen. After a few seconds, there came another gentle knock.

"Rach, I... have to go. I'll call you back." He hung up on her goodbye, grabbed his jeans from the floor and pulled them on as he crossed the lounge. "Hang on!" he called. "Just -"

He hurriedly buttoned his shirt as he got to the door, heart pounding. It took him a minute to get the lock undone.

He pulled it open, taking a deep breath.

It was John.

As they met eyes, and John smiled, Greg realised who he'd been expecting to see.

Everything went quiet for a moment; he wet his dry lips.

"Hi," he said.

Apology flickered over John's face. He knew who Greg had expected, too. It was a mark of John's character, Greg thought, that he would even look sorry for turning up somewhere as the person he actually was.

"No Sherlock?" Greg said, for something to say.

"Oh - no, not this time." John gave a slight smile. "We've agreed that he'll do the actual crime-solving, and I'll handle client relations."

"Client relations," Greg said. Any other time, he'd have found it funny. He glanced down, realising his shirt was buttoned wrongly and there were Mini Cheddar crumbs in his chest hair. "I, ah..."
wasn't really expecting…"

"I'll only be five minutes," John said. He hesitated, considering something. "Mycroft is - … well, he was dressed, but he's not - …" He frowned at himself, trying to find the least offensive way of saying this. "He's not at the top of his game either. Can I come in?"

Startled, Greg held open the door. "Sure…"

John made no comment as he entered the flat. The curtains had not been opened for days, and the kitchen bin had not been emptied. He politely did not look at the collection of wine bottles beside the sofa, nor the ashtray overflowing with cigarette ends, but instead turned his attention to Greg.

"Sherlock's working on a plan for Monday," he said.

Monday was Blackmailer Day, Greg thought - a single weekend away.

"We hoped you'd be okay going to the tube station again," John said, carefully. "You won't be alone this time, and we'll make sure you have all the right questions to ask. I know it's not ideal. But we think that if we all pull together, we can catch them both - the blackmailer and the messenger."

"What about the - "

"Mycroft's agreed to supply the money - marked. You'll have it in a briefcase. That's all Sherlock's decided for now."

Greg hesitated, looking away. "Fine," he said. "Should I… come to 221B just before?"

"Actually," John said, with care, "we wondered if you'd come over on Sunday night."

"The day before?" Greg frowned. "Why?"

"I think Sherlock's plan might be a little complicated - there are some things to test out, and some details to get right… best to run a rehearsal."

"Alright," Greg said, suspicious. He ran his tongue behind his teeth. "Will…?" he said.

It was all he needed to ask. John understood.

"Yes," John said, his eyes quiet. "He'll - be there too."

"In person?"

"Yes. If you can handle that."

"Right." Greg drew in a long breath, saying nothing for a while. "Hide the knives somewhere, will you? I've got total trust in you as a doctor, John - but stab wounds aren't easy. I don't want to die."

John pushed his hands into his pockets, no light in his eyes.

"Are you planning on stabbing him back?"

"No," Greg said. His heart ached with it, but he couldn't hide it. "I, um… this isn't - … I know Mycroft thinks I'm pondlife right now, but… well, it's never really mutual. That's all I'll say."

John listened, quietly understanding.
"Have you - tried telling him that?" John smiled a little. "No offence, Greg, but... you're giving as good as you're getting, from what I can see."

Greg snorted, trying to smile.

"Hard to tell someone who thinks you're a worthless idiot that you miss him," he said. "Easier to tell him he's a prick."

"Easier," John admitted. "But it won't make anything better."

"I've given up on making things better," Greg said. "Right now I'd settle for 'quiet'. It's... the best I can hope for."

"You know he misses you too - don't you?"

Greg snorted. "Be serious."

"I've just come from Chester Square," John said, with a small shrug. Greg's heart contracted. So that's where he is. "Mycroft might not be saying it in words, but... believe me, Greg. He's just as much of a wreck as you are."

He looked away, apologetic.

"Sorry - I know that's - "

"No, it's... fine." Greg's heart whirled. "I am a wreck." He hesitated, wondering how much he dared to ask. "What did Myke - talk to you about? I mean - ... did he..."

"He's - a bit fixated on vengeance, I'll admit. I don't think there's much chance of your blackmailer being forgiven at the end of all this. But - for you... "

John let the thought fade away; he gave a Greg a meaningful.

"He's - hurting, Greg. He's afraid. And he's a Holmes. They don't handle it well."

Greg nearly smiled. "Don't we know it?"

John's eyes were bright for a moment.

"It's the... lack of trust that Mycroft is having problems with," he said, carefully. "He - doesn't see why you didn't tell him."

"I... thought I'd lose him. So I figured if I just dealt with it myself..." Greg sighed, scuffing the edge of his foot across the grubby carpet. "I don't know. We'd had rows before. I hated it. I liked when we were happy and - ... well, domestic. I just wanted that to keep going. I wanted to keep him safe."

"I don't think he wanted your protection," John said, quietly. "He wanted your trust."

Greg felt it sink, slowly, into his chest and settle somewhere deep.

"But how do I - ..." Greg pushed his hands through his hair, uneasy. "He's not interested in talking, John. He just wants to shout at me over Skype, and tell me all my friends and family are plotting to ruin me."

"Because he's a Holmes," John said. "That's what they do. They snap shut like oysters and spit at
you when they're scared."

"That - sounds like the voice of experience."

"Well… try living with one for years. You get used to the pattern." John smiled, pushing his hands deeper into his pockets. "They think everyone will give up on them eventually and leave. So they drive everyone away, and say, 'see, I was right'. It makes them feel safe."

Greg had forgotten to breathe for a while. "So - what do I do?" he asked. "What do I say?"

John thought about it, quiet for some time.

"Don't spit back," he suggested. "Don't give him the anger he's goading you to give him. Don't show him he's right and that you're giving up. Instead, just… show him he's wrong, and you're not going. Tell him you're sorry. Keep showing him you're staying, and eventually he'll let you in."

"He's blocked my number," Greg said, faltering. "I can't contact him at all. I've tried - … God, about a hundred times… each time I just keep hoping that - "

"That's his shell," said John. "It's closed. You won't get through that way."

"So - how - "

"Come round on Sunday," John said. "I… know you're worried. But I think he needs to see you."

He paused. "And you need to see him, too."

"Right." Greg swallowed, feeling his throat tighten. "If he starts biting chunks out of me - "

"He might do," John warned. "Just… let him. It's a defence mechanism."

"If he starts on about my sister one more time - "

"Does it matter?" John begged, startling him into silence. "Mycroft doesn't have a clue who your blackmailer is. That's why he's taking pot-shots at every single person you know, one by one - and because it gets you to talk to him - but you know it's not her. That's what matters. Just let him say words at you. It's fear, Greg. That's all. You can't bite back at him or you're proving what he thinks about himself - which is that he's going to lose you anyway. Stop letting him think that."

"Right." Greg swallowed again, resolved. "I - … fine. I'll show him I still - ..."

He was going to handle this. The thought made his heart leap, lifting for the first time in days, pounding with renewed hope. He wasn't going to let this end. Even Mycroft wouldn't make him let this end.

"I'm not saying it'll be fixed right away," John warned. "It takes time. They need patience."

"I can do patience."

"And just… think about what I've said." John hesitated, glancing at the sofa - strewn with crisp packets, cigarettes packets and old clothes. "And don't give up on yourself, will you? That's the last thing Mycroft needs."

"John, I - want to say - "

"You don't have to," John said. "I just want the best for you. For all three of you." He hesitated, awkward - he'd said all he needed to. He gave a nod, cleared his throat, and showed himself out.
In the silence that followed the clunk of the door, Greg looked around the wreckage of his lounge.

This had been their haven, once.

Myke had laid in his lap here, peaceful and happy and safe as they relaxed after work, watching old black-and-white romances long past midnight. They'd eaten Thai food here, talking about everything and nothing. They'd kissed on this couch like weekends never ended, like nothing else mattered in the world.

This room wasn't meant to look like this. There were meant to be ice cream tubs and eighteenth-century novels lying around, not fag ends and half-eaten Pot Noodles. The curtains were meant to be open. Dinner was meant to be cooking; Myke's paperwork was meant to be on the coffee table.

And Myke was meant to be on that sofa - peaceful, happy and safe.

Greg looked down at himself, breathing out with a shudder.

"What the fuck…" he whispered, suddenly appalled by the crumpled shirt, the crisp crumbs, the stained jeans. He'd not even shaved in days. No wonder things weren't getting any better. They wouldn't, until he showed that he wanted them to. "Right…"

He rooted through the kitchen for a roll of bin bags. It was the best place to start.

Myke needed him - needed him to get up, and get dressed, and clean up the mess that he'd made.

That was good enough for Greg.

He wrenched open the curtains as he began to gather rubbish. It wasn't even nine. He had all night - and fuck it, he wasn't sleeping. He didn't want to lie in bed anymore, frightened of a nightmare he couldn't change. This, he could change.

He took two bin-liners full of crap out to the bins, hefted all the dirty dishes into the sink and left them to soak, put a load of laundry in, and went to shave.

"How did it go?" Sherlock asked, appearing noiselessly behind John in the bathroom. John looked round from the mirror, surprised, his chin covered in shaving foam.

"Oh - fine, I think. I suppose we'll find out on Sunday, but… seems positive, at least."

"Good." Sherlock loitered by the shower, watching for a while as John shaved. "I would make a poor blackmailer, John."

"Oh?" said John, flicking foam off the blade beneath the tap. "That's good to know. London can rest a little easier. What's brought this to mind?"

"It seems to involve a reckless idiocy of which I would not be capable. A wild disregard for one's own reputation… a viciousness. Fear is a foul thing to take up as a weapon against one's fellow man."

"Well, it's not the sort of thing anybody nice does…" John lifted his nose high in the mirror, running the blade carefully beneath it. "Not the kind of thing that's easily forgiven, either."

"No… quite ironically. Most of us would gather with great pity around a friend or family member who was blackmailed, regardless of their original transgression… but would we extend the same pity to one who had opted to blackmail? Unlikely."
Sherlock pondered the matter for a while, quiet, as John finished shaving. He rinsed the razor and dried his face.

There was a faint ding as he hung the towel up.

"Was that you?" he asked.

Sherlock blinked out of his state of contemplation. He reached absently into the pocket of his dressing gown for his phone, and read the message.

It caused an immediate frown.

"Everything alright?" John checked, reaching for his toothbrush.

"Mycroft," Sherlock said, and nothing more.

"Right… what's he said?"

Sherlock did not reply, typing some swift - and apparently annoyed - reply.

John put his toothbrush down. "What's wrong?" he said, coming over. He reached for the phone. "Oi… show me."

Sherlock hesitated, retaining the phone. John's expression softened.

"He's hurting, Sherlock. Of course he's being vile. What's he said?"

Sherlock looked away. He did not resist as John turned the phone around, bracing himself with quiet patience.

*Bring your happy little mongrel to heel, will you? I don't expect to be offered relationship advice on my own doorstep again. And the day I need it from the likes of him will be a sorry one indeed.*

*M.*

John smiled, giving Sherlock a look of reassurance. "I expected worse," he said. "Honestly, Sherlock. If it's taken him three hours, and that's the best he's come up with, then… it's fine. Like I said, he's hurting."

"I - don't want him to speak about you like that."

"Well… he doesn't mean it." John laid a hand on his arm. "Delete your reply, will you? Let me tell you what to put."

Warily, with a look of quiet concern, Sherlock deleted the acidic response he'd half-composed.

"Ready?" said John. "Okay, word for word… *John and I are here to support you however we can.* Put 'S', so he knows it's from you. Now send it."

Sherlock regarded him with uncertainty - but nonetheless hit 'send'.

"There," John said, smiling. "That's how you do it."

"Do what?" Sherlock asked, still baffled.

"That's how you look after Mycroft Holmes. Now let's hope Greg can manage it, too."
As Greg edged out of the car, balancing a cheesecake and a bottle of rosé under his arm, the front door burst open with a bang.

"Uncle Greg!" came the scream, as both a six-year-old and a spaniel came flying out and rushed down the path towards him. "Uncle Greg, Uncle Greg!"

Greg had just enough time to set the cheesecake and the wine on the roof of the car before his niece reached his arms. He scooped Sarah up off her tiny feet, grinning from ear-to-ear as she shrieked with laughter, whirling her through the air while Boofle charged about their feet and barked to his fullest.

The chaos of barking and laughter brought Greg's brother-in-law to the door. He came ambling down the path, smiling broadly.

"Alright, Greg?" he said, reaching them as Greg set Sarah gently down on her feet.

"Good to see you, mate..." They hugged one-armed, patting each other hard on the back. "Sorry I've not been round in forever. You know how it is, constant grief counselling. Did you see that ludicrous display last night?"

Graham grinned. Arsenal had been slaughtered 2-1 by Manchester City. Greg had watched it thinking of his brother-in-law, in his tidy flat with homemade sausage casserole, a single beer and only three cigarettes - one for each goal, one for the final whistle.

"Just came to tip you off," Graham said, glancing back towards the house. Sarah was now trying to round up Boofle, who thought this was a fantastic game. "He rang Rachel last night... pushed all the right buttons. She admitted to him you were coming over for Sunday lunch, and he went on about how he'd not seen you in ages..."

Greg's smile faltered a little, but did not fade. He took the cheesecake off the roof of his car.

"S'alright," he said. "She'd better not be feeling guilty."

"Had a bit of a cry earlier. She's worried you'll be upset with her."

Greg smiled. "It's not her fault he's our dad. And it's not her fault he's a c- ..." He spotted Sarah, hovering shyly behind her father's legs, Boofle now secured and squirming in her small arms. "... - ollorful character."

"Nice car," Graham said, with the restrained glance of longing that Greg was now used to seeing from other blokes. He grinned.

"She's a beauty, isn't she? I'll let you have a go in her later, if you promise to bring her back."

"Jesus," muttered Graham. "Don't tempt me."

Greg laughed.

As they headed up the path, an insistent voice said from Greg's side, "Uncle Greg, I can count to ten in French now."

"In French?" he said. "You get cleverer every week, young missy. You'll be telling me you can do
it backwards next."

Sarah lapsed into immediate silence, working it out.

As the front door shut, and Greg gratefully handed Graham his jacket, he could already smell his father's brand of cigarettes seeping from the lounge. He knew exactly where he would be - enthroned in the only armchair, feet up in the slippers Rachel had put on for him, glowering at the television and Sarah's scattered toys.

It would be fine, Greg thought.

He told himself he'd take it as a hardcore practice round for tonight. If he could survive his father's bile for a few hours, Mycroft was going to seem like a spitting kitten.

"Where's Rach?" he asked Graham, who nodded towards the kitchen door. "Alright. Give us a minute."

His sister was tending to five different pans at once, a teatowel thrown over her shoulder as she whisked gravy and heated up plates in the microwave. She didn't hear Greg as he came in. He smiled to himself, put the cheesecake and the rosé to one side, and said,

"What can I help with?"

She jumped. "Oh!" She turned around. "G - "

"Here," he said, and took the gravy jug off her and the whisk. "I can do that. Pour yourself a glass of wine. I brought cheesecake, by the way... is mandarin still your favourite?"

She gazed at him, lost; then she started to cry.

Greg put the gravy down.

"Come here," he said.

She was just a bigger version of Sarah, he thought, as he held her and patted her on the back. They felt just the same in his arms - one little, one grown. They even smelt of the same shampoo.

"Don't cry..." he soothed her. "I'll drive to Waitrose and swap it for raspberry. S'fine."

She sobbed into his shoulder. "Don't joke, G..."

"Yeah, I threw out the receipt. We're stuck with mandarin."

She sobbed again. "I'm sorry he's here - I just -"

"Hey... shhh. It's fine. We're going to have a good afternoon." He kissed her on the head. "And if we're not, you and me can sneak out, we'll get in my car and go to the pub. It'll take them at least an hour to find us. Alright?"

She gazed up at him, her eyes still shining. She dabbed them furiously with her teatowel.

"You're really not upset?"

"Look at me, squirt. Of course I'm not."

"You look great," she said - she beamed at him, still crying. "How's your fella?"
Greg smiled back at her. "He's fine," he said. He picked up the gravy jug again, tapping the whisk on the side. "You'll meet him soon. I promise."

A timer began to ring. Rachel swore gently to herself and hurried to strain the potatoes.

"Good job I didn't bring him today, huh?" Greg said. "What a strained Sunday lunch that would have been."

"If Dad had said a word to you," Rachel said, fierce, "just one word, I'd have told him to get out of my house."

Greg smiled to himself, whisking the gravy. "I'll hold you to that some day."

"I hope you do," she said. "I really do, G."

Sarah appeared suddenly in the kitchen doorway.

"Dix," she announced, loudly. "Neuf, heut… sept… six, cinq, quatre… d-… trois, deux, un!"

"You little star," Greg told her, grinning, as she skipped in a circle. "I hope you're going to teach me how to do that after lunch. Might take me a while, though. I'm not as bright as you."

"Come and see my farm, Uncle Greg. It's expanded now. They've got alpacas."

"Alpacas? Wow, I'd love to - but I'm just helping your mum for now, treacle. I'll be there in a minute."

"Mummy can do all that," Sarah insisted. "She's very good at that. You need to look at my alpacas."

Greg inclined his head to Rachel, who was grinning as she removed foil-wrapped plates from the microwave.

"Go on, G," she said. "I'm fine… lunch in two minutes."

Greg put the gravy jug beside the stove for her. "Right," he said. "Give me a shout and I'll carry things through."

Sarah seized him by the hand. "Come on, Uncle Greg! We're wasting time!"

She tugged him out of the kitchen, down the hallway and towards the door of the lounge, skipping slightly as she did. Greg let his niece's enthusiasm surrounded him like armour. He was ready for his practice round.

His father was there, smoking alone as they entered the lounge. He was slumped in the armchair Greg had known he would be in, feet up, slippers on, glaring at an advert for washing powder. He did not look up nor acknowledge Greg as he entered the room. Greg decided to do the same.

Sarah pulled her uncle eagerly across to the rug, where her tiny farm was laid out in all its glory.

"Look," she said. "Alpacas - I told you! - you can get wool from them to make hats."

Greg knelt down beside her, studying the tiny paddock she was pointing at.

"Wow, look at those guys… so they're like tall sheep, are they?"
"Yes, Uncle Greg - they're a bit like sheep… we saw some at the zoo last time. Don't you remember?"

"Of course I do, squirt. How's your farmer doing with his bees? Has he sold a lot of honey?"

From across the lounge, the voice finally spoke - rasping, heavily laden with sarcasm. "Hello, Greg."

"Hi, Dad." Greg did not look up, watching as Sarah hurriedly restored some fences she had knocked over by accident. "How are you getting on?"

"Oh - fine," his father said, breezy. "Kind of you to ask."

"Now, young lady," Greg said, turning to his niece with a smile. "I hear you had some glitter pens stolen. Your mum tells me you've been working hard on your investigation. What have you found so far? Want your Inspector Uncle Greg to look at the case for you?"

Sarah gazed at him in wondrous adoration, quite forgetting the fences in her hands.

"I know who did it, Uncle Greg! I worked it all out already!"

"Really?" he said. "You solved it yourself?"

"I'll show you!" she cried, jumping to her feet. "I'll go get all the clues I found -"

Her mother's voice called from the kitchen. "Lunch, everybody! Graham? Can you get the lamb from the oven for me?"

Sarah sprinted from the room. Greg watched her go with a smile, sliding his hands into his pockets.

There was a short silence.

"Been busy at work, has it?" his father said behind him, his voice edged with mockery. Let's hear the excuse then, Greg heard. Let's hear your explanation.

For a second, he considered pretending he hadn't heard. He could just leave the room, help Rachel carry food through to the dining table, and keep on playing nice.

Then something new came over him - something he hadn't felt before.

He turned, slowly, to look at his father.

The old man glowered up at him from the chair, eyes small within the folds of his face. He was waiting for Greg to explain himself - waiting to be appeased. It wasn't even his chair, Greg thought. This wasn't his house, and yet he sat in it like everything was his to demand - like everyone's attention had one proper place. He'd been the same his whole life.

And everyone had just gone along with it.

Nobody had ever told the bastard 'no'.

Greg took a moment to choose what he wanted to say. "Not so busy," he said.

His father snorted. "That so?" he said. "Thought you'd have found time to visit. I'm not a well man, Greg. My time's running short. You just think about that now and then."
Greg kept his cool. He squeezed the car keys in his pocket, finding them oddly reassuring.

"You want me to visit, do you?" he said. "Strange... when I'm here, you can't find a single good word to say to me."

His father stared at him, disarmed, saying nothing.

Greg lifted his chin. "Now 'scuse me," he said. "I'm going to give Rachel a hand with the food. You sit there, Dad. Keep the weight off your feet. Made it down the bookies lately?"

As he reached the door of the lounge door, his father called after him.

"I worked fifty hours a week for you, Greg. Week in. Week out. Buying you everything you needed."

Greg paused in the door, looking back.

"You know the three each night at the pub didn't count as work... right?" he said.

"Don't you speak to me that way, Greg…" His father's voice shook. "I raised you. Clothed you. Fed you."

Greg looked at him from the door, seeing him all at once for what he was - a broken old bastard who'd battered his kids and bullied his wife into an early grave, issuing demands from an armchair and expecting to be listened to.

"That's... what parents are meant to do, Dad," he said. "That's the bare minimum, to be honest..."

His father started to respond.

Greg left the room, calmly, and headed to the kitchen.

Rachel handed him a huge dish of roast potatoes smothered with a teatowel, glad of the help.

"Careful," she warned him. "Hot… don't go burning your fingers."

"This looks amazing," he said. "You know that? You're too good to us all."

She flushed a little, smiling. "I like looking after you," she said.

He grinned. "I'm washing up, alright? No arguing. You can put your feet up in front of the telly for once... God knows you've earned it."

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**Sunday 19th June**

19.59

*Light Rain Showers*

*No New Messages*

Greg slid his phone back into his pocket, patting dry the few spots of rain that had settled on the screen. This time tomorrow, it would be sixty minutes until their blackmailer arrived.

He hoped Sherlock had a plan.

But that part was out of Greg's hands.
He'd thought about it ever since he'd gotten home from Rachel's, weighted down with leftovers and Sarah's new drawings. It was up to Sherlock to figure this out - nobody better for the job, and he'd be far better at it than Greg was. It was up to John to keep them all sane.

And it was up to Greg to look after Mycroft.

He could handle that.

The door of 221B opened with a clunk. Mrs Hudson appeared in the doorway, delighted.

"Inspector Lestrade… come in - this dreadful rain! Whatever happened to summer?"

Greg stepped gladly inside, smiling. "I think it was those three days back in May, wasn't it? Blinked and we missed it."

As she closed the door behind him, he asked,

"Is Sherlock's brother here?"

Something strange touched the landlady's expression. It was gone in less than a moment; Greg couldn't be sure what it was.

"Yes," she said. "He's just upstairs with them now…"

"Thanks. I'll show myself up."

The stairs creaked petulantly under Greg's footsteps as he ascended. Nobody would ever break into Baker Street, he thought. As he approached the fated doorway, he put his hands around his car keys in his pocket. They were starting to feel like a talisman. They'd got him through his father; they would get him through this, too.

He stepped through the door.

Three faces turned towards his arrival - Sherlock, waiting by the mantelpiece; John, huddled over the laptop; and, by the far window, Mycroft.

As Greg laid eyes on him, he felt his stomach constrict. He suddenly understood Mrs Hudson's strange pause.

Mycroft looked dreadful.

His sunken eyes suggested sleep was now a long-abandoned luxury. His hair was unbrushed, unwashed and dull, and his skin was grey and sickly. His eyes were sharp with the eerie brightness of burgeoning illness. His cheeks were hollow; his chin and waist had thickened. The dark grey suit didn't seem to fit him anymore - too tight here, too baggy there, the shirt collar unkempt and the tie done with disregard. The overall effect was of a half-hearted impression of Mycroft Holmes, performed by one who'd had not enough time and only meagre resources to prepare.

Greg - clean-shaven, clean-shirted, and with eight hours of sleep beneath his belt - could only stare for a moment, realising the enormity of what he'd done.

There was a long, uncomfortable pause.

It was John who eventually broke it, with a tentative clearing of his throat.

"Greg… thanks for - …" He stood up, taking Greg's coat. "Have a seat," he said.
As he sat down, Greg could barely take his eyes from Mycroft. He'd never seen someone look so desperately unwell.

Mycroft, in return, was watching him with the guarded and unfaltering stare of a cornered viper. He remained still as a statue by the window, with a lit but neglected cigarette in one hand.

Greg had known this would be hard. He hadn't realised how hard.

He was glad to see that John didn't bother with offers of tea. He joined Greg straightaway on the sofa, carrying the laptop with him to make notes. Sherlock, too, took a seat - coiled himself quietly into an armchair, his fingers steepled, quite calm.

Mycroft was the last to join them. He did so with visible reluctance - as if unsure whether he was required to be here at all. Greg's heart ached with desperation as Mycroft came near enough almost to touch, lowered himself numbly in a chair, and stared hollow-eyed at the opposite wall.

"As you know," John said, tentatively, "Sherlock has been working on a plan…"

Mycroft seemed to remember his cigarette. He drew on it, stiffly, his eyes lowered. Myke watched him shake a little as he did it. The ends of his fingers were stained yellow.

"We actually have two parts to it," John said, glancing at his notes. "So… information, and then following the guy. We're pretty sure we can pull both off."

"Following him?" Greg asked.

"Yes - to establish where he lives," said Sherlock. "Or, ideally, where your blackmailer lives. This man is clearly a mere go-between, picked for his hard-headedness and general air of threat. There is a strong chance that he will deliver the money immediately to his employer. Likely for a significant cut, which he will want at once. If Greg's description is apt, this man has little access to wealth... we hope his eagerness for his share leads him to be reckless."

"Won't he... see me following him?" Greg asked.

"It won't be you following him."

"I'll be doing that," said John, with a small smile. "I'll have the best chance at blending in, according to Sherlock, so… I'll be waiting near the entrance of the tube station."

"But - how will you know which one he is?"

As John began to explain, Sherlock looked far too pleased with himself. Mycroft had yet to speak, move, or acknowledge that he was anything but alone.

"Well… we're going to be fitting you with some help you didn't have last time. You're going to have a small camera transmitting back to Sherlock and Mycroft, here at Baker Street. We're also going to put a wire on you. We'll be able to hear everything you hear, and give you instructions."

Greg's eyes widened. "Instructions?"

"There may be questions I should like to put to this keen businessman," Sherlock said. "I considered a number of alternatives where I could be present in person. All would have sparked his suspicions. I'm afraid you shall have to serve as my ventriloquist's dummy, Greg."

Greg smiled a little. "That's fine," he said. He could still feel the swirling vortex of unhappiness
that was emanating from the armchair to his right. "You and Myke will have a much better idea of what to ask this guy than I did. I'll do as you say."

"Miracles never cease," Mycroft intoned, drawing on his cigarette.

Greg took the blow without a blink. One, he counted.

"Genuinely," he said, "whatever you need me to do, I'll do it."

Mycroft seemed reluctant to surprised. He watched his cigarette smoulder with a slight frown, saying nothing.

A gentle quiet ensued. John and Sherlock - watching closely - visibly relaxed a little.

"So," said John, his eyes flicking briefly into Greg's, "we'll… send you with the money. You hand it over. Sherlock and Mycroft will watch via the camera, and get as much as they can out of the guy. Then you just let him leave, and I'll follow him to see where he goes."


"Simple plans have less opportunities to go wrong," said John. He cast his eyes to Sherlock. "As I'm told."

"Fewer opportunities, John."

John smiled. "Fewer. We thought about doing something more elaborate, trying to get him into custody, but…"

Greg shifted a little. "If we can do this - without police involvement…"

"I have already taken too much risk acquiring surveillance equipment," Mycroft added, sharp. "If I start requesting agents, questions will be asked... questions I am not prepared to answer."

"Have you managed to keep this quiet at work?" Greg asked him.

It was the first calm, reasonable question one of them had put to the other in weeks. Mycroft's brow contracted slightly, as if wondering what new game this was.

"With great effort," he replied, coldly, not looking at Greg.

"You - had your tech team check the internet. John told me."

"Two of them only. Two who are now paid well above their grade." Mycroft's frown deepened, drawing on his cigarette. "I should rather resolve this with as few professionals involved as possible... hence my brother. If it becomes known I'm being blackmailed, my position becomes untenable. Weak."

He hesitated, running his tongue around his teeth as he primed something in his mouth. Greg braced.

"No thanks to you," Mycroft added.

Two. Greg took the shot; it didn't hurt. "I'm sorry," he said. "I caused all this. But you won't be weak - we'll sort it out."

"Will we?" Mycroft muttered. "How gratifying."
Sherlock cast an ashtray from nowhere smoothly across the coffee table. Mycroft ground his cigarette into it as it slid to a halt, then reached into his jacket for another one.

"If you could manage that before half the world sees me tied to your headboard," he said around the cigarette, scowling as he looked for a lighter, "that would be marvellous."

Three. This was only getting easier. Greg reached into his pocket and held out the lighter.

Mycroft paused. He took it with a frown, lit the cigarette, and handed it back.

"Thank you," he intoned, audibly unnerved.

"You're welcome."

Mycroft sat back in his chair, taking the first drag on the fresh cigarette. "We're being pleasant to each other now, are we?" he inquired, blowing smoke.

Greg was aware of Sherlock and John at the table with them, doing a very good impression of people not listening.

"I've caused you enough trouble," he said. "You have enough to handle right now without me barking at you too."

"Are you attempting to make me feel guilty?"

"No," said Greg. He'd lost count of blows. "Just better."

Mycroft's expression quirked with reluctant surprise. He quashed it into a frown and lapsed back into silence, smoking, shoulders hunched.

Greg turned, mildly, to the two amazed faces across the coffee table.

"So," he said to them. "When should I get here tomorrow? Kick off is quarter past nine, right?"

Sherlock thought about it for a moment. "Be here for eight," he said. "That should be ample time to fit you with the camera and microphone."

"Fine. I'll be here." Greg raised his eyebrows, thinking it might be best to quit while they were ahead. "Anything else I can do, or...?"

John inclined his head instinctively to Sherlock. "I think that's - everything for now, isn't it, Sherlock?"

"Mm," said Sherlock. They were both still startled by the lack of a fight. "That seems… satisfactory for this evening."

Greg smiled, easing himself up from the couch.

"Good," he said. "I'll make myself scarce, then. Thanks for your hard work on this, guys."

He was halfway to the door when Mycroft spoke.

"Might Inspector Lestrade and I have a moment alone?"

Silence fell. Greg turned to find John giving him a worried look over the back of the sofa.
He tried to reassure him with a smile.

"Sure," he said. "Guys... would you - ?"

"Yes - of course..." John got to his feet. "Sherlock, shall we - ...?"

"Shall we what?" said Sherlock, concerned.

"Go upstairs?" said John. "You've - got a map of Baker Street tube station somewhere, I think. We should take a look at that."

Sherlock cottoned on. "Yes... I think we should."

He stood, slowly, and followed John from the room. The two of them headed away up the stairs.

For the first time in weeks, Greg and Mycroft found themselves alone.

Greg wondered briefly if he was expected to stay standing near the door - then he realised it didn't matter what was expected. What mattered was what he showed.

He came back to the sofa, quietly, and sat down. It creaked a little beneath his weight.

Mycroft continued to smoke for a moment, barely registering his presence.

It was hell to see him this way, Greg thought. He looked so in need - in need of everything: a shower, a long sleep, a decent meal, a shoulder to cry on, a neck to put his hands around. He was falling apart.

Greg wondered for a moment whether to say something - how to ask.

Mycroft spoke first, his voice hollow.

"Which of them is it, Greg?"


"Try."

"It won't help, Myke. I've been trying for weeks. All I can see are my friends, my family. I can't see what you need me to see."

"Then I need you to try harder," Mycroft bit out. His hand shook on the cigarette. "I am about to lose everything... everything. I'm not interested in - ..."

He shuddered, dragging on the cigarette like it would keep him alive.

"Sherlock's plan's going to work," Greg murmured. "Twenty-four hours from now, we'll find out where this guy goes. We'll see who opens the door to him. Then it'll be over."

Mycroft said nothing, his eyes bright and fevered as he smoked. Greg had never wanted to help someone more. He wanted to lift Myke out of the chair and into his arms, carry him from the building, all the way to his flat, put him in it, lock the door and make him better. He didn't care if it took weeks. He couldn't see him laid low like this.
"Myke, I'm - really sorry you're -"

Mycroft let out a cold laugh. "Don't you dare," he breathed, shaking his head.

"Myke -"

"Don't you dare breeze in here, looking like an action hero and tell me you're sorry I'm a wreck."

Greg felt his heart quieten, watching Mycroft shake. He longed to touch him - to rub his back, to coax away the shudder - but he didn't think it would go down well. Mycroft was tense enough to hook him around the jaw again if he tried. Ending the evening with an actual fistfight probably wouldn't count as progress.

He chose his words with care, his voice gentle.

"I know you're worried. Fuck, I'm worried too. I'm just trying to push that aside, so I can do a good job… so I can finish this properly, like I should have done a month ago. I fucked up and I hurt you. I'm not going to fuck up again."

Mycroft shook his head, wordless.

"You have no concept of 'worry'," he muttered. "You're not about to be... violated, for the whole world to see."

Greg's heart twisted. "That's - exactly what I'm worried about… you know that, don't you?"

"Oh, please," Mycroft hissed. "So you have a starring role in a few blurry seconds of video." He dragged on the cigarette, hard. "Don't even begin to claim your reputation is going to suffer as much as mine."

"Myke, I mean I don't want to see you violated..." Greg sat forwards, gazing at him in despair as he ground out the cigarette. "I don't give a fuck what happens to me. So my dad will hate me twice as much, so what? It's... you I'm worried for..."

Mycroft covered his face with his hands.

"Stop it," he whispered. "Just - stop it. Stop whatever this game is."

"Caring about you, you mean? It's not a game."

"You do not care about me."

"I do," Greg said. He drew in a long breath, fighting the urge to hug Myke with every ounce of his strength. "Myke, I… fucked up royally. I shouldn't have lied. I shouldn't have kept it from you. Nobody knows that more than me. But I never stopped caring about you."

"Get out," Mycroft breathed into his hands. His voice broke.

Greg fortified himself. "I will," he promised. "In a minute - I'll go, and I'll give you space. Before I do, I just… need you to know..."

He knelt on the floor beside the other man's chair; he hesitated.

He laid a hand, gently, on Mycroft's arm.

"I'm going to fix this," he promised. "I'll fix it all, if it's the last thing I do."
Mycroft was deathly silent for several seconds.

He then whispered into his hands: "Get. Out."

Greg bit his lower lip. He could risk it - maybe ruin it - or he could leave it for now. They'd done well, and they would do better tomorrow.

He decided not to push it.

This wouldn't be solved in one conversation. Nothing would be gained by rushing; everything could be lost.

He chose not to hug Mycroft. Instead, he quietly got to his feet.

"I'll see you here tomorrow," he said, gently. "And - whoever it turns out it is, Myke, I… don't care what you do to them."


Greg paused.

He'd passed on the big risk. He decided he could take a small one.

"If you… wanted a second one," he said, "you know where I am."

Mycroft said nothing, face still hidden in his hands.

Greg took his cue to leave.

On the stairs, he paused and called upwards. "Sherlock? See you tomorrow, mate."

He let himself out into the rain.

As he heard his brother tentatively re-enter the lounge, Mycroft finally looked up from his hands.

Sherlock stood alone in the doorway, expression neutral. He was waiting.

Mycroft shuddered a little as he inhaled, looking away. "What?" he snapped.

"That seemed to go… well."

Mycroft didn't know what to think.

"I need to leave," he said. "I - have a number of work matters to - …" He got shakily to his feet.

"Eight, tomorrow?"

"Eight," said Sherlock. He did not try to stop Mycroft as he passed.

Back at Chester Square, Mycroft ignored the burgeoning stack of papers now all marked 'urgent' in his in-tray. They had been urgent for two days. The country was still standing; it meant they were not urgent at all.

He took a shower instead, thinking under the hot water for some time. He washed his hair, found clean clothes, and almost poured himself a glass of wine. Instead he made a malt drink. It was just past ten.
He took a book to bed - a Colin Dexter novel he'd been meaning to finish for a while. In the end, it bored him. His life was too much of a mess for fiction now. He put it aside and laid down to sleep.

After an hour with no success, Mycroft rolled over and reached for the bedside table.

His mobile phone was just where he'd left it.

He unlocked it with his fingerprint, skimmed through a number of pieces of software that were not standard on this model, and located one of the simplest - a blocker. Various numbers were listed. He scrolled through them silently, his eyes tired.

At last, he found the one he was looking for. He knew it by memory.

Mycroft gazed at the string of digits for some time in the dark.

It had initially felt so good to type it in and hit 'block'. That emotional door-slam - all the pain, all the misery, shut away with a single press of a key. It had felt like it would keep him safe.

It hadn't worked, though. He realised that now. He'd only crushed the despair deeper, where it could reach him but he could no longer reach it.

He just had to hope that someone else could reach it for him.

He stared at Greg's number, his heart pounding for the first time in days. He wanted to cry, but he was too tired.

_I'll fix it all_, he'd said.

*I never stopped caring about you.*

_You know where I am._

In a rush of emotion Mycroft hit 'unblock'. He closed the app before he could regret it. He put the phone aside, turned over, and slept straight through until dawn.
Both

Greg arrived at 221B the next night to find operations were already underway. John, dressed as an unassuming commuter in pale blue shirt and tie, was being wired for a microphone by an impatient Sherlock, who seeming to be getting annoyed with the process.

"The whole point of surveillance equipment is that it's meant to be unnoticeable, John. A bulging tie is going to ruin the entire - "

"Nobody on this planet notices how much ties bulge except you, Sherlock. This is ridiculous. Just hook it in there, and then the wire goes down behind the buttons. What's the problem?"

"The problem is that if you appear even vaguely suspicious, you could be - "

As they argued, Mycroft came across the lounge to Greg. He was carrying a second wire.

He looked better, Greg thought - much better. Calmer. He'd slept at least, and the clothes were clean. It turned out that covert surveillance was a smart-casual affair - white shirt, grey waistcoat, no tie.

"Sit, please," Mycroft said, not meeting his eyes.

Greg obediently took a seat on the sofa, watching as Mycroft untangled the pale glint of the wires. Sherlock and John were still absorbed in their gently heated discussion.

"How are you?" Greg asked, gently.

Mycrof cast him a slight frown, as if this were a strange question to ask. "I'm - quite fine," he muttered. He knelt down, stretching out the wire, and reached around Greg's neck to turn up his collar. "This may take me several attempts. It mustn't be visible at all."

"S'alright," Greg said. He gazed at Mycroft's face, quiet with concentration. "Do what you need to do."

There came a few minutes of silence, in which Mycroft fitted the wire carefully beneath his shirt collar and tested a few places to attach the button-sized camera. Greg said nothing, not wanting to cause any distraction. He just watched Mycroft work, and gazed at him, and enjoyed being near to him again.

Finally, Mycroft asked,

"How are you?"

Greg's heart-rate increased a little. "I'm fine," he said. "Looking forward to the end of all this."

"Mm." Mycroft reached across to the arm of the sofa for his laptop, levering it open as he studied Greg's collar critically. "Pity this isn't January. A heavy coat hides anything."

"Bit suspicious in June," Greg said.

Mycroft left the laptop to start up, lifting Greg's chin with one hand. "At least this is navy," he remarked. "Not quite as obvious…"

He bit the tip of his tongue as he secured the camera into place on Greg's collar with a tiny click,
then took a matching button from his pocket and clipped it to the other side. He appraised the effect, unconvinced.

"No… if the man has any wits at all, he'll spot it from the other end of the platform…"

The laptop had booted up. Mycroft picked it up in the crook of one arm, loading several programs with a frown.

"I daren't place it too low on your chest, or Sherlock and I will be deducing what we can about his stomach. We need to see his face."

"Clip it to some sunglasses?" Greg suggested. "I can wander in like I'm auditioning for a community theatre version of *Reservoir Dogs*.

The smile that flickered over Mycroft's mouth was the most perfect thing he'd seen in weeks. It was gone in a second, but Greg knew what he'd seen. It made his heart feel like it was filling up with helium.

"I don't think we're quite that desperate," Mycroft said. "But thank you for contributing."

He set the laptop aside on the sofa and knelt back in front of Greg, frowning at the video feed of his own face that appeared on the screen. He unsecured the camera and began to test some new places.

"What sort of things do you want me to ask?" Greg said, after some time.

"Sherlock will feed you questions as appropriate," Mycroft replied, concentrating as he fed the wire down between Greg's shirt buttons. "We've decided not to pre-supply you with a script… I don't want to burden your short-term memory."

"It's… Sherlock going to be in my ear, then?"

"Mm."

Greg hesitated. "Not you?"

"No, not me." Mycroft glanced up at him, halfway down Greg's shirt and currently anchoring a wire behind one of his buttons. "Sherlock feared we would fight."

"Who, us?" Greg said.

Mycroft smothered his smile. "Be quiet," he said. "Let me work. I need to get this right."

Greg consented to be quiet, smiling to himself. John and Sherlock were now studying a map of the surrounding streets, colour-coded with all the corresponding bus routes.

At last, Mycroft stepped back to appraise him. He glanced at the laptop screen, now featuring himself in crisp and live-action video.

"Have you finished configuring John's earpiece, Sherlock?" he asked. "We're ready here."

Sherlock appeared from the kitchen, carrying a small black case. "Some time ago," he said.

"So - I'll be able to speak to John, too?" Greg asked.

"Yes," said Mycroft. "Just in case."
Sherlock moved towards Greg, removing some tiny piece of technology from the case. Mycroft stopped him with a hand, and a frown. He took the case and the device from his brother, with a short "Thank you...", and knelt at Greg's side on the sofa.

"Tilt your head," he said.

Greg did so, trying to ignore the leaping of his heart.

Sherlock sloped off back to the kitchen.

"This may feel strange," Mycroft warned. "You will have muffled hearing in this ear. This is where Sherlock will be. Rest assured that your microphone will catch everything."

He began to fit something that felt like an in-ear headphone. Greg winced a little at first, but made no complaint. It took Mycroft a few minutes to make sure the device was hidden, smoothing something with his thumb that Greg suspected might be liquid latex.

At last, there was a faint, tiny click.

"... getting on better though," came John's voice in his ear, hushed, but as loud as if he were standing right next to Greg. "... I told you they just had to see each other, didn't I?..."

Greg paused, looking round in confusion. Sherlock and John were both through in the kitchen.

"... no, don't worry about me, Sherlock. I'll be fine..."

Greg put two-and-two together, biting his cheek to suppress a smile. Mycroft was still adjusting his earpiece.

"... I know, but I'll be careful..." There was a faint intake of breath in Greg's ear; his eyebrows lifted. "... the rule - ..." he heard John gasp. It was cut off.

Greg realised to a few seconds of some fairly interesting noises of shifting fabric, mouths, a gentle thump, and at one point a small moan that he realised could have been either of them.

"... promise me you'll be safe," he finally heard Sherlock murmur, somewhere close to the microphone. "Promise me."

"I'll be fine," John whispered. "Of course I will..."

Greg realised Mycroft was looking at him - with an expression of great concern.

"Is it working?" Mycroft asked.

Greg smiled. "Yeah," he said. "It's working fine."

"Oh - ... God," he heard John gasp in his ear, as the matching earpiece transmitted his voice to the kitchen.

Mycroft's eyes narrowed. "What...?" he said.

Greg glanced past him, to where a stony-faced Sherlock and a bright red John were creeping out of the kitchen. Sherlock proceeded straight to the second laptop set up by the window, beginning to load up software with a fiercely neutral expression.

John lingered by the mantelpiece, looking at no-one and doing a bad impression of casual boredom.
Greg smirked at him.

"Fifteen grand," he said. "In a briefcase on my desk tomorrow morning."

John shot him a pained look.

Mycroft stared down at Greg for a moment, bewildered - then looked sharply across at his younger brother.

"What has he just heard?" he demanded.

"One thing at a time," said Sherlock, stiffly. "Have you got the video feed in place, or are you still frivolously wasting time?"

"It's in place," said Mycroft, annoyed, gesturing at the laptop beside Greg on the sofa. "And the camera is invisible, which is more than I can say for John's microphone. That kelvin knot is the size of Greater London."

"We don't have time to change things," John intervened, before Sherlock could pick a fight. "It's fine. Greg, can you see a microphone on me?"

Greg looked him up and down, shaking his head. "No… not all."

"And I can't see a thing on you," said John. "So let's take the opinion of the two non-geniuses in the room, and carry on. We've only got a few minutes left."

"Agreed," said Mycroft. "One last time, then… the plan."

He picked up from the side of the sofa a small leather briefcase; he handed it to Greg.

It felt oddly light. Paper, Greg realised, and felt stupid at once - but then, he'd expected fifteen thousand pounds to feel a lot weightier than it did.

"Find yourself somewhere to stand that he's forced to approach you from the front," Mycroft instructed him. "Sherlock and I need the best visual shot you can give us. From what you've told us, this troglodyte rather enjoys holding power over you - probably a long-held grudge against the police and the authorities. He wants fear from you. Make him work for it. It will encourage him to linger. If he insists that you leave first, do so. Do not look for John. Proceed straight here, back to Baker Street, and John will handle the rest. Is that clear?"

"All this stuff will still work in the underground, won't it?" Greg said. He found himself suddenly a little edgy. "All the signal will still find me."

"The technology is the best I could acquire," Mycroft replied. "It should be fully functional on the platform. I can't guarantee it if you boarded a train."

"Am I going to be boarding a train?" Greg asked, concerned.

"No," Mycroft said. "And if you do, something has gone hideously wrong."

"Right…” Greg took a breath, steadying himself. "Wish me luck, then."

"You shan't need it," Mycroft said. "You have both Holmes and a Watson behind you. Luck is redundant. Now go. John will follow you in a few minutes."
As Greg crossed the ticket hall of Baker Street station, Sherlock Holmes's voice popped into being just inside his ear.

"How are we for volume, Lestrade?"

Greg paused by a map, pretending he was checking his route. "Down a little," he murmured.

Sherlock's voice eased slightly. "Any better?"

"Better."

"Good. I assume you're there by now. Please listen carefully, and do not speak - I need you to become accustomed to hearing my voice without reacting. Practice now before it counts."

Greg said nothing, still studying the map. He could do this, he thought.

"I have a number of theories I will need you to test," Sherlock said, quietly. "Foremost, I will need you to steer the conversations toward Dungeons & Dragons."

Greg's face creased in bewilderment. "What?" he said.

"No, Lestrade, no!" Sherlock cried. "I said without reacting! You could have just shipwrecked the whole thing!"

"Oh, for - …" Greg sighed. "Look, just tell me the sort of things you'll need to know. Otherwise every time you feed me a question, I'm going to look like bloody Derek Acorah being interrupted by his spirit guide, aren't I?"

There was a sullen pause.

"Fine," Sherlock said. "In order of importance… what knowledge they have of Scotland Yard… what level of influence they believe Mycroft to hold... how informed they seem about your family - and... if you can edge the discussion towards Dungeons & Dragons, then by all means - "

There was a crunch, followed by the sound of a brief scuffle. Greg tried not to worry. He continued studying the map, until at last there came a scrape and a quiet crackle.

"It's me," said Mycroft's voice in his ear. His heart thumped a little in response. "You have been commandeered."

"Right."

"John is leaving now… he should be there shortly. Make your way to the platform and listen to me as you walk."

Greg eased his free hand into his pocket, drifted idly away from the map and headed in the direction of Platform Ten. He said nothing, doing his best to blend in with the steady stream of people going about their business.

"This man is a non-entity - a connector," Mycroft said. "No more. He serves only to hide someone else from scrutiny, and his confidence comes from being aware of his own irrelevance. He needs to be unnerved before he makes a mistake. We are going to make him relevant."

"Mm," Greg murmured, as he stepped onto the escalator to the deepest platforms.

"I will supply you with what you need," Mycroft said. "Don't hand over the case to him until I say.
It is our one advantage... you are in possession of what this man wants. He will be loathe to leave without it."

Greg glanced, numbly, across the pale faces drifting up from the depths towards him - all the people on the other escalator, tired and ready for home. He wondered where they were going - if they were happy. Most of them didn't look it. Underground lighting never did much for humanity.

"If you can," Mycroft murmured in his ear, as they descended together into the earth, "I want you to project the impression that you're now well aware of your blackmailer's identity. Commit to nothing; ignore questions if you must. But don't let them sleep easily tonight."

"I won't," Greg murmured. He reached up, pretending to scratch at his neck. "Promise."

Mycroft paused. His voice crackled a little as the signal strained. "Give him a glimpse into hell, Greg."

Greg curled his hands quietly into fists. He intended to. If he could have carried the guy's detached head back to Baker Street, and deposited it in a bloody sack at Mycroft's feet, he would have done.

"Almost there," came John's voice in his ear, a little breathless. "I'm nearly in position."

"Excellent." Mycroft sighed. "And now we wait."

Greg stepped off the escalator, the briefcase bumping gently against his leg as he did.

A tube had just left; the platform was almost deserted. Greg turned himself carefully one way and then the other as he arrived, making sure the camera got a good view of both.

"Mm," Mycroft said. "Turn right - go to the end of the platform."

Greg did so, idling along the platform with a bored and easy tread. He took his phone from his pocket as he did, pretending to scroll through old e-mails.

"Stand and face the entrance," Mycroft murmured.

Greg turned, slowly, resting the briefcase between his feet.

"A little left..." Mycroft said. "Yes. There. When you see him, Greg, I want you to hum - a single, sustained note."

"Hmmm?" Greg tried.

"Perfect."

Greg breathed in slowly, trying to relax the sudden tightness in his chest. It was not an easy feeling to handle. Someone was on their way here to prey upon him, and he couldn't afford to let it go wrong.

The first time he'd been here, Mycroft had been waiting for him back at home... lighting candles around the bedroom; undressing; settling beneath the sheets.

It felt like a lifetime ago.

"You're quite safe," said the voice in his ear. For a moment, Greg couldn't be sure if it was just a memory. Then Myke spoke again, and his careful tones eased through all Greg's nerves, all his fears, straight to his heart. "At least we are - ... both, this time."
Greg swallowed, afraid.

"Should have told you," he whispered to the empty platform. "I'm sorry."

He looked down at his phone screen, struggling to pretend he was just bored and waiting for the tube.

"Thought I'd lose you," he admitted. "Didn't think I could cope with that..." He hesitated. "I was right. I can't."

Mycroft's voice took on an unconcealable shake. "We're - not doing this now," he said. "Not like this."

"Have you eaten?" Greg asked. His heart was pounding.

"I - … yes."

"Recently?"

"Greg -"

"Let me buy you dinner. We'll talk. I'll… be back in twenty minutes - and frankly, I'm going to need something to calm me down..." He paused, closing his eyes. "Please. Anywhere. I just..."

"Greg..." Mycroft said again, wordless.

Greg heard him breathe in.

Then a second voice broke over the line.

"Mycroft - It was John, faint as a mouse. "He's - here. Just gone inside."

Greg felt the words crash over him like ice water. From the sound that Mycroft made, he'd experienced a similar sensation.

"Okay," Mycroft said, audibly still shaken. "This is - … happening. Everyone please focus. We will deal with - everything else, later."

Greg slid his phone away, balling up his courage. He told himself that, one hour from now, he would be facing Mycroft Holmes across a restaurant table, and everything would be a hundred miles closer to okay.

He just had to get through this bit first.
As the thug from Hackney with his broken nose came sloping along the platform, smirking from ear-to-ear, Greg stayed as still as he could.

*That's right, dickhead, he thought. Nice and slow. Let them have a good look at you.*

He hummed a single low note, though Mycroft had already gone completely silent in his ear. Their target stuck out like a sore thumb here - like he'd only slunk in to get out of the rain.

As the thug came nearer, Myke suddenly began to speak - low, quick and quiet, the details pouring without pause.

"Ex-security guard. Unable to find work - poor timekeeping - unreliable. Laid off from a major firm within the last six months for attitude problems and now being supported by a live-in girlfriend who's tiring of him - works in some form of beauty therapy. Probably claims a lot of headaches. Two dogs... labrador-height."

*Sherlock's voice cut in. "Boxer crosses."

"Of course. Boxer crosses. No hobbies or interests except the pub. Smokes - probably Royals. Children from previous relationsh-… no. One child. A daughter, less than seven but older than five. 'Sapphire', based on the hand tattoo. The new girlfriend resents the child. She resents the alcohol-induced erectile dysfunction more. He'll have pornography hidden somewhere in her house and he masturbates with it… twice a day."

Mycroft coasted to a perfect finish as the thug came to a stop in front of Greg.

He was no longer smirking. Greg's broad grin had wiped the expression from his face.

"You smilin' at?" he grunted. "You pleased to see me or somethin'?"

"Couldn't be happier, mate," Greg said. "Let's go get ice cream."

The thug's eyes narrowed to slits. "You think you're funny?"

"Nah… just new to this blackmail thing. So how's life? You found a job yet?"

The thug stared at him, wild-eyed, saying absolutely nothing.

"Rough, without a reference," Greg commiserated. "Big company like that, too… and your attitude seems so positive to me. You've got plenty of ambition, at least. But then, I suppose… this whole business scheme wasn't really your idea… was it?"

Mycroft breathed in his ear. "Gregory Lestrade, you utter star..."

Greg let the grin shine through on his face. He cocked his chin high as the thug visibly shrank back several steps, turning pale.

"What's wrong?" Greg said. "Cat got your tongue? Sorry… forgot you're a dog man. How are they? Your boxers?"

The thug's mouth opened.
"Two dogs you've got, right?" Greg said. "Three, if we're counting the french-nailed bitch you live with."

"Fuck off," the thug managed, now as grey as the tunnel wall.

Greg shrugged, picking up the briefcase at his feet. "Fine," he said. "See you."

"Wait - you... you owe me somethin', mate," the thug burst out, panicking. "We ain't finished here. We ain't even started."

"Owe you something?" Greg jeered. He tightened his grip on the briefcase. "Didn't realise you'd ever done me a favour, mate. All you've done is cause me trouble so far."

"Keep going, Greg," Mycroft murmured in his ear.

"Been keepin' your secret," the thug grunted. "Ain't I? Seems a pretty big favour from where I'm standin'. 'Specially considerin' what we could make from it." He sneered, squaring his shoulders with a brave stab at turnabout. "He's in government, huh? Your friend. Some toff. Brother of that clever dick detective on the telly. We know all about it. The rest of the world will, too - if you don't gimme that case right now."

Greg held onto it, smiling.

"Tell me something first," he murmured.

The thug's face screwed up, wary. "Tell you what?"

"Is the guilt kicking in yet?"

The thug snorted. "I ain't feelin' no guilt, mate. It's a tough world. Can't stand the heat, get outta the kitchen."

"M'not talking about you, dickhead."

"Who you talkin' about, then?"

Greg smiled, cold. "You know exactly who," he said.

The thug shook his head, slowly. "What's she got to feel guilty about?"

"He," Mycroft breathed in his ear. "Sherlock, did you - "

Greg faltered, tilting his head towards his earpiece. "Sh-..." he began.

He caught himself a second too late. The thug's eyes had sharpened. Something awfully like suspicion flickered across the paunchy face.

"...knows well enough," Greg finished. Inspiration flashed. "How's Sapphire? School in September, is it?"

The thug's face contorted. All suspicion vanished in the face of rage. "Fuck off," he snarled. "You know nothin', mate. Don't you fuckin' talk about my daughter."

"Oh... so my life is fair game, but yours is off-limits?" Greg took a step forward; the thug took one
"Am I making my point yet? If you still missed it, mate, here it is - back off. Can't stand the heat? Get outta the kitchen."

"You ain't got nothin' on me," the thug breathed. "Not like I got on you."

Greg snorted. "A few photos? You think I care if you even put them online?"

Something lit up in the lumpen face. "No," the thug said. "But he does… don't he? That's why you got that."

He nodded, jerkily, at the briefcase in Greg's hand.

"That's why you're here, paying it. Because of him. So you can huff and puff at me all you want, mate… don't matter. Here you are, with my money. So - hand it over. Because I'm done talkin'."

Greg withheld the case for a moment, waiting. It felt like the game was over.

"Give it to him," Mycroft said at last.

Greg held the case out. The guy snatched it and stepped back three paces, visibly shaking.

"All of it in here?" he grunted.


A thin, flickering breeze had arisen; the next tube was about to arrive.

The thug glared at Greg, the briefcase held firm in one arm.

"Tell your toff we ain't done with him yet," he growled.

Greg shook his head, openly pitying the miserable bastard as the tube came rocketing out of the tunnel.

"We're not done with you either," he murmured.

The tube coasted into place beside the platform. The carriage doors opened with three identical hisses and clunks, people hurrying out in droves. The thug glanced at the sudden influx of souls, uneasy - so many witnesses, Greg thought; so many people suddenly present for his crime.

"I'll be in touch," the thug warned him, backing away.

He headed towards the open tube doors.

"Greg - " Mycroft's voice spiked with sudden alarm. "Greg, he's - "

The thug leapt onto the tube, barging his way through an affronted huddle of businessmen to get on board.

The doors began to bleep.

"Myke - " Greg said, his heart hammering. "What - "

"Get after him!" Mycroft shouted. "Now! He's - "

Greg didn't need to hear any more. He sprinted for the doors of the carriage behind, slammed the
release button, leapt on board and dodged immediately out of sight behind the luggage rack. The doors cracked shut with a hiss. The carriage jolted. The tube set off.

In Greg's ear, the signal crackled in panic. A few last fragments of Mycroft's voice broke through - shards of Greg's name, smashed into pieces by the encroaching abyss. A second later, the tunnel mouth swallowed up the train. The signal died.

Greg was left alone with his pounding heart and his breath.

The tube rattled on into darkness.

"Map!" Mycroft shouted, wrenching the microphone from round his neck and kicking out of the chair. "Map! NOW!"

"What's going on?" John asked over the audio-link, panicking.

"Slight problem," Sherlock managed, frozen in place. On the laptop, the video-feed had severed - a blank, black square and nothing more. "The thug got on the - … but he walked! He walked here, and he walked away before! Why would he suddenly just change to - "

Mycroft, ripping through documents on the table, stopped dead.

The two brothers turned to each other in a single motion.

"No," Mycroft whispered. "No, he can't possibly have realised - ..."

"If he did - " Sherlock said.

"Then - ...", Mycroft lost what little colour remained on his face. "No - no."

"Then it's a trap." Sherlock grabbed for the microphone. "John, get into a cab. Now."

"Where to?!" John shouted, his voice oscillating wildly across the screen. "Taxi! Taxi, stop!"

"Where?" Sherlock barked at Mycroft, receiving a look of terrified outrage in response.

"How should I know which - "

"Because you're the smart one, Mycroft, now where? Which stop?"

"I don't know, I - ..." Mycroft threw his hands over his face. "Only one stop along. St John's Wood. God help me."

"St John's Wood! The underground!"

"Right - " John said. "St John's Wood, please! Underground station - as fast as you can - "

Mycroft's entire body shook as he scrabbled his mobile phone from his pocket, flashed through the list of quick contacts and hit 'call'. It rang only twice before it was answered.

"Da, Mr Holmes?"

"St John's Wood Underground Station," Mycroft barked. "Now. This second, now."

"Received," the voice said. The line went dead.
As they hurtled on through the blackness, Greg kept himself out of sight behind the luggage rack. There was no sign of his new pal nearby. He must have gone further along the tube. It was only two minutes to the next stop, and there was no point checking his phone for signal - not this far down.

He was on his own.

And he wouldn't be going home empty-handed.

As the tube came to a stop in St John's Wood, Greg decided he could take the chance to get a little further along the carriage. He stepped out from behind the luggage rack as the doors opened, keeping a careful eye ahead.

As he passed the doors, he caught a flash of something outside on the platform - a familiar zipper jacket, rounded shoulders and balding, bowed head, the neat leather briefcase clasped under one thick arm. Their friend had only gone a single stop.

It struck Greg as strange - but he didn't have time to overthink things right now.

He slipped off the tube, taking care to keep a crowd between himself and his prey.

The thug, oblivious, joined the escalator heading up towards the surface. He kept the briefcase held securely to his paunchy chest. Greg took a place on the escalator some distance behind him, not taking his eyes off the back of that scabbed bald head.

St John's Wood was a weird place for a guy like this to have a friend - it was an affluent area, well outside the price range of his kind of person. Greg wondered if they were maybe just meeting here - he was lucky it hadn't been right there on the platform.

She, he thought he'd said.

But Mycroft had heard the complete opposite - which had it been?

Greg couldn't even remember the sentence it had featured in now. All he could see was the back of that bald head, the furrows of neck fat that age had stacked on top of each other, and the oncoming mouth of the escalator ahead.

He worried the guy would be long gone from the station by the time he reached the surface - then he spotted him just exiting the main doors. Greg followed, sticking to crowds.

Out of the station, the thug turned left. It was easy to track him along the main road. He had a loping, sluggish walk that reminded Greg of his father from ten years ago - it was an unhurried pace, one that didn't see why it should be early or on time for anyone. He slubbed along, not a care in the world, fifteen thousand pounds richer and thinking he was safe. He didn't once look round to see if he was being followed.

Greg thought for a moment he was heading into The Ordnance Arms, to meet somebody there - but he passed the pub without a glance, turning left again up another street.

It was not as well populated - quieter, residential, with far fewer cars and streetlights further apart. Greg hesitated for a moment, watching the pouchy figure trotting on ahead. Pursuit would be harder the quieter it got. This was why John would have aced this - unassuming, anonymous.

But he couldn't stop now, Greg thought. He'd come this far already. And he couldn't go back to Mycroft with an awkward shrug and a 'sorry'. He wanted to go back with answers. It was the only
thing that would make all this okay.

He followed at a more generous distance, keeping his head down - but he needn't have worried. The thug, absorbed in his own little world, was still not looking back. The guy had probably never been tailed anywhere in his life.

At last, Greg saw him cross the street and take a right turn through a commercial gateway, vanishing from sight.

Greg sped up to stay on his tail, quietly closing the gap between them.

The gateway - plastered in notices forbidding all pedestrian access, with several large yellow warnings for heavy machinery and dangerous equipment - led to large-scale commercial premises of some sort. There were yellow crash barriers, portacabins and corrugated steel containers in the yard beyond. The locked gate was only as secure as the huge hole kicked through the wooden fence beside it.

Workmen, Greg thought - wanting quick and easy access. People would never learn how to keep themselves safe.

He scanned the yard for any sign of the thug, easing a hand into his pocket for his ID. If a night watchman was around, a Scotland Yard Inspector would be able to blag it. Some Hackney lowlife with a briefcase full of marked fifty-pound notes would have a much bigger problem on his hands.

Greg jemmied his way through the broken fence, keeping his ID tight in his hand.

He crossed the yard silently, glancing between the steel containers for any sign of his quarry. He could feel his phone vibrating frantically in his pocket. He ignored it - he was too close now. If he didn't find the guy's trail soon, he would be gone into the night and they were no better off than they'd started.

He thought he saw a shadow flicker over the corner of the building up ahead. He crept towards it. A short passage awaited him - probably for bins. He hesitated at the mouth of it, peering into the darkness beyond.

It was a good place for an ambush. He didn't think it would be a problem - but two decades of training weren't easily forgotten.

He made up his mind to push on - just as the first blow came from nowhere.

It struck Greg hard on the back of the head, a single slugging strike with something heavy and square and solid. Greg's knees hit the ground before the pain even registered. When it did, it wrenched the breath from his lungs - it short-circuited his every sense, blazing, crippling. He buckled, grabbing in instinct for the back of his head, just as another blow came down. It crushed his fingers where he was protecting his skull. After three more brutal strikes, the brick was thrown aside - he heard it clang against a container - and then the flurry of fists came down upon him.

"Fuckin' follow me, faggot? " the thug spat. "Fuckin' try your chances, then!"

He seemed to have a hundred fists. Each one fell harder than the last. Greg fought them all, trying to deflect each vicious blow to his face and chest. At last, a boot hard to the guts flung him over onto his back. Wracked with pain, Greg hauled his arms around the leg that the boot was attached to and tried to wrench the guy off balance - only succeeding in bringing the fucker crashing down on top of him.
Something landed, hard, on Greg's collarbone. He realised it was a knee. In the same second he felt something crack, deep under the skin.

His howl of agony echoed round the yard. Pain, perishing, exploded in his every nerve - it felt like his whole chest had cracked inward - agony was ripping up into his shoulders, up his neck, out along his arms, wrenching him apart.

The thug, panting, struggled off him as he screamed.

One final kick - hard, in the side - Greg curled around the blow, gasping with the pain, spitting blood onto the ground between breaths.

The thug grabbed the briefcase where he'd thrown it and ran.

Greg didn't even see which way he went. There was only pain. Everything from his neck to his navel was shrieking itself into pieces with the agony. He could not breathe. The back of his head was still banging from the first dull blow. More blood spattered the ground as he coughed, creasing around the last vicious kick to his side.

What seemed like hours passed. The pain strung every second on and on, unending, unbearable. He was losing blood. He was losing his grip on his thoughts. He could not move.

When at last he heard footsteps, sprinting across the yard, he was almost at the point of passing out.

The towering figure that dropped to his side was medically trained - enough to know not to move him. A lightning-fast assessment was made of the blood on the back of his head, the blood he was spitting across the ground, and the shuddering curl of his body around his shattered collarbone.

Yuri immediately pulled a mobile phone from the inside of his Saville Row suit, and jabbed in a three-digit number. It rang.

"Ambulance, please." His gruff Russian tones prompted immediate obedience from the control room. "It is Ordnance Hill, a construction site. St John's Wood. He has been attacked - there is trauma to the back of his head - heavy facial injuries - perhaps a broken shoulder. I cannot tell. His name is Lestrade - Detective Inspector. Please, hurry."

He hung up on the operator's further questions, swiftly dialling another number. As it began to ring, Yuri watched with growing concern the panic-stricken shudders of pain coursing the broken body on the ground.

The phone was answered even faster than by the emergency services.

"Have you found him?"

"Yes, sir - …" Yuri said. Lestrade let out a choked cry of pain, seizing around his shoulder and breaking down into desperate screaming sobs, teeth gritted, white with shock. "I have called an ambulance. They are coming."

"Is that - " Mr Holmes could hear every cry. "Yuri, is that - "

"He is alive, Mr Holmes. I have him. He has perhaps broken bones - …" Yuri hesitated, wincing as Lestrade clawed at his own chest and coughed another mouthful of blood. "Sir, it is not good."

"Stay there, Yuri. Stay there. Do not leave him."
"No, sir. I will not."

"I'm on my way," Mycroft said, and hung up.

Eight minutes later, an ambulance came screaming to a stop outside the gates. Yuri helped them carry him into the back. He sat at Lestrade's side as they tore through London, lights flashing, siren keening, as the paramedics hooked him up to oxygen.

Two minutes away from the hospital, the inspector passed out as shock overwhelmed his system. The ambulance drove faster.
Fault

Fractured collarbone; blunt force trauma to the back of the skull; two fractured fingers on the right hand; black eye; severe bruising to the cheek and jaw; severe internal bruising to the left-hand side, just below the ribs; one fractured rib.

The list would haunt Mycroft for the rest of his days.

He would remember, too, the face of the desperately sorry junior doctor who had first read him the catalogue of injuries, proceeding from one to the next with the deepest of sympathy. He would remember the face of the nurse who took his details at the desk of the emergency ward, and asked what relation he was to Mr Lestrade. He would remember his own voice, saying in despair, "He's my partner - please - I need to see him. He was attacked and I need to see him."

He would remember her sorry, sad-eyed refusal.

Mr Lestrade wasn't conscious, she said. He wouldn't be for a while.

But the doctors were doing everything they could.

He would remember the long hours sitting on a shapeless plastic seat in a waiting area, surrounded by crying infants and people coughing and phones ringing, cheerful nurses and bleeping machines. He would remember the night that followed, sent home to wait for news - pacing his shell of a house in the dark - no sleep, no food, no thoughts but Greg.

He couldn't stop hearing him scream.

It was only as nine o'clock approached, the following morning, that Mycroft realised they would be expecting Greg at work. He also realised who had inadvertently listed himself as next-of-kin.

"New Scotland Yard," Sharon trilled down the phone. "DI Lestrade's Office."

"Sergeant Sally Donovan, please. I'm afraid it's urgent." Mycroft tapped the ash from his fourth cigarette since dawn into the kitchen sink, shaking a little as he did. His voice was strained. "I'll also need the number for your Chief Superintendent… but if I could speak to Sergeant Donovan first, please."

"Not a problem. And who's calling?"

"It's Mycroft Holmes. Regarding DI Lestrade."

"Ookay," she said. "Just putting you through."

There came a few moments of silence, then a click and a crackle.

"DS Donovan speaking," said Sally's voice.

Mycroft felt his throat contract as he realised what he was about to say.

"Sergeant Donovan… it's Mycroft Holmes. Greg's - partner."

"Mycroft," she said, a little surprised. "Hi... what can I do for you?"

"I'm afraid that - …" Mycroft pinched at the bridge of his nose, forcing himself to get a hold of his
wrenching heart. This was not going to get any easier. The guilt was nearly enough to choke him.

"... - Greg was admitted to hospital during the night. He was - attacked in St John's Wood yesterday evening. He's still receiving emergency treatment."

"He's - ... sorry, did you say attacked?"

"Yes."

"Who by?"

Mycroft closed his eyes. He might as well have inflicted the catalogue of injuries upon Greg himself. "We - don't yet know. I'm waiting for an update on his condition."

"God…" she said, blown away. "Do his family know?"

Mycroft felt his despair take another steep pitch downwards, as he realised he was now going to have to call a woman who didn't even know he existed, to tell her that not only was her beloved brother gay but had been hospitalised by some thug who'd broken his collarbone, two fingers and a rib.

"I'm about to ring them," he said, feigning composure. He didn't know if it was convincing or not.

"Alright," Sally said, quietened. "Is there - anything we can do to help?"

"No. You are - kind to offer. I'll make sure you're kept updated." He hesitated, bracing himself for the next ordeal. "Would you - kindly transfer me to your Chief Superintendent?"

"Of course," Sally said. Hesitancy touched her voice. "He, uh... might not know that - "

"Yes… I'm well aware. But I'm afraid we've been rather thrown in the deep end." He paused. "Perhaps you could wish me luck."

"Good luck. I'll… be thinking about you. Both of you."

"Thank you," Mycroft managed. He suspected she'd hit 'transfer' before she heard him say it.

There was silence, another click, another crackle - then a sigh.

"Vaughan," grunted a voice.

"Superintendent Vaughan… my name is Mycroft Holmes. I'm calling in regards to - "

"Holmes?" the voice interrupted him, blunt. "You that amateur detective?"

"No," Mycroft intoned, biting the side of his tongue.

"Not a common name."

"Far more common than 'Vaughan'," Mycroft noted. "A fascinating surname, which I shall mention to my good friend David Marston-Lang the next time he and Cynthia hold another drinks party."

The name of the Commissioner and his wife took some of the edge - but not all - off the voice.

"What can I do for you, Mr Holmes?" Superintendent Vaughan asked, wary.

Anger made it easier to say, Mycroft found. The facts of the matter left him in a sleek and
venomous stream.

"I'm calling to inform you that DI Greg Lestrade was attacked while off-duty in St John's Wood last night. He's been hospitalised with serious injuries. As he falls under what we'll loosely term your responsibility, I thought I should let you know."

"He was - … what? Who attacked him?"

"If I knew," Mycroft snapped, "I would be dealing with them, and not with you."

"And - wait, who did you say you were?"

"My name is Mycroft Holmes. I am his partner. Thank you for your condolences."

Mycroft ended the call with a slash of his thumb. He made a mental resolution that, years from now, when ex-Chief Superintendent Vaughan tried to pinpoint the exact moment in his life when everything had started to go wrong, it would be this one.

He scrolled through his list of contacts quickly, finding Sophie and composing a new text message.

*I need the phone number for a Mrs Rachel Whittaker who lives in Croydon, nee Lestrade, married to a Graham Whittaker. I need it quickly and I do not care how many laws you break to do it. I will not be in work.*

M.

He had started a fifth cigarette by the time she replied. The number he'd requested was accompanied by a tentative inquiry, which he ignored.

He was halfway through typing in the number when his phone began to ring of its own accord.

"Mr Holmes?" said a soft female voice, as he answered it. "I'm calling from the trauma centre at The Royal London... I wanted to update you on your husband Greg."

Ice cascaded down into Mycroft's chest, freezing him solid. He didn't bother to correct her. The intricacies of his current official standing with Gregory Lestrade were the least of his worries right now.

"How is he?" he managed, barely aware of his own voice.

"He's stable," she said, "and he's slept well through the night. We have him on a lot of painkillers, so he's in no discomfort. His second x-ray results have confirmed that none of the fractures have caused any internal injuries - they're fairly clean breaks that should heal well, given time and proper management, which is good news. We're finding him a bed on the ward at the moment so we can keep an eye on him... then, hopefully, he can go home in a couple of days..."

*Home.* Mycroft breathed it out over the course of several seconds.

He'd never been so grateful to an anonymous voice on a phone before. He wondered if she wanted a free house in Belgravia.

"Thank you… can you - tell me if he's able to receive visitors yet?"

"Of course. He's asleep at the moment, but it should be wearing off fairly soon. He'll be in the trauma ward, and we have no set visiting times... we only ask that it's two visitors to a bed at a time, and please no plants or flowers."
"Thank you. I'll - be there shortly."

Mycroft ended the call. He found Rachel's number still waiting for him on the screen.

The silent kitchen echoed around him.

He covered his face, trying to think what Greg would want him to do. If he were honest with her, this would function as Greg's coming out. It was a significant moment. It was not something to have thrust upon you - but then, these were not usual circumstances. The man had been battered halfway to - …

Mycroft breathed in sharply. He was not thinking about that.

Greg would want his sister to know. That much he knew.

Perhaps, Mycroft thought, he should present himself as just a friend.

It would hurt like hell to say it - even if it was far more than he deserved to call himself, and it was more true than him being Greg's husband, for God's sake - but it was his only option. Now was not the time for Greg, or his sister, to have this very personal discussion, let alone via a third party while he was unconscious in a hospital bed.

He hit call before he could think twice. He held the phone to his ear, worrying silently at his lower lip as it rang.

As it was picked up, further ice tumbled down into his chest.

"Hello?" came the curious, cheerful greeting.

In the face of fear, Mycroft reverted to the comfort of formality. "Mrs Whittaker?"

"Yes," she said. "That's me… are you from the school?"

She sounded just how Mycroft had imagined her: a flower of the East End, bright as a summer garden and as warm with a stranger as she would be with a lifelong friend. This was the first time they ever spoke, he thought - the two people who loved Greg Lestrade the most in this world; one who deserved him, one who did not.

How bitterly he wished they were speaking about something else.

"I'm… sorry to bother you," he said, deeply aware of his cut-glass accent, the social gulf between them - how desperately he didn't want there to be one. "My name is - Mycroft Holmes," he said. "I was calling to - "

"Oh... my God," she gasped. Mycroft stiffened. "You're - 'Mycroft', you said?"

Mycroft froze, staring at his own reflection in the burnished steel fridge door.

"Yes... I'm - "

" - you're Greg's fella! " she squealed.

Mother of God, Mycroft thought. The kitchen whirled around him. He told her. He actually told her.

"I - I didn't realise you - "
"Oh my God," she said again. He heard the eager scrape of wooden legs across a tiled floor. She had pulled a chair over to the phone. "You - you sound just like I thought you would…"

Mycroft gripped the phone hard, staring with misery into his ash-filled sink.

"G's been so protective of you," she said, soft, her voice full of fondness. "He hardly tells me a thing… I mean, he only told me anything last weekend… we were crying in Costa together. It was mortifying."

"Last - ..." Mycroft's head spun. Last weekend had been the immediate aftermath of The Nightingale. He didn't know what that meant. "I... hadn't realised he'd told you. I'm delighted he did, of course. He'd - wanted to tell you for some time, but..."

"He should have told me months ago... I said to him it doesn't matter - no-one's got the right to make anyone feel ashamed - I'm just so glad he found someone. Someone who makes him happy. And I'm so glad I got to speak to you, this is amazing!"

Mycroft reached, weakly, for one of the barely-used bar stools. He leant his weight upon it.

"Mrs... Whittaker, I - "

"Rachel," she said. "I'm - your sister-in-law. I think that means we're friends."

Mycroft screwed his eyes tight shut.

"Rachel, I - need to tell you..." He put a hand to his face, fighting the wretched sting of tears already. This was entirely his fault. He had no right to weep. "Greg was attacked yesterday. North London. He's been in hospital overnight - they just called me with an update... he's - ...

"Attacked - ...?" She couldn't believe what she was hearing. "What do you - … oh my God, is he hurt?"

The carousel of injuries whirled through Mycroft's mind, one horrifying diagnosis after another, his heart aching under the strain. The collarbone he'd fractured; the rib he'd broken; the eye he'd blacked. All his fault.

"He's stable," he managed, his hand shaking. "They've said he slept well. He's - had a number of bones broken - facial injuries..." Mycroft's voice cracked. "They should heal in time."

"Oh - oh, my God - "

"I'm sorry," Mycroft managed, breaking apart. He could barely speak. "I'm - so sorry."

"Can we see him?"

Mycroft fought to control himself. This was not how this conversation was meant to have gone. "He's - just been moved to a ward."

"Okay," she said. "I'm on my way - … oh God, Graham's got the car... I'll ring him at work. I might be an hour or so. Will you be alright getting there?"

Mycroft realised at once the utter miracle that two such shining examples of humanity had managed to grow in the fetid soil in which they'd been raised. It should have withered the very souls from them. Instead, all they cared about was other people. Rachel would drop her entire life to rush to her brother's side, and worry most about how Mycroft would get there; while Greg…
"I need you to try harder," Mycroft had raged at him.

Greg had tried harder.

He'd nearly been killed. He could have died, kicked apart in a construction yard somewhere, alone with nobody to find him. Nobody to help him.

Yuri had said he did not know what had turned him left out of the station, instead of right. His split-second decision was the only reason that Greg Lestrade was not gone from the world.

"I'll - be fine," Mycroft managed, realising she was waiting for an answer. He was shaking almost too much to form words. "You're - very kind. I'll make my way there now. He's in the trauma centre of The Royal London. I'll make sure they're expecting you."

"Alright, darlin'... I'll meet you there. Tell G I'm on my way."

"I shall." Mycroft hesitated. "Goodbye…"

He ended the call; he stared down at his phone for some time, blown away. The guilt was rapidly twisting into nausea.


He opened up his contacts one last time, scrolling through for Jameson.

"Lestrade, please. Gregory. My name is Holmes."

The nurse on the desk scanned her eyes down a clipboard tethered to the desk with string, searching the night's long list of admissions.

"Oh, " she said at last, with an expression of sympathy. "The fella found in St John's Wood - yes… come with me. He was sleeping when last we checked. Best thing for him right now. Are you...?"

"I am," Mycroft said. He knew what she was asking. "His family are on their way too."

"Okay," she said. "I'll look out for them... let me show you where to go."

She got out from behind the desk, rustling quietly in her scrubs. She led Mycroft along the corridor, tilting her head to talk to him as she did.

"Have you seen him since his accident?" she asked.

Accident, Mycroft thought. He knew it was a harmless courtesy - a gentler, cleaner word that horrified relatives could take from her and use if they wished, so they wouldn't have to contemplate the truth.

"No, I've... been told about his injuries, but I haven't - ..."

"Okay…" She stopped gently outside a closed door, resting her fingers on the handle. "Well, as I'm sure you can imagine, he's looking pretty battered... he's got a lot of bruising around his face in particular. It might be a shock when you see him. But he's not in pain, he's doing wonderfully, and it's nothing to be worried about."

There was something unnerving about being psychologically prepared for a sight, Mycroft thought. Nonetheless, he found himself listening to her, needing her to say the things that she knew how to
"I understand," he managed.

"He might be a little spacey with the painkillers, too. If he doesn't recognise you for a minute or two, don't worry. I'm sure just hearing your voice will help."

The last time Greg had heard his voice, Mycroft had been shouting at him to get after the thug - to get on the tube. It could have been the last thing Mycroft had ever said to him in this world.

"I - thank you.... that's - helpful."

The nurse smiled a little, opening the door. "He's just in the bed at the end. Let us know if you need anything, okay?"

Mycroft nodded, his expression guarded. He fortified himself as he stepped into the room.

As he passed each bed, he tried not to speculate on what might have caused the various injuries he saw there. It was impossible not to. Most were victims of traffic accidents. One young man looked more like a sports injury. Private school, from the look of him; rugby, from the state of his knee. All of them, Mycroft realised, were victims of one kind or another - it was the only thing that united them - including the bed at the end, which had been partly screened off for peace.

As he came closer to it, Mycroft found he was holding his breath. He realised he was preparing himself for the worst. He could never return to this moment - this moment before he discovered the true extent of what he'd done.

There was no delaying it, though.

He stepped around the screen.

There was a sleeping figure lying flat upon the bed.

Greg looked perfectly at peace - as calm he ever had in their bed at home. It formed an awful contrast with the savagery written across him. He had livid black bruises blooming from cheekbone to jaw, a deeply-hollowed black eye, a cut stitched in black upon his lower lip, and heavy bandages wrapped around his waist. Yellow bruising was creeping its way over the top of them. The top of his right arm and shoulder had been secured by a black brace across his chest, supporting the fractured clavicle in place. He would have it for months. His right hand was encased in a split - broken fingers where he'd tried to defend himself. The bastard had clubbed him with a brick.

Mycroft experienced his instinctive reaction as a pulse - a sudden, greying wave of horror that he couldn't suppress. He couldn't look away either.

He'd never seen another human being broken like this.

In the safety of his comfortable office at Whitehall, violence had become to him a strange and primitive practice that only happened in isolated, lawless pockets of the planet - something most humans had evolved not to need. In his world, it was careers that were stolen, seized and shattered; not bodies. The threat of dishonour was the worst to which one could ever be subjected.

It was alarming to be shown so visibly how wrong he'd been.

He sat himself down by the bed, gazing at the silent, broken face of the man he loved.
A torrent of emotions seized him in its grip.

One, then another, surged to the surface - for some time, a guilt so overwhelming he could not breathe; then, out of nowhere, a white-hot rage that shook his fingers into fists. He would find the man. He would obliterate him. No legal system in the world would keep him safe from Mycroft's wrath. The rage then came crashing down as frustration, as he realised the bastard could be anywhere by now - untraceable, gone - and guilt arose again, as he comprehended that it was his own rage now written in violence across Greg's broken body. Despair, choking, made him weep in silence for some time; and finally he was cast adrift, on a featureless, exhausted misery.

Through it all, Greg slept in silence - unaware of the agonies taking place at his bedside.

The simple truth - the one that superseded all the other pain - was that Mycroft knew it was entirely and completely his fault. He'd caused every one of those bruises and fractures as surely as if he'd laid into Greg himself. He'd broken him apart, left him to die on a building site.

Worse, he couldn't pretend to himself that last night was his one and only error.

Ordering Greg to board the tube was only the latest in a series of unforgivable acts.

He'd failed Greg time and time again - failed him by hurting him, failed him by loving him, failed him by allowing him to love back. This had been inevitable since the moment he'd picked up that first glass of mulled wine on Christmas Eve, and wondered to himself if Inspector Lestrade was always as sullen and straight as he appeared.

Slowly, and surely, he had led Greg to this hospital bed.

He'd torn the man's life apart, cajoled him into danger, upended his childhood, loosed all the ghouls and antagonised all the monsters, and now one had finally lashed out. It was Greg who'd taken the blow. This had all been there from the start.

All because Mycroft had been so fixated on his own wretched career.

A few photographs, he thought. Had his spotless reputation really mattered to him so much?

He realised it now - now that the person he loved had paid the price to protect that reputation, paid it in blood and broken bones and pain.

It didn't matter at all.

Politics was a party game - nothing more. A sanctioned diversion for the ultra-rich and the bored.

A few scandalous pictures of Mycroft Holmes would have entertained and amused them all for a few weeks - then onwards the wheel would have rolled. It would have meant nothing in the end. Stepping out of the game, at the worst. Nothing more.

As he gazed down into Greg's face, Mycroft found himself contemplating the path they'd almost walked.

With a few miniscule alterations - Yuri sprinting right, rather than left, out of the station; Greg moving a little deeper into the yard, where his screams could not be heard; one extra jibe, justifying a few extra kicks - this scene could have had a miniscule alteration of its own.

A morgue bed, rather than a hospital. Greg's face, ever peaceful. Eyes that would not open again.
Mycroft pushed his hands into his hair, overwhelmed with that thought - shaking with it.

He should have stopped this. He should have stopped it long ago.

*Words*, he snarled at himself. Cheap, easy words. Anyone could sit at a hospital bed beside the person they loved and throw wishes into the past.

But he was not anyone.

He was a Holmes.

He was finally going to do what he should have done six months ago - if he'd not let his own selfish whims condemn the man who loved him to agony.

Greg would heal, he thought. The bruises, first; then the bones.

Finally, the heart.

The world was packed with people who would adore a man like Greg Lestrade. One of them would find him before long - look after him. Make him happy. Keep him safe.

So long as they didn't get him blackmailed, then beaten half to death with a brick in a construction yard, they would do a better job of loving him than Mycroft had.

Mycroft's heart heaved as he realised what was about to come to pass. He let his tears fall in silence.

"I love you," he whispered to the closed, peaceful eyes.

It was true. It was, perhaps, the only truth. Even after everything he'd done to Greg, every agony he'd caused him, he loved him more than he'd ever thought the world could hold. Greg had given him something no-one else had - ever - not his parents, not his work, not the scattered bed partners over the years.

He didn't care that Greg had lied. He'd been afraid. Now, more than ever, Mycroft understood fear.

"I'm - going to do the right thing for you," he said. "At last. I should have done it a long time ago - before I hurt you."

He swallowed, gazing into those gentle, quiet features. This would be the last time he saw them. It had to be. Otherwise, some day, those eyes would shut forever and it would be his fault.

"I wish you - all the happiness in the world," he whispered, his voice breaking. "All of it. Everything you ever want. Everything you need. Everything I… couldn't give you - "

He gripped his hands together, hard, swallowing to keep his throat from closing shut. He had to speak. It was his only chance.


He smiled, empty, his eyes hazed with tears. He almost couldn't see the bruising on Greg's face any more.

"You are wonderful," he breathed. "You are - … everything. You deserve better than me. I have to let you find it. I - can't move mountains - I cannot shift the stars... I can't even keep you safe."
He pushed the tears away on his sleeve, breathing in.

Time to go.

Half of his brain was already calling Jameson, making plans - sell the house for a song. It could be gone in a week. Perhaps Europe, he thought. Perhaps further. Sit by the Danube and read Goethe until it no longer hurt. And if it never stopped hurting, then at least he would never forget.

Half of him had no plans to make. It would remain just here - right here - standing at this hospital bed. Empires would rise and fall. Here, half his soul would stay, where everything had stopped.

He rose from his chair, broken and resolved. This had to be.

One final goodbye, he thought. It was far more than he deserved.

Carefully - as careful as he should have been from the start - Mycroft leant over the bed. He pressed his lips, silently, to Greg's forehead - the one part of him not bloodied and broken.

"Whoever he is, Greg..." he whispered. "May he realise how lucky he is. Every single day of his life."

He swallowed.

"Goodbye, darling." His heart broke. "Be happy."

He composed himself for a moment behind the screen - pushed the tears aside, drew himself upright, seized that door in his soul and slammed it, hard. He would recommend Sophie for his position. God knew the girl did most of it anyway these days. He could be on a plane by nightfall, and it would all be done. Perhaps Sherlock would write. If he was lonely, let him be lonely. It was all that he deserved.

He left the ward in silence, closing the door with a quiet snap.

He felt it already - no longer whole. The world was quiet and grey around him.

As he approached the desk, the nurse glanced up with a smile.

"Hi..." she said, softly. "Is he awake? Glad to see you?"

"I believe I'm listed as next-of-kin," Mycroft murmured, numb. Her expression flickered with confusion. "Might I amend that? His sister is - far more rightly that person. Not me. Her name is Mrs Rachel Whittaker."

"Oh, I... I guess if you need to, then sure - we can - ..."

"If you would be so kind. Mrs Whittaker should be here soon to -"

A door at the end of the corridor suddenly banged open. Hurried voices came through, the squeak of shoes sprinting on the rubber floor and the rustle of bags.

Mycroft's heart clenched.

"This way, sweetheart! This floor..." Rachel dipped, scooping her daughter up into her arms. She was already carrying a sports bag full of supplies. The addition of a child in full school uniform did not slow her at all. "C'mon, honey - nearly there..."
For one wild moment, Mycroft thought of hiding. But it was a perfectly straight corridor - there was only one way for them to come. He shrank back away from the desk, panicking, as Rachel ran this way. Clattering through the door behind her came the husband, Graham, still dressed in his work clothes, and the youngest - Toby.

They were just as Mycroft had pictured them - down to the last detail.

"I'm looking for Lestrade," Rachel gasped as she staggered up to the desk, hefting Sarah higher in her arms. "Greg Lestrade, my brother - he came in last night - ..."

"Oh - " The nurse shot a panicked glance at Mycroft, faltering. "Um, this is - "

Mycroft braced himself, turning with despair to the woman who'd made herself his sister only an hour ago.

Rachel's face opened with realisation. She gazed up at him.

Her smile was Greg's smile. It cracked Mycroft's heart afresh in two. As she set her daughter on the floor, dropped the sports bag, and threw her arms around him, he decided beyond doubt that he was the most vicious bastard ever to walk the earth, and that this was the second worst moment of his life.

He thought she would let him go after a moment; but she didn't. She held him like she'd missed him for months.

Her husband had now reached the desk behind her. The poor man was gazing bewildered at the total stranger his wife had suddenly decided to embrace. Sarah, too, was watching the scene with the wide-eyed wonder of a six-year-old.

Mycroft faltered, shutting his eyes to it all - he couldn't bear to look.

"Of course you are," Rachel murmured in his ear. "You're just - … Greg's. Look at you." She held him a little tighter. "M'so glad you're here."

Mycroft swallowed. Tentatively - not knowing what else he could possibly do - he put his arms around her at last.

He felt her smile against his shoulder.

"Did you just get here?" she asked, as she finally let him go, gazing into his eyes with tears in her own. "Is he awake yet?"

"No," Mycroft managed. "He's - still - "

"Good... we can be there, then…" She turned to her husband, even as she took Mycroft quietly by the hand. "Can you look after Sarah and Tobes? It's only two at a time, I think…"

"But I want to see Uncle Greg," came a frightened voice from somewhere near their knees. "If it's only two - ..."

The nurse smiled, leaning across the desk to see Sarah. "Two and a half should be fine," she said, gently.

Rachel's face lit with gratitude. "Thank you," she said, and grabbed Sarah as well. "Come on, sweetheart… let's go find your Uncle Greg… is it this way?" she asked Mycroft. She was heading
down the corridor already, pulling him along.

"It's - I - …"

What else was there to do? he thought. He couldn't think what to say. It seemed like this was happening whether he wanted it to or not.

"Just the… fourth door along. The end bed."

He found himself being taken back through the door he had moments ago closed forever, back between the beds full of victims.

Rachel stopped just outside of the screens and knelt down, gathering her daughter's small face into her hands. Mycroft shot a panicked look at the open door.

"Sweetie… Uncle Greg had a bad accident, okay? You remember when you got your hand caught in the bathroom door that time?"

"Yes…"

"Well… Uncle Greg's going to look a bit like that, just all over. He's going to have bruises and cuts. Probably around his face?" she added, with a note of query, glancing at Mycroft over her daughter's tiny shoulder.

He gave her a silent nod, pale.

"Around his face," Rachel said. "And if you hug him, you've got to be gentle. But it's nothing scary, and he's going to look fine again soon… okay?"

"Okay..."

"There's my girl. You ready?" Rachel said, holding out a hand.

Sarah nodded, fortified. She took her mother's hand.

Rachel led her, carefully, around the screens. They vanished from view.

Mycroft threw his desperate eyes towards the door.

This was his one and only chance to make his exit - to get out of here, to leave Greg with the people who deserved him, who would keep him safe.

"Hey!" he heard Rachel gasp behind the screen. His heart leapt; he turned towards it. "Oh my God, G… look at your face… Sarah, honey, sit down here… how are you feeling?"

Mycroft gazed, his heart heaving, at the screen. He then looked back at the open door.

He clenched his fists; the tears burned in his eyes.
Greg was dreaming they were home.

He was lying on the sofa, and Myke was getting ready for work. Briefcase, coat. The leather gloves he liked. Myke leant over him, gently, and kissed his forehead - the only place it didn't hurt to be kissed.

"Goodbye, darling," Myke whispered. "Be happy."

"When will you be home?" Greg asked him, sleepy. He'd cook, he thought. Stir fry. Maybe curry. They'd eat ice cream together on the sofa and fall asleep listening to the rain.

But then he'd realised that he wasn't at home at all - and Mycroft wasn't really there.

He was in the construction yard, somewhere in St John's Wood. There should be pain, he knew - pain all over - but strangely, there was none.

He was only pretending. The figure that grappled at him on the ground was not a thug with a broken nose, but his dad. He was trying to haul Greg up, trying to force him to his feet. Greg resisted, waiting. He had to time this right.

At last, the boot appeared - kicking at him, causing still no pain. He was immune now, he realised. He didn't feel it anymore. He seized his father's foot and pulled, and his father fell. In the scuffle, Greg somehow ended up on his feet.

And in his hand, he was holding the belt.

After twenty-nine years, it was his.

He lashed it. He brought it down, hard, the crack of the buckle and the snake-like slap of the leather echoing across the yard. He did it again, and again, lashing and lashing in a frenzy until his dad fell apart into dust - into balls of black fluff that tumbled away in the breeze. Exhausted, safe at last, Greg dropped the belt.

The rain was coming down now.

He felt it washing the blood from his cheeks. It melted away the words that were carved there. It was sinking into his shoulder now too, cleaning out the pain - into his ribs, where they'd cracked open, fusing them back together - over the back of his head, where the blood and the brick-dust had matted and gone cold.

But the shower spray was warm - a soft and gentle hiss, surrounding them in steam - and Mycroft was kissing him, holding him - gently directing the water through his hair. Greg's heart heaved with joy.

They had the whole day, he thought. No-one but them. It filled him with a peace and happiness he'd never known, perfect and pure - everything was how it should be, he realised. Everything was right. They didn't need to even leave the flat.

They could just lie here on the sofa, watching films.

It was all he'd ever wanted.
It was all okay again.

Then the door of his flat opened - and his niece walked in.

As Sarah spotted him, she shied back a little - afraid of something she saw in his face.

"Hey!" His sister's voice gasped from somewhere. "Oh my God, G… look at your face…"

Rachel was here, too - she was stepping past the chairs someone had arranged beside his sofa, gazing down at him in desperation.

"Sarah, honey, sit down here…" She lifted Sarah up onto one of the chairs beside the sofa - no, Greg thought suddenly. Not his sofa. Somewhere else. Where, he didn't know - or, for that matter, how he'd come to be here. Nothing made a lot of sense.

"How are you feeling?" his sister asked him, desperate.

Greg gazed at her for a second, wondering what she was talking about - and why his ribs were so sore.

It felt good to look at her, he realised.

He smiled.

"Hey," he said.

He face filled with joy as her eyes filled with tears. "Hey, G…"

Greg smiled a little more, dazed. This was nice, he thought - it was good to see them both, even if he wasn't sure why they'd come round. He peered at his startled niece, all neat in her school uniform.

"Hey, squirt."

Sarah's small face crumpled, displeased. "I'm not a squirt, Uncle Greg. We talked about this."

"I forgot," he teased her, sleepy. "M'not as bright as you."

She swung her legs a little under the plastic chair. "You're all grubby, Uncle Greg... like when I put Mummy's make-up on Toby."

Her mum, pained, wrapped an arm around her.

"Sweetie, that's bruising… you know, like your hand was? It's just - a bit bigger than your hand, that's all."

Greg frowned at them both, confused.

"I'm not wearing make-up," he said.

Rachel looked for a second like she was going to cry again. She then turned her head, glancing up at the screens encircling his bed.

Someone else was edging into the quiet space with them.

"Guess who we ran into outside," Rachel said, her eyes shining.
Greg blinked at her, trying to figure out why it hurt to do so. His right eye felt like it had swollen shut - like it wasn't really opening properly.

"Who?" he said, confused.

The new person was sitting warily on the other side of his bed, uneasy on the hard plastic chair. He turned to see who it was.

Pain - lightning-sharp - jagged suddenly across the front of his chest.

It ripped straight from one shoulder to the other. He cried out, wincing. Before he could even work out why it hurt, hands had suddenly come up to cradle the sides of his head. There was a voice, hushing soft against his forehead - a voice he knew.

"Breathe," the voice whispered. "Keep your head as still as you can..."

"Myke," he mumbled. He breathed, deep. Mycroft's scent seemed to soften the pain. It made it go small, small enough to breath away, easing more and more with each fresh lungful he drew. As the pain ebbed, Mycroft held him safe - kissed him on the forehead like he was precious. Greg rested against him, feeling the pain feathering into nothing once more.

"Why're you shaking?" he asked Myke, confused.

Mycroft simply held him tighter.

"Who is that?" came his niece's piercing whisper to her mother, on the other side of the bed.

"That's Mycroft," her mother told her, gently. "He's your Uncle Greg's boyfriend."

Mycroft was stroking his hair now. It made Greg feel wonderfully safe. He closed his eyes, only half-listening to the conversation.

"Uncle Greg has a boyfriend?" his niece asked, intrigued.

"Yes, sweetie," her mother murmured. "Anyone can have a boyfriend."

"Can I have a boyfriend?" Sarah asked.

"No," Greg mumbled into Mycroft's shoulder. Myke's trembling fingers carded gently through his hair. "Not until you're thirty."

"Thirty?" his niece said, appalled. "I'll nearly be dead then."

"Heaven help us all," he heard Mycroft murmur, and Rachel laughed. "Greg… let me lie you back again. This might be sore. Breathe for me."

Greg breathed; the bands tightened painfully around his ribs.

"Why am I all wrapped up?" he murmured, uneasy, as Mycroft rested him back against the pillows.

"You have a fractured rib," Mycroft said, adjusting the pillows carefully to make him comfortable. "The bands will keep you still… they'll help you breathe."

"Okay." That seemed fine, Greg thought. Let them get on with it. He closed his eyes, humming low in his throat. "I have… no idea where I am," he sighed after a moment.
"Is Uncle Greg drunk?" his niece asked.

"No, princess," said her mum. "He's just kinda sleepy - so he doesn't feel the pain."

"Did you get hurt bad, Uncle Greg?"

Greg thought about it, fuzzy. Mycroft was sitting at his bedside again, holding his hand - their fingers woven tightly together in a ball. It felt good.

"I think I did," he said. "I… don't remember."

"Do you remember anything?" Mycroft asked him, with care.

It was a hell of a question, Greg thought. He gave it his best attempt, frowning, sifting through the murky swamp that had become his short term memory. Nothing much was making sense.


"It's alright," Mycroft said to him, gently. "Don't try."

"Okay." Greg sighed; his ribs twinged again. "Ah - …"

"Shhh…" Myke ran a hand over his head. "Slow breaths."

"Don't go," Greg managed - he didn't know why he suddenly needed to say it, why he was suddenly frightened. He gripped Myke's hand, wishing the pain would subside. "Don't go - …"

"I shan't go. I promise. I'll never go again." Mycroft scraped his chair closer, rubbing the back of Greg's hand with a thumb. He gazed into his face. "Now breathe for me, slowly…"

As the pain steadily began to soften, Greg was aware of his sister giving Sarah a gentle hug.

"Shall we take you back to your dad for a little while, hmm? You can come see Uncle Greg again in a few minutes."

"Okay," Sarah sighed. "I need to start Uncle Greg's get well card, Mummy... I hope you have my crayons."

"They're in my handbag. Say bye for now to your uncle - remember not to touch his arm."

Greg opened his eyes, smiling weakly as his niece made a tentative approach to the bedside.

"Bye for now, Uncle Greg," she said. She leant over, neatly kissing him just above his black eye. "I'll be back in a while. I won't have finished your card, though. I'll have it ready for when you're out of hospital."

Greg searched her face, smiling. Kids said the weirdest things. "Hospital?"

"C'mon, princess," he heard his sister say. "Let's go find your dad and your crayons..." She guided Sarah out between the chairs, back towards the screens.

Just as they stepped from view, Sarah paused. She looked over to the bedside.

"Bye for now, Mycroft. Please keep an eye on my Uncle Greg while I'm gone."
Mycroft's hand tightened hard around Greg's.

"I shall, Miss Whittaker," he said. His voice cracked. "It was delightfully to meet you."

Sarah hummed and left, her pigtails bobbing, trailing obediently after her mother.

Greg settled back against his pillows, squeezing Mycroft's hand. He felt like he was all blurred together at the edges - like he'd slept for far too long.

"Why is my head sore?" he asked.

Mycroft didn't answer for a moment. When he did, it almost sounded like he'd been crying. "You - had an accident," he explained. "Last night."

"An accident...?"

"You were led into a trap. You - were hurt. I should have realised what was happening... I should have kept you safe. I'm sorry."

"You always keep me safe," Greg mumbled. "S'my fault I keep getting in trouble... causing you grief..." He yawned a little, wincing as it spiked across his chest. "Can we go home soon, Myke? M'tired."

"Soon," Mycroft whispered. His hand shook as he squeezed Greg's. "I promise."

"Don't know if we have any food in... I can't remember..."

"We'll get some," Mycroft said.

"Okay..." Greg sighed, passing his tongue briefly between his lips - he found the stitches and frowned, investigating them with his tongue. "Ow."

"Don't agitate those," Mycroft said to him, gently.

"Have I been fighting?"

"It was - rather more one-sided than that." Mycroft hesitated, stroking the back of his hand. "I - should have known... I should not have told you to follow him. I'm - so sorry."

"Oh, right..." Greg wasn't sure Mycroft had the right person, but didn't want to seem rude. None of this was familiar. "S'okay."

"Yuri found you. The doctors have been treating you overnight. You've - broken some bones. They'll take some time to heal, but - ..."

Mycroft breathed in, shaking a little.

"- ... perhaps it - could have been worse. All things considered. And you are... alive, which is what matters..."

"What's a Yuri?" Greg asked.

"Oh, God... Greg - I'm sorry - "

"You worry too much," Greg told him, softly. He gripped Myke's hand. Just having it to hold made the pain stay quiet.
He didn't know what was going on, or why everyone had suddenly turned up to see him - why everyone was fussing - but he'd figure it out later.

"You're here," he murmured. "S'what matters. The rest is just… the rest."

Mycroft made a quiet, strained little sound.

"Greg… I love you."

Greg smiled, opening one eye. Mycroft fazed before him, foggy and perfect - his Myke. They would go home soon, he thought. He'd make stir-fry and they'd watch films all weekend.

"I love you, too," he murmured.

Mycroft's chest seemed to expand. "I'm - very lucky, Greg. I don't deserve you."

Greg snorted, closing his eyes. He settled back into the pillows.

"Don't care if you deserve me," he mumbled. "So long as you love me."

He felt Mycroft stand up beside him, and lean closer to the bed.

Gently Mycroft leant down, avoiding his arm and his ribs and his side. He placed his lips cautiously over Greg's.

Greg's heart did a small, happy flip inside his chest. He responded gently - he was too afraid of the pain to turn his head, but it felt somehow like he'd missed this - like it had been far too long since they'd done it. He held onto Myke's hand, feeling everything go quiet as they kissed. Myke didn't seem to want to let him go.

Only the squeak of Rachel's tennis shoes on the corridor outside brought the kiss to an end. Myke stepped back from him, a little shy. His cheeks had flushed with colour.

"You're so gorgeous when you blush," Greg whispered, full of wonder.

"Your sister is coming back," Mycroft said. His eyes were bright. There came a faint ding from his pocket and he swore softly. "Oh, hell… I meant to turn that off…"

"Who is it?" Greg asked, still gazing at him.

Mycroft took the phone from his pocket, reading the message as Rachel reappeared around the screens.

"There. Happily drawing..." she said. "How's the patient?"

"In good spirits," Mycroft told her, with a smile. "It's from John, Greg… he's asking after you."

Greg smirked a little. "He kissed your brother."

"Yes, well," Mycroft said, as he typed a reply. "We all make mistakes..."

"You don't," Greg said.

Mycroft looked up; his expression softened. He abandoned the text message, unfinished, and slid the phone away into his pocket.
"Not any longer," he said. He took hold of Greg's hand.

Rachel was grinning from ear-to-ear.
Hello mycroft... so glad we got to say hello today. Thank god G is in your safe hands. As I'm sure you know he is easy to worry about!! So glad he has you... could not have wished him a more perfect somebody. Are you going to visit tonight? Was thinking I could maybe check on him tomorrow morning and let you know how he is? Lots of love - welcome to the family... Rachel xoxoxoxoxox

Hello Rachel... you are so very sweet. Thank you so much for all of your kindness to me. Honestly I am quite overwhelmed.
I'm going to be there for 7pm. Will of course update you.
Hopefully he will be a little more lucid by now...
M x

As he finished composing the text, standing just outside the door of Greg's flat, Mycroft reconsidered the final kiss.

Was it too much, he wondered? There was only one person in this world who had previously received text kisses from Mycroft Holmes.

He re-read Rachel's message - he felt again the impossible rush of affection and gratitude it had brought him. He could still see Greg's niece, regarding him from beside a hospital screen. Please keep an eye on my Uncle Greg while I'm gone.

He added a second kiss, and hit send.

As Mycroft turned the spare key in the lock, the silly plastic skeleton rattled gently against the door. He'd thought about changing the keyring at first. Now, he'd grown strangely fond of the thing.

He had an empty holdall over his arm, ready to be filled. Rachel had already supplied her brother with more food, books and magazines than he could possibly consume in three days - now Greg needed clothing, toiletries, and a few home comforts.

The door gently opened; Mycroft found himself once more in the small, cluttered flat where he'd fallen in love. His heart gave a giddy lurch just to be here again, skittering with tentative joy.

He knew he was getting ahead of himself.

One kiss; a little hand-holding; a single painkiller-addled 'I love you', and his swooning heart wanted to move back in. They had so much left to talk about - a violent blackmailer still on the loose, for one thing; Mycroft's guilt; the future, and what form that might take.

All the same...

It felt good to be back here.

He felt almost like the flat had missed him. As he moved quietly from room to room, he was aware of the space gathering around him as kind and welcoming as Rachel's arms - the furniture, the light fittings, the hideous patterned curtains - he'd missed them dearly. He hesitated by the television, gazing at the sofa where they'd spent so many evenings. In the bedroom, he trailed his fingers quietly over the crumpled bedcovers - how could one old bed feel so completely and utterly safe?
Because it was Greg's, he thought; because Greg was his joy.

Heart aching, Mycroft set about packing the holdall with the clothes Greg would need - underwear, pajamas, shirts that would be easier to negotiate over his arm. Six weeks for a clavicle fracture to heal fully, the doctor had said; four for the rib. It might be a troublesome couple of months - dressing, showering, keeping his shoulder supported - but they would manage somehow.

Mycroft realised, with a flush, that he was taking it as written he would be here.

He patted the clothes down carefully into the holdall.

He supposed the truth of it would come out at seven. The nurse had assured them as they left that Greg's next dose of painkillers would be lessened, and he was unlikely to be quite so... adorably stoned.

Mycroft just hoped that nothing else was different.

He took a few toiletries from the bathroom - shampoo, shower gel, toothbrush and toothpaste. As he picked up the deodorant can from by the mirror, he paused.

It seemed such a pathetic thing to do. But he couldn't resist. It had been a long, awful week.

He took a single, tentative sniff of the scent.

His eyes shut at once with the rush of it.

Greg's smell - cedarwood, a little salt, leathers and citrus and something desperately, powerfully male. It made Mycroft feel weak inside. God above, what he would give to sleep wrapped up in that scent once more… to feel warm skin against his own, hear Greg's voice soft at his neck, melting in the safety of that scent.

He took a sharp breath to reorient himself. He gave his head a small shake, pushing the can away into the holdall.

There was one last thing he needed to do. He'd left it purposely until the end.

He placed the holdall briefly on what he still thought of as his side of the bed, and got down on his hands and knees. He closed his eyes, wincing as he reached beneath. Perhaps Greg had found them, he thought - moved them - gotten rid of them altogether. Mycroft wouldn't have blamed him.

Then his outstretched fingers brushed a small leather box. His heart thumped. Mycroft closed his hand around the box and retrieved it carefully from beneath the bed.

He opened it up, his breath shallow.

The cufflinks glinted up at him from their padded lining - just where he'd left them.

He hadn't been able to bear it… the thought of them being somewhere else. A drawer, a cupboard, a box somewhere in Belgravia. It hadn't seemed right. He didn't know why he'd needed them to stay here.

As he gazed down at the cufflinks, he finally realised why.

It was because he'd needed to stay here.

He'd left them in his stead.
He hesitated, still kneeling on the floor, the beautiful leather box still open in his hands.

What if it all went wrong, he thought? What if he arrived to find Greg furious, not only at the mortal danger he'd been put through, but also the callous exploitation of his morphine-addled state this morning?

*Then I shall say sorry, Mycroft thought. And I will make amends.*

That was what you did when you belonged to someone.

You refused to give up on them.

Greg had taught him that.

He slipped the cufflinks gently from their box.

They were glinting at his wrists as he left the flat, eased the holdall over his shoulder, and locked the door.

_____________________________

*How are you? S*

*Better. Thank you.*
*M.*

*How is Greg? S*

*M.*

*Not your fault. S*

*On what are you basing this assertion?*
*M.*

*Have sent email detailing the wider points. Read when less preoccupied.*
*For now, lack of warning signs - speed of developing incident - Lestrade considerable autonomy to make his own decisions. Many factors. S*

*And yet I feel guilty.*
*M.*
You took a sabbatical. You did not get him attacked and left for dead because you were a power-hungry fool who thought your reputation mattered more than him. Very different situation. Though I appreciate the thought. M.

I watched him weeping at my grave. The guilt will go in time. S

At five minutes to seven, Mycroft approached the trauma centre's front desk with the holdall at his side.

It was the same nurse as this morning. She recognised him, brightening as she looked up.

"Mr - Lestrade, is it?" she said.

"Holmes," he replied, with a small smile. "How is Mr Lestrade?"

"Sore, but chirpy," she said. "He managed two helpings of treacle sponge, at least."

Mycroft's heart expanded with a silent sigh. "Have you caught him smoking in the bathroom yet?" he asked.

She grinned. "No, but thanks for the heads-up. I'll put a note in his file. D you remember the way?"

"I do... thank you."

The door of the ward was open as Mycroft approached. It was peak visiting time. Families and friends were gathered at bedsides, some talking brightly, others sitting in awkward silence. Only the bed at the end had nobody sitting beside it.

Mycroft breathed in as he made his way along the ward, hoping against hope that nothing had changed.

The patient was sitting up in bed; he was reading his own chart with a bemused little frown. The smile was a good sign, Mycroft thought - as was the recovered ability to read.

As Greg glanced up, his smile split into a grin. Mycroft's heart performed a somersault inside his chest. He didn't dare think.

"Hey!" Greg said, as he approached the bed. "Are you here to congratulate me?"

"Congratulate - ?" Mycroft said, hesitantly, putting down the holdall.

Greg turned round the chart one-handed, indicating a box at the bottom with his thumb. "Turns out I'm a happily married man," he said.

Mycroft stared at the Patient Details form he was being shown. In a nurse's looping blue handwriting, right at the bottom, was a space labelled Family Contact.
Within it was written, 'Husband - Michael Holmes'.

"Something I missed?" Greg asked him, with a grin.

Mycroft didn't know if he should look embarrassed or not.

"I… quite clearly told them 'partner'..." he muttered. "In my defence, I've had a somewhat emotionally volatile twenty-four hours..."

He sat down on the hard plastic chair at Greg's bedside, placing the holdall cautiously on the floor.

"You seem - slightly more clear-headed," he said, with care.

"I'm no longer blitzed out of my skull, you mean?" Greg said, bemused. The black eye only served to make his expression more mischievous. Mycroft immediately hated himself for finding it almost attractive.

"Are you in pain?" he asked.

"Ah… only if I move in any way. But I'm alright, considering…" Greg smiled, putting aside the chart. He twitched a little as he reached. "Has Yuri got a new storey on his house yet?"

It was good to hear him joke, Mycroft thought. The great benefit of falling for a policeman - humour in response to trauma.

"Yuri will be compensated in due course," he said. "How exactly I can reward him for averting such an utter and catastrophic failure on my part, I don't know..."

Greg smiled to himself.

"I knew you'd be like this," he said. He regarded Mycroft with a crumpled smile from his hospital bed, quite at ease. "You couldn't have known I'd go charging into a bloody obvious ambush. So don't beat yourself up. I know that's what you're doing."

Mycroft knotted his fingers together, unhappy.

"I should have realised his intentions," he muttered. "The moment he headed for - "

"We both thought it, Myke. We thought he was headed off to meet the real bad guy, and this was our one chance. We took it. Anyway... it was me who fucked up with the wire - talking back to you. It was my fault the bastard smelt a rat. So don't worry."

"Then I shouldn't have spoken," Mycroft said, his chest hollow. "I shouldn't have distracted you when - "

Greg smiled, shaking his head a little. "I know you're good at this game," he said. "Twisting it all back to your fault. But I'll win, Myke. Because I should have told you the second those bloody photos arrived. You'd have checked my phone, found the name, problem solved. Instead I hid it from you. I lied, and I made it all worse, and I was a prize idiot. So cancel the guilt trip. You're not going."

"You feared you'd lose me," Mycroft said, despairing. "I did precisely the same to you after The Beaumont. Lied, for fear of - "

Greg reached out.
His one good hand took Myke's - gripped it, tight - knotted their fingers together.

Mycroft fell silent, heart lodged in his throat.

"I've got my own feet," Greg said to him, quietly. "They go where they want. I chose to follow the guy into an isolated area without backup. The end."

Mycroft curled his fingers into themselves, shying away from the gentle hold.

"I should never have commenced this," he managed, tight-throated. "Should never have - drawn you into danger - … it was selfish of me. Unforgivable. I - "

"My feet go where they want," Greg told him again, eyebrows lifting. "I followed you out of Sherlock's on Christmas Eve. I followed you out of your car into a hotel bar. Then I followed you to your room. Then, two weeks later, I got back in your car and let it take me wherever the hell you wanted me, because I wanted it too. Spoiler alert, Myke. If you walk out that door, I'll follow you still. You're… going to have to try harder to get rid of me."

He took Mycroft's hand again, tighter this time. He tangled their fingers back together.

Mycroft did not let go; he wished he was not shaking.

"I could have been the death of you," he whispered, barely audible.

Greg smiled a little. "You've been the life of me. Fuck 'could'. I'm fine, Myke."

"He broke four of your - "

"Then we'll find him," Greg interrupted, "and we'll find whichever of my stupid friends is employing him, and we'll make them pay." He shook his head. "M'done hearing you blame yourself. I made my choice, Myke. It's you. Now... just fucking get used to it."

Mycroft looked away; he gripped the hand that was holding his, gently.

Sherlock's final text blinked across his heart. The guilt will go in time.

At least nobody had to weep at a graveside this time.

"You met my sister," Greg said. As Mycroft looked up, he found Greg's eyes watching him, bright.

He smiled a little, comforted by the thought. "Mm."

"And my niece."

"Women of dazzling intellect and insight," Mycroft said. "I am... put to shame in their presence."

"How did you find Rachel?"

"By telephone, at first." Mycroft hesitated, wondering something that had been pushed to the back of his mind. "She said you told her... last weekend. The weekend of - …"

Greg's expression shifted.

"I was a bit… cut-up," he said, "and she was trying to hook me up with Sue Next Door… and it all just sort of… came out. Then I couldn't bring myself to tell her you'd already gone."
He hesitated, glancing down at his splint-strapped right hand lying useless on the sheets.

"Sorry... I just - shouldn't ever lie. It doesn't work."

Mycroft paused, looking down as well. In two days, he'd gone from thinking Greg Lestrade was misguided at best, reckless at worst, and either way an idiot with serious reparations to make; to feeling like his own organs were being removed via his throat whenever Greg apologised to him.

"I - believe that you and I may now be even, when it comes to ill-judged choices..." Mycroft said. He couldn't help himself. "Though, I will add that you never risked my life."

"I'm about to kill your career well enough."

"My career is not my life," Mycroft said. He'd never been so sure of anything. "If only I'd grasped that earlier, I could have saved you a great deal of pain."

"You've worked hard at it, though. Seems - sad for you just to give up..." Greg hesitated. "M'sorry he got away."

"You're - ..." Mycroft realised. He let go of Greg's hand. "Oh - no. Not for a second. Don't you dare apologise for - "

"It all just happened so quick. I tried to take him down, but the bastard landed on - "

" - battered you with a brick, and you're apologising to me for - "

" - I know, but if I'd just hung onto him - "

" - nothing but my damnable anger, driving you into danger - "

"Christ," Greg breathed. "Listen to us. We... spent days arguing over who's more to blame. Now we're arguing over who's more sorry. This is... crazy, Myke."

His expression twisted a little.

"It's... causing marital disharmony."

Mycroft felt his mouth lift in a reluctant smile. He smothered it away, annoyed at himself. Damn, but he wished Greg didn't know how to do that to him - the man was irresistible. It was both the cause and solution to every problem.

"We need to fix this," Greg decided.

If they could agree on anything, Mycroft thought, it was that.

"How?" he said.

"You're the politician," Greg told him, fond. "You must deal with this all the time... people squabbling over nothing. How d'you get them to cut it out and move on?"

Mycroft sighed, giving it serious thought.

"Emphasise shared interests," he said, at last. "Historic ties... identify and pursue a common cause."

"Seems sensible." Greg paused, reaching for Myke's hand once again. Their fingers came together
quietly. "Historic ties is easy."

Mycroft smiled a little as Greg stroked at his cufflink. "We've... shared much."

"Yeah..." Greg said. He remembered something, giving an uneasy grin. "M'sorry I tormented you in China."

"I liked it," Mycroft said. The simple honesty made Greg's expression quirk with delight. Mycroft decided to give him some more. "You make me feel alive... invested. Human."

He lowered his eyes, breathing deep.

"When you told me about your father... I've never felt despair like that. I would erase him from the world if I could, for what he did to you. What he tried to obliterate in you."

Greg gripped his hand gently.

"That's a shared interest, then." He looked up at Myke, quiet. "Life... sent a better man along in the end," he reassured him. "Fixed me up."

"He's trying," Mycroft whispered. He swallowed. "I'm afraid I'll hurt you."

"Do it," Greg said. Mycroft looked at him, startled. "Then make it up to me. It's love. It hurts sometimes... hurts because it matters. It only hurts for good if you give up on it."

Mycroft wondered how a private library of five centuries of literature hadn't taught him that yet. He took a slow breath, ringing with the enormity of it.

"A common cause then," he said, at last.

Greg pressed his teeth gently into the corner of his lip, fidgeting with the stitches of his cut. "What's our priority?"

Mycroft watched him for a moment, quiet. He decided to be brave.

He moved his chair nearer and got to his feet.

Greg watched him, round-eyed, as he leant across the bed. In the moment before their lips met, Greg's eyes flickered shut.

Mycroft kissed him, slowly, cupping one hand with infinite tenderness beneath the unbruised half of his jaw.

As their lips parted, their foreheads stayed together. Greg swallowed quietly in the silence.

"I have a single concern now," Mycroft murmured. He searched Greg's deep brown eyes. "One, and one only."

Greg bit down at his lip again; his pupils had swollen. "Yeah?" he said.

"Yes." Mycroft lowered his voice. "... to stop you biting at those stitches."

Greg's grin spread from ear to ear. "Sorry," he said.

Mycroft smiled slowly, gazing into those eyes he adored. They were so full of life - full of fire. They took his breath away. He would gaze into them everyday, he thought - every single day of his
"I... once asked you what it is that you want," he said. "At The Beaumont. Do you remember?"

"Yes," Greg whispered. "I remember." He smiled a little. "I... think my answer was to ask what you want."

"Mm." Mycroft breathed in, filling his lungs with Greg's scent. Even masked by hospital sheets, it was there - the scent of the man he loved. "I think we've come far enough now for you to give me an honest answer."

"I didn't know what I wanted then," Greg admitted, soft. "You - hadn't shown me yet."

Mycroft studied his face. "Do you know now?"

"Yes," Greg said. His eyes flashed. "Completely."

"Then... I think you'd better tell me."

Greg glanced at his lips; then back to his eyes.

"I... want you to be here," he said, "when I've had a horrendous day."

Mycroft's heart twisted, recognising his own words from months and months before - The Beaumont - London, laid out like a cloak of stars. Greg saw it in his face; his eyes began to shine, full of love.

"I want to talk to you," he went on. "I want to eat with you. I want you to take me to bed. Every single morning, for all of my life, I want to wake up with you. And I want you to think about me when I'm not there. That's... what I want."

Greg breathed in.

"It's all I want," he whispered.

Mycroft felt his heart pound, weak. "The... rest is just the rest."

Greg's expression softened.

"Let's start again," he said. "First date. We'll do it properly this time - no lies - no keeping old secrets from you - no kidnapping me off the streets... just you and me."

Mycroft paused, his gaze flickering to Greg's bruises. "We - still have a blackmailer on our tail."

"Doesn't matter," Greg said. "Not if we're together."

Mycroft smiled; he couldn't query that. "I adore you."

Greg's face lit up as he grinned. Even battered to hell, he'd never looked more gorgeous. He glanced down, admiring the flash of silver at Mycroft's wrist.

"I'm... glad you're wearing them again," he said, stroking the cufflink with his thumb. "I worried you'd got rid of them."

Mycroft smiled. "I'll wear them for our first date," he promised. "When are we going?"
Greg gave him a hopeful grin. "Now?"

"I'm not spiriting you away from a hospital for our first date. 'Properly', you said - that means no kidnapping involved."

"Okay... when I'm released, then. As soon as we can." Greg smiled, glancing down at his braced rib-cage. "It'll give me something to look forward to."

"You have much to look forward to," Mycroft said. "Believe me."

He was already making plans for their birthdays next May.

A holiday, he thought - a long one - a beach somewhere at sunset and the world laid out before them. A candlelit table. A blackmailer's head in lieu of a ring.

A modern touch, he thought - but then, tradition wasn't everything.

"D'you want a kitkat?" Greg asked him, reaching for his bedside drawer. "Rachel's brought me thirty-six... I don't know how long she thinks I'll be in here for."

Mycroft watched him for a moment, marvelling.

"You are extraordinary," he said at last.

Greg looked back at him, amused. "Is that... yes to a kitkat, or...?"

Mycroft, still marvelling, accepted a kitkat.

"I'll have to call work at some point," Greg mused, as he unwrapped his own. "Probably wondering where the fuck I am."

"Your loving spouse has dealt with it."

"Really?" Greg grinned. "Who did you - ... not the Chief Super, surely."

"Mm."

"Jesus. Did you tell him - everything?"

"He is aware of my connection to you."

"What did he say?"

Mycroft broke his kitkat in half. He'd never had one before. Life was full of novelties, he thought.

"I'm sure Chief Superintendent Vaughan shall have much to say on the subject," he remarked. "And if it begins with anything but a grovelling apology, let me know... I'm acquiring a taste for incinerating those who mistreat you."

It was ten o'clock, and the lights were being turned out, when Mycroft took his cue to leave. They had talked for three hours; it felt like only minutes.

"You need your rest," he murmured, kissing Greg's forehead as he stood from the side of the bed. "I will be back tomorrow. Everything else you need is in your holdall."

"Did you happen to bring a phone charger?"
"In with your shirts," Mycroft said. He hesitated a moment, holding Greg's gaze. "I'm a text message away."

Greg smiled, his face opening with relief. "Alright."

"Rachel is coming to see you tomorrow morning," Mycroft said. "I imagine you might have Sergeant Donovan here too, during the day - perhaps Sherlock and John. The evening slot is incontestably mine, seeing as I am, by official documents, your spouse now… which means I get first call."

He leant down; he kissed Greg, gently, with the lightest of touches to his face. Greg made a little noise as he pulled away.

"Sleep well," Mycroft murmured to him. "Have sweet dreams, darling."

Greg's whole face lit with joy. "I love you."

"I love you, too... desperately." One last, gentle kiss - Mycroft couldn't bring himself to go. He'd not slept in forty hours, but he wasn't feeling it at all. He just wanted to stay and watch Greg sleep. "Do not eat thirty-four kitkats overnight."

"I won't."

"And do not agitate your stitches."

"I love you," Greg said again.

One final, final kiss - Mycroft cradled Greg's face in his hands. Greg held onto his wrist, weak.

"Goodnight," Mycroft whispered, easing away.

"Goodnight…" Greg watched him go, soft-eyed.

All the way home, Mycroft could still see his eyes. London passed the tinted windows of the car in a haze - showers of light, rivers of people, great monuments uplit in the darkness. Mycroft saw none of it.

They were almost home by the time Jameson spoke.

"Is he… alright, Mr Holmes?"

Mycroft looked up in quiet surprise; it was unlike Jameson to talk. He'd been driving Mycroft for nearly nine years now. This was quite possibly the first inquiry he'd ever made of his employer, and spoken in a tone of deepest apology.

"He's… well, Jameson." Mycroft found himself oddly touched. "Conscious, and in good spirits."

"Pardon my asking, sir."

"No, it's… quite alright."

"We've all become rather fond of Inspector Lestrade."

"Haven't we," Mycroft said, with a slight smile. He glanced out of the window, watching the cold and faceless fronts of Chester Square curve into view. "He has… a number of fractures, which will heal. A few facial injuries. He's in very safe hands."
"He is, sir. Quite the best." The car drew to a faultless stop at Mycroft's door. "Goodnight, Mr Holmes."

"Goodnight, Jameson…" Mycroft stepped out of the car, pausing. "Thank you for your concern."

Jameson gave a single nod.

As Mycroft ascended the steps, the door was opened ahead of him.

Yuri, grey-faced, was waiting in the light. He lowered his eyes as Mycroft approached.

"Mr Holmes," he murmured.

"Yuri," Mycroft said. He began to unbutton his coat. "How are you?"

It was no easy feat to surprise a six-foot-five Russian. "I am quite well, Mr Holmes… but how is Inspector Lestrade?"

"He's in excellent spirits. The hospital expects him to make a complete recovery." Mycroft paused. "Entirely thanks to you."

Yuri looked down, a solid wall of professionalism.

"I am glad to hear it, sir. His injuries were…" Yuri sought for the right word. "… not insignificant."

Mycroft removed his coat, remaining quiet as Yuri took it and hung it up with care.

"Yuri, I… owe you quite a debt," he said at last.

"It is my job, Mr Holmes. No debt is owed."

"Your contract is to ensure my safety - not anyone else. I will be… changing that, shortly. I would like you to safeguard two lives. But for now, you have gone above and beyond."

Yuri did not argue. Mycroft held his gaze, entirely serious.

"I would like you to think at length," he said, "and return to me when you are ready. If there is something in this world that I can acquire for you, or enact for you, or arrange for you, I wish you to name it. There is no limit to this. I will be offended if you ask for nothing, Yuri."

Yuri's eyes flickered.

"I… shall think, Mr Holmes."

"Good."

"Sir, your assistant. Sophie. She called to see you." Yuri's expression was rather guarded - more so than usual. "She left papers in your office, and asked me to give you her best wishes."

"Sophie," Mycroft said, with quiet interest. He studied Yuri's face as he did. "Did you explain the situation to her?"

"In small detail, sir. It was not my place."

"No, that's fine… I'd have quite understood." Mycroft wondered for a moment. "Do you speak to
Sophie often?"

"In the - course of my duties, sir, only."

"Mm." Mycroft reached for his cufflinks, undoing the first gently. "Perhaps you and she should work more closely together, for the benefit of my safety. I shall glean her opinion on the matter."

Yuri said absolutely nothing.

"Might I have camomile tea in my room, Yuri? I haven't slept in two days and I rather need to amend that."

"Of course, sir. I am - pleased that Inspector Lestrade is improved."

Yuri left, heading off to the kitchen.

Mycroft removed his cufflinks as he ascended the stairs, thinking. He placed them by the bed, along with his mobile phone.

The phone vibrated gently as he undid his shirt.

Mycroft reached for it, sitting on the edge of the mattress with his shirt half-done.

*are you home safe? x*

It was quite a sight. Mycroft had missed it - that name at the top of his screen, the casual disregard for capitalisation, the single kiss.

*Yes. Most of my staff have asked after you. They are glad you're alright. M xxx*

Yuri arrived with his tea, and placed it on the bedside without speaking. He turned to leave.

"Thank you, Yuri…” Mycroft murmured, typing.

Yuri nodded, a little surprised. "You are - welcome, sir."

He left, closing the door behind him.

Mycroft got into bed. He settled just as another text message arrived.

*have you told them you're alright too? x*

He couldn't help but smile. He typed his reply, sending it as he picked up his tea.

*I shall. Though I imagine they'll be able to tell. I missed you. M xxx*

*you're the whole world to me. i love you x*

*Sleep… before we end up texting into the small hours. I will see you tomorrow. I love you, too. M xxx*
A very brief note on clavicle fractures, which differ wildly in people's experiences of them. Some people are laid low for months, while some people (who I can only assume have a far, far more fun job than I do) are back to work in a couple of days. I've put our tenacious Greg at the mild-medium end. Just in case anyone had a very different time of things.

Greg was released from The Royal London on Thursday morning, with a list as long as his arm of all the things he was no longer allowed to do.

He would not miss skiing so much. Shirts without buttons were going to be a bigger loss. He was no longer allowed to sit down for long stretches either, on account of his rib, and he had to let his arm hang loose at all times - no resting it on tables, on desks or inside his sleeve. He was not to perform any heavy-lifting, the physiotherapist said, and added (with a wry glance at Greg's medically-documented husband) that she was afraid hoovering and grocery bags were now Mycroft's domain.

Greg laughed - he'd expected Myke to do the same. Instead, his partner had simply smiled to himself, adding both items to the notes he was making.

Luckily, the list of forbidden activity had nothing to say on the subject of garlic bread - nor candlelight. As a result, on Friday evening Greg found himself waiting in the rain outside an Italian restaurant on Dorset Street.

Rachel had been kind enough to put his umbrella up for him as he left.

"Are you sure you'll be okay getting there?" she said, standing with him on his doorstep as he clumsily locked the house. His left hand was turning out to be even less useful than he'd thought it would be.

He gave her a smile over his shoulder as the lock finally clicked, his eyes bright.

"It's only a street away, squirt," he said. "I won't go into any building yards. I promise."

She gave him a soft frown. "G, don't joke about that… you had your head kicked in. The guy could have killed you."

"I've learnt my lessons," he said, seriously. "All of them. I promise. Thanks for helping me not look like a scruff tonight."

She smiled, admiring the new shirt they'd teamed up to get him into - slate grey with a pale pinstripe.

"You look gorgeous, G," she said. "Top class. He won't know what's hit him."

Greg grinned. She handed him his umbrella, carefully.
"Have you got money for the taxi home?" she asked.

"Seriously? It's a street away. I'll be fine."

"I know, but you shouldn't be walking much... you broke four bones."

"Two of them fingers. And the collarbone was only minor. Besides," Greg said, with interest, "I'm actually meant to be walking more. Stops the bones growing back together strange. That's not just me being obstinate for once. That's science."

"Well, if you're sure..." she said. His sister paused, studying him softly for a moment, then placed herself around him in a featherlight, ultra-careful hug. "Am I hurting you?"

"You're hardly touching me," he said, amused. He opted for a fond nuzzle of her cheek, like they were small animals somewhere in the wild. "Thanks, squirt..."

"You have a lovely time on your date," she mumbled, pressing their faces together.

He could feel her smiling. It made him smile, too. "I will," he promised.

"Will you be okay getting back out your shirt?"

"I - kinda hope there'll be someone helpful around to give me a hand by then..."

She laughed. "You broke four bones this week. If you're not allowed to play tennis, you're not allowed to do that."

"It's not on the list," he said, grinning.

"What are you like..." she mumbled. She squeezed him a little, barely there. "He's so sweet to take you out. I can't believe how happy you are now... it's just so..." She sighed, shaking her head as she gently let him go. "... it's just perfect."

He smiled at her, wondering what he'd done in a previous life to deserve her as a sister. He was glad he'd done it, whatever it was.

"Are you - ever going to tell Dad?" she asked, tentatively.

Greg thought about it. He'd been expecting her to ask any day now; he supposed it was worth talking about.

"Can I be honest with you?" he said.

"Of course you can."

"I feel like telling Dad would be in some way like I'm... asking his permission. Or... I don't know, looking for his blessing in some way. His approval. I'm not getting any of those things. And I don't want them."

He shrugged, and winced in immediate regret - the gesture had sent a sharp stab across his collarbones. He reached up to massage it, feeling stupid.

"Don't tell him," he said. "He'll find out when he finds out."

"Okay, G... he won't hear it from me."
"And when he does find out, if he's got something to say... tell him I don't want to hear it." He smiled at her. "M'happy," he said. "I waited a long time to be happy. I'm not letting anything get in the way of that again."

A drip from the restaurant gutter above slipped past the edge of Greg's umbrella, spattering on his elbow. He jumped, finding himself with a start on Dorset Street; the rain was still coming down.

It was almost seven.

He felt strange and giddy - a date, he thought. An actual date. Not in a private room, either… a normal restaurant, at a normal table, two normal people on a Friday night. He was wondering what the morning would bring.

Propping his umbrella carefully against the wall behind him, Greg eased his one good hand inside his pocket.

The list of forbidden activity hadn't mentioned cigarettes. Lighting the damn things was the only obstacle now. Greg put the lighter between his teeth for safe-keeping, fished his Rothmans out of the other pocket, and with some difficulty managed to extract a cigarette. The umbrella wobbled dangerously - he froze - it stayed in place.

Gingerly lifting his right arm, his collarbone immediately warned him to stop.

"Ow - …" He secured the cigarette between his splint and the next finger along, wincing as he gripped it in place. Next, the lighter - and Christ, the things were impossible to operate with the wrong hand. He clicked at it, scowling, feeling his bad arm start to shake. "Ow! - oh, come on, just - ..." A spark; his heart leapt. The rain spattered it out. "Jesus..."

A car door slammed.

"What on earth are you doing?" demanded a familiar voice. Greg looked up, abashed. Mycroft swept across the pavement through the rain, dipped beneath the umbrella and took the lighter off him at once. "For goodness' sake… come here."

Mycroft lit the cigarette for him, then steadied the umbrella with a hand. Rain rattled down above them.

"If you're going to get yourself readmitted to hospital," Mycroft warned him, stern, "at least let it be when I'm there, and for something interesting... I'm not going to tell a doctor that you re-fractured your collarbone sparking up."

Greg surveyed him with a puppy-dog expression, trying not to grin.

"What sort of 'something interesting'?” he asked.

Mycroft could not stay angry. His reluctant smile made Greg's heart light up like a beacon - he could imagine their shared umbrella now glowing with golden light in the grey London street.

"That's a new shirt," Mycroft noted. He admired it with a quiet flash of his eyes. "It's… very nice."

Greg grinned, gazing up at his lover. "Thanks. Thought I'd make an effort. First date and all..."

Mycroft smiled; he reached up to brush a drop of water gently from Greg's cheek. The silver cufflink gleamed in place, bright as a star.
"How are you?" Mycroft murmured. Greg's heart gave a little hop.

"Fine. It's - kinda tricky to sleep, but... I'm all settled in. Rachel's put more food in my cupboards than I'll ever eat in a lifetime, and filled my freezer with things I can just throw in a pan and warm up. I won't starve, at least."

"Good." Mycroft's eyes warmed. "Tricky to sleep?"

"Trying to get comfortable, mostly... I'll figure it out." Greg grinned, taking a last drag on his cigarette. "Are you hungry?"

"Famished."

"Good. Let's eat. Don't let me order steak, will you? I'll never be able to cut it... end up frisbeeing it away across the restaurant."

"Then thank goodness you have a partner equipped with two good hands," Mycroft said, sleekly. "Both of which are willing to help you at a moment's notice."

He pushed open the door of the restaurant, unleashing the warmth and aroma of garlic and red wine. He stood back for Greg to step inside.

"It's under 'Holmes'," he said.

"That's what we're going for, is it?" Greg asked, pausing to squash his cigarette stub underfoot.

"Mm?"

"'Holmes'," he said, looking back from the door. His eyes flashed up at Mycroft. "Married name. Not Lestrade, or... Holmes-Lestrade."

He needed to stop joking about this, he thought. It was only so long before he started scaring Mycroft.

"Lestrolmes," he ventured, unable to help himself. "Hostrade."

Mycroft did not look scared. He was smiling from ear-to-ear.

"Get inside," he said. "Before you're soaked."

Greg got himself inside, grinning. A waitress breezed forward to meet him.

"Hi," he said. "We've got a table booked under 'Holmes' - just two of us."

She showed them to the back of the restaurant, where a cosy corner table had been laid out ready. As Greg reached for his chair, Mycroft stepped smoothly past him and brushed his hands aside.

"Thank you," Greg said, amused, sitting down as Mycroft eased the chair in behind him.

"Chivalry costs nothing," Mycroft noted. He took a seat, graciously accepted his menu from the waitress, then said to her as she offered the wine list, "Ah... no wine, thank you."

Greg's face fell. "None at all?"

Mycroft raised an eyebrow. "You are currently taking enough painkillers to fell a horse."
"It's fine," Greg said. "I'm not a horse."

Mycroft resisted for a moment more, then gave in with a smile. He turned his amused eyes back to the waitress. "A single glass of chardonnay, then, please. If you could generously water it down in the back, I'd be grateful."

She wrote it down, grinning to herself. "And for you, sir?"

"Merlot, please. Just a small glass."

She nodded, smiled, and left them alone with the menus to decide.

"I think we're her favourites tonight," Greg said.

Mycroft smirked, scanning the specials. "She's been waitressing for three years… she knows what sort of diners tend to leave a generous tip. A dual-income professional LGBT couple on a Friday night is nothing sort of a jackpot."

"We're also adorable, Myke. Don't deny it."

"That may also be a factor." Mycroft's eyes flashed into his across the menu, full of affection. "Conceding the issue of alcohol to you does mean that I will be paying the bill, of course… without protest on your part."

"Your half of the bill - absolutely."

"In addition to your half, yes..."

Greg pushed his tongue against his canines, trying to hold in a grin. "I'm not going to win this one, am I?"

"No," Mycroft said, idling his eyes over the fish courses. "I suggest you make your peace with it."

"Fine…" Greg flipped the menu over, looking for pizzas. "I'm getting the Thai food in tomorrow night, so… doesn't matter really…"

"Are you now?" Mycroft murmured. "I don't recall agreeing to a second date."

"This one's going pretty well, don't you think?"

"Mm... very well."

"Good," said Greg. "That's a plan, then. Instead of wine, how many desserts can I have?"

Mycroft smiled, his eyes shining. He reached a hand quietly across the table to where Greg's rested on the table-cloth, and wove their fingers together.

"However many you would like," he murmured.

Greg smiled into his menu, squeezing Mycroft's hand. "Okay."

A few minutes later, the waitress returned with their wine. She took their order, fighting a smile the entire time, told them her name was Gemma, lit the candle on their table, and wished them a wonderful evening.

"This is… really nice," Greg said, as they found themselves alone again. He gave Mycroft a coy
look across the table. "Being out like this... in public."

Mycroft raised an eyebrow slightly. "Isn't it?"

"It's - not as scary as I thought it might be." Greg glanced around the nearby diners - mostly couples, a few groups. Everyone was busy with their food and their companions, too wrapped up in their own lives to pay much attention to anyone else's. "Nobody seems too bothered. I think we've had a few looks, but... let's be honest, it's probably for my face as much as my boyfriend."

Mycroft's expression softened. "The bruising isn't as bad as it was."

Greg grinned a little. "I've got a mirror, Myke... and I don't care - it's not a problem." He lifted his good hand to rub the back of his neck, wincing a little as his collarbone twinged. "It's just nice to be together, that's all... it - feels good."

"Does it feel good to be seen together?" Mycroft asked.

Greg thought about it, kindling a smile.

"Yeah. It does. It's - ..." He shook his head, marvelling for a second at how far he'd come. "Such a cliché. I'm not going to say it."

"Go on," Mycroft said. His expression was oddly proud.

"It's... good to feel like I'm not hiding anything. Like I'm happy with who I am. Not suppressing things anymore, just... being how I'm meant to be." Greg sighed a little, even though his ribs hurt. "It's - good."

Mycroft's chest expanded silently. "It's gratifying to hear that."

"It's all you," Greg said, raising an eyebrow. "You know that, right?"

Mycroft shook his head, even as he smiled and his eyes grew bright. "I aided, perhaps. Offered a few snippets of experience. Hardly 'all' me."

"No, Myke - I'm... serious. This was all you. I... staggered along for thirty miserable years, wondering why life felt like one accident after another... and now..."

He gave an awkward grin, reaching for his wine.

"Not even got our starters yet. Sorry. I'll rein it in."

"You'll do no such thing," Mycroft said. "This is a dinner date... profound conversation is de rigueur." He propped his chin on one hand, picking up his glass of merlot in the other. "To 'being how we are meant to be'," he proposed.

Greg grinned; their glasses chinked softly together.

"Being how we're meant to be," he said.

They drank. Mycroft watched with amusement as Greg finished half the glass in one go, licking a little off his lips.

"You've been very patient with your injuries. I appreciate it's frustrating for you."

"It's fine... physio said my collarbone could have been a lot worse. I'll be off the prescription
painkillers soon, and I can drink... then it's only another seven weeks at the most until I can ski again."

"Thank heavens."

"I know, right? I don't know how I'll cope... I'll have to find something else to occupy me." Greg smiled, checking Myke's reaction. "TV, maybe. Old films..."

Mycroft's eyes shone from within. "Do let me know if I can assist."

"I will." Greg took another drink of wine, wishing there was twice as much of it. He supposed he didn't want to knock himself out. He hesitated a little as something came to mind. "I was... thinking earlier."

"About?"

"The - blackmailer." Greg gave an apologetic glance across the table. "Sorry... I know this isn't romantic dinner conversation."

Mycroft sipped at his wine. "We've been preoccupied with your hospital stay... but perhaps the time has come to discuss this. It's important. What have you been thinking?"

"Not much. I wondered if you and Sherlock had figured out anything new... that's all."

It was Mycroft's turn to look apologetic. He picked up his wine.

"Nothing conclusive," he said. "We both agree that another demand is likely."

"Really?" Greg grimaced. "A big one?"

"Mm. Vast, if we're right." As he took another drink of his wine, Mycroft seemed to remember something. "That night... at Baker Street. You heard 'she'."

Greg hesitated. He'd relived that moment a hundred times now, trying to put himself back hearing distance of that single, telling sound.

"I don't really know what I heard," he admitted. "At the time, I was pretty certain - but when you said - ... did you definitely hear 'he'?"

Mycroft ran his thumb around the curve of his wine glass, thinking.

"There was something strange about it," he said. "Though it seemed to be 'he'."

"How sure would you say you are?"

Mycroft pulled a slight face. "Eighty per cent, perhaps..."

"That's - quite high."

"How sure are you?"

Greg didn't want to put a number on it. The more he replayed that moment, the more indistinct the sound became in his memory. Mycroft was right that there was something strange about it. That much he knew. He just couldn't put his finger on what.

He supposed they wouldn't figure anything out now, days later, with the thug long gone.
He shook his head slightly. "Not - sure enough," he admitted. He looked down into his wine glass. "What happens when another letter arrives?"

"We discuss it," Mycroft said, gently. "Calmly, and like adults, as we should have done from the first. We reach a decision together and proceed. Until that day, we relax in the knowledge that any hold they had over us is now significantly reduced."

Mycroft sat back in his chair, finishing his wine with a swirl of the glass.

"The bastard's treatment of you has shown me the irrelevance of my career," he said. "How little it matters. If my reputation suffers, may it suffer. Better it suffers than you do."

Greg felt a quiet flush low in his chest.

"I'm - sorry," he murmured. "I'm sorry the photos are all you."


"And... cuffed to someone's bed..."

"Not to someone's. To yours. It makes a vast difference." Mycroft smiled, turning the empty wine glass between his hands. "All of this is secondary," he said.

"Secondary?"

"To my actual priorities." Beneath the table, the toe of a leather loafer gently brushed Greg's knee. "I do not care if I'm forced to bow out of the great game. It will continue without me, and I will find some new occupation. I... could not find another you."

"Myke..." Greg felt his heart skip a beat; he put down his glass, afraid he would drop it. "You're..."

Mycroft smiled, lowering his eyes.

"Lucky," he said. "And well aware of it."

Their starters were arriving. The waitress arranged them carefully on the table and left them to it, with a bright, "Enjoy."

"You - shouldn't give up, you know," Greg said, as he carefully picked up a first prawn with his fork.

"Mm?"

"Your career. I mean... they probably need you more than you need them." Greg knew that for a fact. He smiled at Myke across the table, a brief flicker of his eyes. "I don't know, it just... seems a shame. You worked hard on it."

Mycroft smiled a little in return, selecting an olive. "I would be unlikely to command the same respect."

"Because you're gay? Is it... really that big a deal?"

"How times change," Mycroft noted, wry. Greg smiled uneasily. Mycroft lowered his voice as he snapped off a piece of bruschetta. "It's more the... specific content of the photographs. They betray
a certain vulnerability. Difficult to fear someone who you've seen on their knees, ardently giving their partner head."

"D'you... need to be feared?" Greg asked.

Mycroft seemed surprised by the question. He thought about it, chewing. "It helps."

"I don't know about these things, but... well, there's plenty of married politicians out there. Granted, we don't get full-colour photos of them going at it, but... they're still respected."

Greg placed another prawn in his mouth, glancing at Myke across the table.

"Love doesn't necessarily make you weak," he said.

Mycroft smiled a little, disarmed.

"No?" he said.

"If I was some rent-boy you'd paid, and the whole thing was a big dirty secret... I don't know. Maybe it's different when it's an established couple."

"How do you mean?"

Greg fished in his head for an example.

"So... say it turns out that some sneering, holier-than-thou right-winger kinda likes getting flogged by someone in a basque and seven-inch heels. And there's photos of it. That's - funny. It's... puncturing the pompous, I guess. But if there's a couple, just doing what couples do, and someone steals their private photos..."

He shook his head a little, transferring a forkful of salad to his mouth.

"Seems different to me," he said. "Maybe I'm wrong."

Mycroft was watching him with great interest.

"And perhaps you're right," he said.

Greg smiled. "First time for everything. Try a prawn... they're amazing."

Mycroft leant forwards, taking the prawn from his fork. For a second, it looked like he'd never tasted anything so awful in his life.

"Mother of God," he muttered, frowning deeply as he chewed. "That's magnificent. Why did I not order that?"

Greg laughed aloud. "Tell your face, will you?"

"This is what proper culinary appreciation looks like," Mycroft said, as he stole another prawn. "What did you order as your main? More of these, I hope."

"Calzone, I think... to be honest, I just spotted 'tiramisu' under desserts and nothing else mattered from that point."

"Your sweet tooth is... adorable," Mycroft said. His eyes flashed. "Even if your sly consumption of more liquor is bare-facedly transparent."
"It doesn't count if it's soaked into biscuit."

"The doctor said that, did she?"

"Pretty sure she mentioned it at some point, yeah. Chemistry is complicated, Myke. Who knows how all that stuff really works?"

Mycroft took another prawn off him just for his cheek.

"You're going to be asleep by the third spoonful," he chided, chewing. "I shall have to carry you home."

Greg hoped so. He helped himself to a piece of Myke's bruschetta, grinning from ear-to-ear.

He realised he'd quite forgotten they were in public - flirting furiously across a table, not a care in the world. It felt amazing. Nobody nearby seemed to care.

_Could it really just be like this?_ he thought. Was it really this easy? Gay, he thought - and at peace with it, and happy. Nobody with a bad word to say. He thought, briefly, of all the years it felt like he'd maybe wasted - all the time he could have been doing this, feeling like this, more comfortable in his own skin than he'd known it was possible to feel.

But then he realised it couldn't have been this way - not until now.

Not without Myke.

Everything was happening just when it was meant to. He was right here, right now, and everything was perfect.

As he picked up his wine glass, taking a sip, he found Mycroft's eyes shining at him across the table.

"What?" Greg said, amused.

"You seem very happy," Mycroft remarked. "That's all."

"Funny how these things work out," Greg said. "I'd have gotten myself beaten up weeks ago if I knew. Slip Yuri twenty quid, job done..."

Mycroft smiled, remembering something suddenly. He swallowed his mouthful of bread and olive.

"He has discreet designs upon Sophie."

"Your assistant? With the - …?" Greg mimed her loose brown curls.

"Mm. I'm going to canvas her opinion on the issue... I think she might be amenable to it, though. The man's six-foot-five and can get on a horse at full gallop. She's insane if she's not at least a little interested."

"You're matchmaking," Greg grinned at him, amazed. "What have I done to you? Six months in, and you're breezing around London like a maniacal cupid... it's a good job Sherlock's already spoken for. Christ."

"Perhaps," Mycroft said, lifting his fork, "I am very happy, too."

"I think you might be," Greg said, grinning. He skewered his final prawn, and held it across the
table. "We should go on more first dates."

"Let's," said Mycroft, and took the prawn from his fork.
Darkness had fallen by the time that they left the restaurant. The rain was holding off for now. It left the night air clear and cool in its wake, the black streets shining in the headlights of cars that sailed past down Dorset Street.

Mycroft paid the bill, including a tip that made their waitress's eyes widen as she opened the cheque wallet. She thanked them profusely, and held the door as they stepped out into the darkness, hoping they came back again soon.

Greg hoped they came back, too. He liked it here.

"No Jameson?" he noted, glancing around for the car.

"No," Mycroft said. "It seems only chivalrous that I walk you home. I also promised your sister that I would."

Greg grinned, resting a little against Mycroft's side as they headed down the road together, walking slowly through the darkness.

"I had a feeling she was going to ask," he said.

"Rachel cares desperately for you. Her... capacity to love is quite amazing."

Greg smiled, proud. "Like our mum," he said. "I - wish Dad appreciated her more. I don't think it's possible, though. He doesn't know how to."

"Have you... spoken to your father lately?"

"Once," Greg said. "The day before the - ..." He gestured at his bruises. "Hardly said a word though, to be honest. Life's too short. Rachel told him I was in hospital. He grunted, apparently... asked where his paper was."

"Do you think she'll tell him about our relationship?"

Greg wasn't sure. He knew she would try her hardest not to; but then, he knew their father was a bully. He frightened her. Even now, broken and old, hunched in his chair and unable to pull on his own socks, the old bastard had her believing he could still hurt her if he wanted to.

"I wouldn't be angry," he decided at last,

"if she did. I wouldn't... feel anything, really." Greg hesitated. "Is that bad?"

"No. Your reactions towards your own life are valid. Let them be what they will be."

Greg smiled a little, uneasy.

"They might be - more, someday," he warned. "There might be fall-out. 'Specially when he dies. I don't... know how I'll handle it."

"Whatever arises," Mycroft said, "or does not arise, I shall be there."

"That's... good to know."
"You will be alright," Mycroft said.

Greg believed him completely.

They walked the rest of the few minutes to Greg's flat, talking quietly as the traffic hushed by. At last, as they reached the front doorstep, Greg began the search for his key.

"D'you… fancy coming in for coffee?" he said. He felt weirdly nervous - as if this really were a first date, and Mycroft had never seen his flat before.

"If I wouldn't be intruding," Mycroft said.

"Oh - God, no. Not at all." Greg smiled slightly, unlocking the door. "You… might have to open the jar for me."

Mycroft's eyes brightened. "Happy to help."

They made their way up the stairs in the half-dark, past Mrs Dobson's empty flat - still unoccupied. Greg almost mentioned it. In the end, he didn't dare. There was something fragile in the air - something a little vulnerable - he didn't want to chase it away. It felt like months since Mycroft had been here with him, here in the place that had been home. He didn't want to spoil it by making jokes or asking a question too far.

As he attempted to get his key in the door of his flat, a sharp twinge wrenched across the top of his chest - he hissed, jerking, and the key clattered to the floor.

"Here..." Mycroft bent down, retrieving the key. "Are you alright?"

"Sorry - just… can't hold onto anything properly..." Greg put a hand carefully on his shoulder, feeling it throb with a hot and insistent pain. "Ouch..."

"Are you due to take painkillers?"

"Um - yes..."

Mycroft opened the door for him, stepping back. "Go and lie down," he said. "Are your tablets somewhere obvious?"

"On the coffee table, I think..."

"Alright. I'll bring them for you."

"Thank you - "

"The least I can do," Mycroft said. He closed the door of the flat behind them and moved straight into the kitchen. A moment later Greg heard him sifting through the freezer for ice.

The bedroom was quiet and dark, and full of the fragility Greg could still sense in the air. He left the light off, finding it an odd comfort against the pain. He sat on the edge of the bed and quietly undid the buttons of his shirt with one hand, finishing just as Myke entered the room.

Myke had ice wrapped up in a hand-towel, Greg's various medications, and a glass of water.

He knelt down by the side of the bed.

"Painkillers first," he said, gently stern. He didn't seem to notice the livid black bruising patterned
across Greg's ribs.

Greg gave a half smile, taking the glass that was offered. "Thanks..."

He filled his mouth with water, then obediently took the pills he was handed one after the other. When they were all gone, Mycroft took the glass from him and placed it safely on the bedside.

"Would you like help with your shirt?" Mycroft asked.

Greg gave him an awkward smile. "M'sorry."

"For what, precisely?"

"I'm - a bit useless right now. I won't always be."

"Of course you won't. And you have no reason to say sorry. Here…"

Mycroft undid the cuff of his left sleeve for him - pale, gentle fingers making short work of the button. He then held it still as Greg eased his good arm free.

"Take your time," Mycroft murmured.

"You're sweet," Greg said. He gave a small smile as Mycroft drew the shirt over his shoulders for him, then with endless care down over his right arm, infinitely gentle. "Thank you..."

Mycroft laid the shirt over the back of the corner chair.

"Are you more comfortable sitting or lying down?" he asked, picking up the towel-wrapped ice.

"Lying back, usually..."

Mycroft, without a word, set about propping up the pillows for him - plumping them fastidiously. Greg couldn't fight a smile as he watched.

"I'm supposed to be making you coffee," he mumbled.

"May I confess something?" Mycroft said.

"Go on."

"I'm not actually interested in a coffee."

"My trust in you is shattered," said Greg.

"Forgive me." Mycroft knelt slightly, easing an arm around Greg. He was warm, Greg realised, and strong - he smelt of candle smoke and Italian food. He helped Greg to lie back against the pillows, perfectly patient, watching his face gently for pain. "How's that?"

"You're amazing, Myke."

A smile flickered over Mycroft's lips. He sat beside Greg on the edge of the bed, gathering up the cold compress.

"Chest first, is it?" he murmured.

As the cold eased its way beneath the hot, pain-stricken skin, softened by the towel, Greg couldn't keep his eyes open. He breathed out, slowly, relaxing for the first time since they'd stepped through
the door.
Mycroft held the towel gently in place, watching him with tender eyes.
"Better?"
Greg swallowed a little. "Thank you - ..."
"You needn't keep thanking me," Mycroft murmured. "I should be here every night, doing this for you."
Greg hesitated, barely catching the words before they escaped. He swallowed them away too.
"You're - kind to - "
"I'm not kind," Mycroft said. "This isn't altruism… I care for you. A very different concept."
Greg looked up at him, weak.
Mycroft's pupils were huge in the darkness. They were resting nowhere but his face.
"Thank you for taking me out," Greg said, quietly. "I had a wonderful time."
Mycroft's expression was full of wonder. "A pleasure."
"I - meant what I said about Thai food. Tomorrow night."
Mycroft smiled, glancing at the bedside clock. It had just passed midnight. "Tonight, you mean?"
"Mm hmm."
"What time should I be here?"
Greg's expression faltered. Mycroft spotted it before he could hide it; one eyebrow lifted, just a fraction.
"Unless, of course, I already am here."
Greg hesitated, gazing into the deep grey eyes. "Did you - have plans for tomorrow?"
"Yes," Mycroft said, gently. Greg's heart sank. He should have checked, he thought - shouldn't have gotten his hopes up. "Making you breakfast," Mycroft elaborated. "Then, after that... however you wish to spend the day."
Greg's lungs expanded slowly, twinging at his fractured rib. The pain suddenly didn't seem so distracting.
"If," Mycroft added, "that was what you were hoping to hear..."
Greg wondered why he felt so bloody shy and virginal all of a sudden. How many times had they torn into each other in this bed? How many nights had he woken up to find Mycroft's hands, two AM, easing over his body in restless hope? How many lazy sunday mornings had they spent here - kissing, stroking, slowly fucking in the soft morning light? Now suddenly he was a snowy-white innocent.
"I'd... like it if you stayed," he said.
Mycroft smiled, unwrapping the towel gently to find a fresh patch of cold. "Then I shall," he said.

Greg felt a little tension ease in his arms. He'd have hated Myke to go.

A small bubble of humour flittered up, making him smile.

"But no sex, okay?" he said. "This is a first date."

Mycroft's eyes lit from within, full of mirth. He smirked without comment as he reapplied the towel.

"Besides," Greg added. "I somehow leaked all our sex photos to a blackmailer, and you got four of my bones broken by a thug… neither of us should be rewarding that kind of behaviour."

"Hmm," Mycroft said, with interest. "I'd quite forgiven you, as it happens."

Greg's grin widened; he felt heat rise in his face.

"I'm teasing you," Mycroft assured him. He leant over, placing a kiss on Greg's temple. "You are safe from my wandering hands. I would lay my naked sword between us, if I had one."

"Lay your - …?"

"One of the enduring images of early Romantic literature. The bold knight who lays his sword, unsheathed, between himself and his chaste maiden in bed… ensuring her purity shall remain unscathed through the night."

Mycroft readjusted the towel carefully on Greg's ribcage.

"It usually doesn't work," he added. "Still, the intention is rather noble."

Greg smiled to himself. He didn't think he would make much of a chaste maiden - not when Mycroft was around. His ribs ached a little as he breathed in. The cold soothed its way beneath his skin, shutting his eyes.

"Is this alright?" Mycroft asked, somewhere outside his closed eyelids.

"I... think my painkillers are kicking in."

"Good," Mycroft said. There was a pause; a hand gently brushed his cheek. "I haven't any nightclothes."

"S'fine… you can go without."

"I can call Sophie, if you'd rather I - "

"Don't wake Sophie up just to fetch you pants," Greg said. "She suffers enough."

Mycroft laughed. Greg grinned, laughing too. The sudden stretch of his ribcage sharpened itself into pain and he hissed, flinching. "Ahh - …"

Mycroft was holding him in a heartbeat.

"Shhh…" Gentle arms went around him, wrapping him up; fingers stroked through his hair. "Shhh - breathe with me. In..."
Greg breathed in, slowly, fighting the pain. He wrapped his good arm around Mycroft, desperate not to be let go. The towel was pinned between them, cold and soft, and it helped. The feel of Mycroft's arms helped more.

"And out…"

Greg breathed out. He felt the pain start to soften as he did, easing, blowing it away with his breath. Mycroft kissed the top of his head.

"In again," he whispered, and for a while they simply breathed together - breathed until the pain was gone.

They found themselves just holding each other, safe and close in the dark. The whole world had gone quiet around them.

"Better?" Mycroft whispered to him.

"Mm hmm." Greg rested his chin on Myke's shoulder. "If I… wanted something…"

"Mm?" Mycroft stroked the back of his neck - gentle circles. "Anything in this world... you have only to ask."

Greg hesitated for just a moment more, breathing in his lover's scent.

"Can you... get undressed and lie down with me?"

He felt Mycroft smile against his forehead.

Gently, the arms around him eased; they guided him to lie back against the pillows once more.

"Let me lock the door," Mycroft murmured, "and deal with this ice. I will be two minutes."

"Okay." Greg shifted a little, watching him standing up. "Don't - go."

Mycroft leant down, kissed him gently, and whispered, "I shan't. Rest here…” He reached across to the bedside lamp, flicking it on. Its gentle pool of golden light fell softly across the bed, deepening the shadows in the rest of the room. "Two minutes," Mycroft promised.

He left the room.

Greg listened to him moving about the flat - locking the door, turning out the lights. When he returned, he had his mobile phone idle in his hand.

"I've let Rachel know that you're home safe, and in my care for the night." He laid the phone on the bedside table. "She hopes you had a nice time on your date."

Greg reached for his hand, feeling a little fragile again. He wasn't sure why.

Mycroft caught his fingers gently.

He gazed down at Greg from the bedside as their fingers curled together. The lamplight had softened all his features, all the lines of his face. He was like a modern angel, Greg thought - protective and breathtaking, waistcoat and tie, the watch that cost thousands, the cufflinks like tiny stars.

The cufflinks were the first thing Mycroft removed - carefully, one and then the other, laying them
on the bedside where they belonged, followed by the watch.

He then started on his tie, holding Greg’s gaze as he did.

By the time the tie had slipped free, and the first two buttons of the shirt were undone, Greg’s pulse had distinctly quickened. He did his best to suppress it. Mycroft took his time with the waistcoat, button-by-button, his eyes warm and still holding Greg’s. He slid the waistcoat off his shoulders and relegated it with disregard to the corner chair, a flutter of herringbone and navy silk. Idly, he eased down his braces.

Greg realised his mouth had gone dry; he swallowed. Mycroft in just his shirt was somehow as intimate and quickening a sight as Mycroft completely naked. There was something evocative about it - something undone - something that nobody else got to see. Mycroft smiled at his reaction, quite at ease. He was wholly aware of the effect he was having, and doing nothing to belay it. Not saying a word, he began to unbutton his shirt.

More and more pale, perfect chest was revealed with each button - the faint scattering of freckles, the neat appendix scar, the narrow trail of red hair that was more vivid in shade than his head. Finally, with the last button gently undone, Mycroft slid the shirt loose from his shoulders. He let it fall softly to the ground behind him. The lamplight settled across his torso - alabaster, warmed by honey-gold. Greg breathed in.

Mycroft’s eyes blazed as he reached for the clasp of his trousers.

He eased them down, along with his underwear, and at last stepped out of the very last of his clothing. Greg breathed in very slowly. He wondered if rebreaking a rib might be worth it.

"Are these staying?" Mycroft asked, gently. He ran an inquiring hand over the black polyester of Greg's trousers.

"I'm - about to rip them open," Greg said. "So… no."

Amused, Mycroft rested one knee on the bed at his side, unhooked the clasp and smoothly lowered the zip. "Alas, that I forgot to bring my naked sword."

"I… won't tell the physiotherapist if you don't."

Mycroft leant down to kiss Greg's undamaged shoulder. "Lift your hips for me?" he murmured. Greg braced his back carefully against the pillows, triangling his knees up on the bed. "Slowly..."

Greg gritted his teeth a little as he lifted. Myke moved swiftly, pulling his trousers and boxers down in one adept motion. As he worked them off Greg's legs, freeing his ankles from the tangle of fabric, Greg let his head drop back against the pillows and swore quietly to himself.

"Are you alright?" Mycroft said, returning up the bed to him.

"Fine," he lied.

Mycroft placed a hand gently against the pillows either side of his torso, kneeling over one of his thighs.

"You're in pain," he murmured.

"You broke four bones."

"I know," Greg said. He reached for Myke, needing to feel his skin. "Just… come here."

"This is unwise," Mycroft murmured - even as he pressed his lips to Greg's.

Greg eased his one working arm around Mycroft's bare back, shivering a little at the smoothness of his lover's skin - God, how long had it been? How long since he'd felt Mycroft's naked body against his own? He didn't want to count. He didn't want to know. They kissed, slowly, and the pain became just one detail amongst them all - the scent of Myke's aftershave; the pillows, cool, against his naked back; Myke's mouth, firm and slow, the tender tongue that coaxed its way between his lips and made him quiver in desperation; rain pattering the window beside them. Myke was barely touching him. Not a gram of his weight leant upon Greg.

As he stroked the small of Myke's back, the first gentle caress trailed down Greg's left side - fingertips, featherlight, across his unbruised ribs. There was something so tentative, so careful, about the touch that it shocked straight to his cock. It felt as electrifying as if he'd never been touched by anyone before. He heard himself gasp into Myke's mouth. Mortified by the power of the reaction, he tried to stifle the moan that followed - only to feel Mycroft shudder gently against his body, kissing Greg a little deeper, fluttering his gentle fingertips lower down his side - over his hips - stroking his thigh.

"God..." Greg mumbled, shuddering too. He tried to pull Myke closer, desperate, as he felt his lover holding back. "Myke…"

"Don't you dare let me hurt you," Mycroft whispered against his lips. He was shaking. "I - I wouldn't forgive myself if - ..."

"We can go slow," Greg breathed. He didn't care if it hurt. He didn't care if he spent tomorrow scrunched up like a dead spider and crying. He just needed to be in one body with Myke for a while - needed to belong to him again. This was happening. "Fuck, I've missed you…"

They kissed, quaking; Greg pushed his fingers up into Myke's hair.

As they parted, Mycroft hushed against his mouth.

"Lie back…" he breathed. "Let me take care of you."

He kissed Greg's uninjured shoulder, then gently the side of his neck. Greg swallowed thickly, his chest rising and falling deep as Myke began to lick down towards his stomach - flashes of gentle tongue between his bruises.

"Myke..." he managed, tight. Myke persuaded his thighs gently apart, creating a space to lie down. "Myke, you - …"

As Mycroft nuzzled into the thatch of dark hair at the base of his cock, Greg expelled every cubic scrap of air in his lungs.

"Myke... " he breathed.

Myke wrapped a hand gently around his thickened cock, easing back his foreskin to reveal the head. The first slow lick made Greg jerk; shudders skittered from the base of his spine outwards across his body. He'd never wanted something more.

Myke soothed his lips around Greg's prick almost at once, gathering him slowly and deeply into
the wet heat of his mouth. Greg bit down on his lip to suppress a gasp. He closed his eyes, chest
heaving, as Myke softly began to slide his mouth around him. How could something feel so good?
How could it fire him up so quickly? He clenched his left hand into the sheets, fighting not to
finish this before it had even started.

A moment later, his hand was retrieved. Mycroft coaxed it off the sheets, with a gentle squeeze and
moved it without overture to the back of Myke's head.

Greg dragged in a breath, burying his shaking fingers in his lover's hair. Mycroft made a low,
thickened noise of contentment in response, laved Greg's cock with the flat of his tongue, and drew
him another inch deeper. Greg's eyes rolled into the back of his head.

He could feel his mind melting at the edges; all the pain was dissolving away. He concentrated on
the coolness of the pillows beneath him, tracing shaky circles on the back of his lover's neck. As
Myke picked up a rhythm, drawing him deeply over and over into the very top of his throat, Greg
panted and shivered and felt the muscles in his thighs starting to tighten. There was no other sound
in the flat - only his own weakened scraps of nonsense, the wetness of Myke's mouth moving
slickly around him, the hush of the rain of the window.

"M-Myke…" That perfect white heat was beginning to build deep at the base of his cock; his
stomach muscles were quivering. "Myke," he gasped. "Stop - "

His lover's mouth slid back from his cock; Mycroft looked up from between his thighs, Greg's hand
still cradling the back of his neck. Myke was breathing a little hard. His voice, as he spoke, was
roughened - it had Greg wrenching himself back from the brink at once.

"Let me make you come," he breathed. He kissed Greg's lower stomach, brushing his gentle mouth
across the trail of dark hair there. "Come with my mouth around you…"

"I - I want - …"

"Mm?" Myke gazed up at him, wild-eyed and dishevelled. "Tell me."

Greg didn't know how to say it; he swallowed, his head falling back in the pillows in frustration. In
reply, he pushed his thighs a little further apart - he rocked his hips down towards Myke, desperate.

"Please," he gasped.

Myke kissed his stomach, uncertain. The muscles there trembled in response.

"Greg, I… I don't want to hurt you."

"I'm fine - I'm okay, I promise - just - …"

"Are you certain?"

"Yes… I - want you to be - …"

Myke eased up the bed to him, brushing soft kisses back the way he'd come. Greg devolved into
whimpers. He was ready to beg.

"Please," he gasped again, nuzzling fitfully at Myke's mouth for kisses as soon as he came near
enough. "Please, please just - … inside me…"

Myke kissed him, slowly, trying to soothe him - Greg raked his tongue fretfully through Myke's
mouth, tasting where his cock had been. Mycroft was cupping his face in both hands.

"Shhh…" he hushed. He eased Greg's tongue from his mouth. "Shhh, love… it's - too risky. If I hurt you - "

"I need you," Greg pleaded.

"I know… and I'm here." Myke stroked a hand back over his forehead, slick through the thin sheen of sweat. He hesitated. "If it hurts even a little - … even a fraction..."

Greg's heart seared. "I promise," he breathed. "I swear - God, please - …"

Mycroft reached for the bedside drawer, retrieving the lube that had remained right there all these weeks. As he unscrewed the tube, he kissed Greg's lips with impossible gentleness.

Over the course of long, dizzying minutes, he coaxed Greg with his fingers. At last, as three thrust slowly and slickly in and out of his body, Greg quivered against his lover and begged him, unashamed, whimpering against his jaw that he wanted it - that he needed it.

Mycroft was shaking now.

He needed it, too.

"Are you comfortable?" he breathed. Greg's heart-rate spiked wildly.

"Yes - m'f-fine - ...

"Just like this?" Myke eased closer to him, their chests touching gently - barely pressing. His hardened cock nuzzled slick between Greg's thighs. Greg gasped from deep in his lungs, aching to feel it inside him - thick, filling him. Myke was gazing into his expression, searching for any whisper of distress. "No pain - ?"

"No - no pain - ...

Myke glanced up, bracing a hand against the wall above their heads.

"Don't let me lean on you," he whispered.

Greg's heart contracted hard. "I won't," he promised. His head fell back into the pillows. "M-Myke - please - ...

Mycroft kissed him softly, easing his prick into position. Greg arched as he felt the head nudge gently at his softened entrance. He gripped the pillow behind him with his uninjured hand; Mycroft pressed their foreheads together.

"Look at me," Myke whispered.

Greg forced himself to focus, dazed, on Myke's eyes - that perfect blue-grey, burning with love, gazing deep in his own.

As their gazes locked, Myke began to push gently inside him.

Greg's chest heaved. "F-Fuck," he gasped, staring back into those eyes as Myke penetrated him - his lover's pupils were huge, wild and dark. "Oh, fuck…"

"I love you," Mycroft breathed, not breaking his gaze.
Greg didn't know whether he was about to come or cry. "I love you..." He began to pant, hard, his whole body shaking as Myke stretched him further and further, coaxing inch-by-inch inside. It felt so good - like they'd never fucked before - so good it made him want to sob.

At last, as Myke eased fully inside him, Greg let out a deep, drowning gasp. His eyes closed of their own volition. He felt drunk - full - Myke, inside him - Myke, there in every part of him.

"Myke..." It was a whimper. He didn't care. "Make me come - please - "

Mycroft stroked a tender kiss across his panting mouth - too soft, too gentle.

"Promise me - once more." Mycroft's voice left his throat in a tight whisper, ferocious in its care. "Promise me I'm not hurting you."

In response Greg wrapped his legs around the back of Myke's thighs - he was shaking almost too hard to do it. The slight tilt of his hips eased Myke another half-inch deeper inside him, bumping with a blaze of sharp, fizzing pleasure against the place that made him want to weep and howl at once. They each let out a sharp gasp.

"N-No - not hurting - ..." Greg's face twisted. "Oh fuck, feels so good - ..."

Myke gently began to thrust - every stroke, every single one, bumping softly just where he needed it. Pleasure was ripping him apart already - and oh fuck, he wanted to do this all night - just lie here like this - lie here safe with Myke between his legs, whiting out his every pain with comfort and pleasure, the steady rubbing of his swollen cock pinned between their stomachs, that feeling of his lover moving slick and firm inside him. He didn't want this to stop - ever. He didn't want Myke to ever leave his body. He didn't want to be two separate people ever, ever again.

He knotted his fingers in the sweat-damp hair at the nape of Myke's neck.

They panted against each other's throats, kissing softly as they fucked.

"Tell me how it feels," Mycroft whispered to him, long and slow minutes in.

Greg almost laughed - the sound that left him was half-moan, half-gasp, all pleasure. "D-Don't stop. Just... don't ever stop..." He bit down at his lip, shivering. "M'full of you. Feels - ..." His eyes flickered shut. "Perfect."

"More?" Myke breathed, brushing another kiss over his mouth.

"More," he begged. His breath hitched as Myke began to take him a little harder, a little deeper, the same steady rhythm and just as gentle, just a little more. "Oh God - "

"Mine," Mycroft whispered. He hissed softly as Greg's fingers tightened in his hair, lowering his mouth to his lover's arched neck.

Greg ached as Myke kissed at his neck - slow, open-mouthed kisses drawn out across his skin. Myke's cock was coaxing him closer, winding him tighter and tighter with every thrust now.

"Yours," he whimpered. "Forever." He felt the pleasure start to sharpen. Everything was pounding.

"Myke - " he warned, gasping it.

Myke changed nothing - just kept slowly fucking him, coaxing him, kissing at his throat.

As Greg finally broke, he broke hard. He dropped his head back into the pillows and arched as he
came, releasing a cry that in desperation formed itself into Myke's name. Everything whirled; everything surged. He felt Myke's fingers dig restlessly into his hips as he gave a final deep and desperate push into Greg's body, and then Myke was coming with him - panting against his neck; pushing as close to him as he dared; groaning as Greg's thighs wrapped tight around his hips.

The rush was indescribable.

In its wake, the bedside lamp seemed to glow brighter; the rain on the window was louder. The pillows behind Greg's back were softer, and the man in his arms more perfect than he'd ever, ever been.

After a few blissful moments, Myke stiffened against him.

"Did I - "

"No." Greg curled his fingers into Myke's hair, breathing deep. "You didn't hurt me. Just... stay right there."

"I'm leaning on your chest - your ribs - "

"It doesn't hurt... promise." Greg tilted his head a little, catching Myke's mouth with a quiet kiss. "Love you."

"Greg..." Mycroft kissed him back, dazed. "Tell me that was - ...

"You're amazing..." Greg swallowed, easing his sore shoulder back against the pillow. "The... things you have me saying."

"I'm... glad I can look after you," Myke murmured, soft. He kissed Greg's jaw. "If I have to - take the lead for a month or so... I'm sure we will both somehow cope."

He drew back a little, studying Greg's face with gentle care.

"How are your injuries? Swear to me I haven't hurt you."

Greg tentatively tested his shoulder. It hurt - it was, after all, still broken - but the fretful, hot, nagging discomfort in it had gone for now. "It's... better than before, if I'm honest..."

Mycroft's eyes softened. "The strongest painkiller known to man," he noted, quietly. His shoulders and upper chest were still shimmering with sweat. "Another dose tomorrow, perhaps... purely medical."

Greg's heart skipped a beat.

"Twice?" he murmured; his voice husked a little. "On a first date? I don't want you to think badly of me."

Mycroft laughed, looking away.

"Well... depending on the length of the date - if anything, I was rather hoping - ..." He shook his head. "Mm. Sleep, now."

"No - say what you were thinking..."

Mycroft rolled the thought in his mouth. He was still holding it back.
"This is a dinner date," Greg reminded him. "Profound conversation is… de rigueur."

It provoked a soft laugh. Mycroft sighed, amassing his courage.

"I… merely wondered, with our bond now restored to order… perhaps some other arrangements might be, too. In time."

Greg waited, gently watching his face. Mycroft flushed slightly.

"Perhaps I might join you again, he said. "Here. For - rather longer than a date."

Greg's heart leapt. "You… want to move your stuff back in?"

Mycroft hesitated, his eyes slightly guarded. "If… that is to say, if you were - …"

"Myke… I'd... do it in a heartbeat. Honestly, I would. It's just... well, with all things considered..."

Greg lowered his eyes. He drew in a breath.

"... I'm not allowed to do heavy-lifting anymore... so Yuri will have to carry the boxes upstairs for you."

As his grin spread, Mycroft’s face opened with wild delight.

"You - !" Myke yelped. Greg laughed, grabbing Myke's hand before he could break all his other ribs. "You utter, utter - …"


He pulled Myke forwards, kissing him. Myke protested urgently against his mouth, scrabbling not to lean on him. "Greg, your collarbone - "

"I don't care," he mumbled.

He curled his arm tight around his lover's back to stop him pulling away again, kissing him, feeling his heart pounding with joy.

"Break it every night," he breathed, as their lips came apart. "Just be with me. Be with me and don't ever go."

"Greg..." Myke gazed at him for a moment, wordless; his face suffused with love. "If - someone had told me a year ago - …"

"I wouldn't have believed it either. Believe me."

"You are a miracle," Mycroft said. He cupped Greg's jaw, staring at him almost seriously. His eyes were full of wonder. "You're well aware of that, aren't you? It is… fact. You are miraculous. I - fall more in love with you every minute."

Greg bit his lip.

"The miracle happened to both of us," he said. "It's… still happening."

"Grow old along with me," Mycroft murmured. "The best is yet to be."
As they kissed, he murmured, "Robert Browning… from - "

"I don't care," Greg breathed against his lips, kissed him, and pulled him close.
It was four long weeks before Detective Inspector Lestrade made his triumphant return to Scotland Yard.

The bones in his fingers had healed well, which meant that he could type again - albeit slowly - and pick up a phone. Lighting a cigarette was back within his capabilities, too. He could lift things now, even with his bad arm, and carry them a short distance - so long as they weren't heavy and it wasn't for long. Sleeping was getting much easier. For the first two weeks, the broken rib had been a tyrant that kept him awake at night. It was no longer so quick to punish him for transgressions like turning around or taking something off a shelf. He could feel himself healing, growing strong again.

The physiotherapist was very pleased with his progress. He'd have to avoid sitting down at his desk for long periods, she warned - but she had no major worries about him going back to work. Greg promised her - and Mycroft - that he would get up every fifteen minutes to walk around.

Sally, ever reliable, was happy to take over driving for a while.

"So… other than standing about a crime scene with your arms folded, scowling, what else is there you do?" she asked on the phone. "I think we've covered it all. You can still lift a coffee mug, right?"

"Steady," he warned her, playful. "Some of those mugs are heavy."

"Good to have you back, boss. See you Monday."

"Yup. Oh, and Sally?"

"Yeah?"

"Just douse my in-tray with petrol and flick a match at it before I arrive, will you? Quicker that way."

"Will do," she said, cheerful. "We're having a sweepstake for how many e-mails you've had."

"Christ. Has someone taken over a thousand yet?"

"I'll put you down," she said. "You owe me a pound."

It would be strange to get back into the swing of things.

It had been one of those months that felt like years, in only a good way - four weeks of happy, everyday joys. If Greg was honest with himself, he could probably have gone back after two. Having one arm had been an inconvenience; but leaving Myke five days a week was really going to sting.

He knew that a collarbone fracture shouldn't be seen as a golden opportunity.

All the same, it wasn't often you got handed a solid month off. Greg had very much made the most of it.

"You're sure they've not minded you working from home so much?"
"Surprising, what one can do remotely…" Myke reached across to the coffee table, leafing through a short stack of documents in Chinese. It was almost nine PM on the Sunday, and the night was drawing in. "If anything, my staff seem to have worked better without me there."

"Probably nice to have a break from all the fire-breathing," Greg said, eyes bright. He placed a mug of fresh coffee beside Mycroft's elbow, kissing him on the head. "All their singed hair will be growing back."

Mycroft looked up from his laptop, amused. He registered the coffee with a grateful expression. "My hero… thank you."

Greg took a seat in the armchair by the sofa. "Have you heard from your technical guys?" he asked.

"Yes… another day's reprieve. None of the photographs have surfaced online." Mycroft reached over his laptop for the coffee. "Nor have they been offered to any journalists, out of interest."

"Oh - good. How d'you know?"

"I know all the newspaper editors," Mycroft said, blowing across the surface of his coffee. "The moment one of their staff presents them with a compromising photograph of me, I will be contacted and asked if I'd care to make a better offer."

Greg frowned slightly, lifting his mug to his mouth. "That... sounds a lot like blackmail."

"A far more transparent form of it, perhaps." Mycroft glanced at his laptop, reading a new e-mail that had appeared with disinterest. "Bearing in mind that my 'better offer' might be that I shall not shipwreck their entire career, if they hand over the photographs at once and bleach all trace of them from their memory..."

Greg smiled, adoring him for a moment. "You're terrifying sometimes. I'm glad you're on my side."

Mycroft eyed him rather smokily over the coffee mug. "We've - had a few early appearances of the money, by the way," he said, with care.

Greg's eyebrows lifted. "Really?"

"Mm. A handful of notes have reached the central banks… deposits made by small businesses and shops scattered rather widely across London. Pathetic things. Off-licenses, fashion outlets. A pizza shop in Bethnal Green. It's being frittered."

As this news sunk in, Greg felt his blood run ever so slightly cold.

The guy had left him screaming in agony in a building yard; now someone was spending the money on pizza and booze.

"They'll amass the courage to make a larger purchase soon," Mycroft said, watching Greg closely over his coffee. "A car, perhaps. We'll be able to trace it back to the retailer, and get a name and address. It's only a matter of time."

Greg shifted a little, uneasy. "Weird to think they're out there spending it."

"I imagine they waited a week or so to ensure you were not dead," Mycroft said. His matter-of-fact tone belied the hardness in his eyes. "Fifteen thousand pounds in cash is quite a prize… unless it's central to a murder inquiry, at which point it becomes rather a dangerous thing to be in possession
of. Now the concern has passed, they're starting to relax."

"And - you think they'll make a mistake soon?"

Mycroft's eyes flashed. "They made one the day they decided my paramour was prey."

Greg gave a half-smile, holding his coffee mug to his chest. There was quiet between them for a moment.

"M'going to miss you next week," Greg said at last. "It's going to be weird, not having this all day..."

Mycroft cast him a look of amusement. "We'll have our evenings together," he said. "Mornings. Weekends."

"I know, but... it's been nice. I've gotten used to having you to myself."

"You always have me to yourself," Mycroft told him. "You merely loan me out for a while each day - for the good of the British nation."

"Well, I hope the British nation are grateful... it's a big loss I'm taking." Greg smiled, rubbing the side of his mug with a thumb. "I - love loving you. S'easy."

Mycroft's expression softened. "That's - very sweet."

"It's true." Greg held his gaze, feeling his heart ache a little - joy, sadness, all at once. "Look after me this week, will you? It's - going to sting."

"Of course I will. Would it help if we met for lunch?"

"Really?"

"Yes, of course." Mycroft lifted the mug to his lips, taking a long drink. "The least I can do."

Greg felt his heart lift. "That'd be great," he said. A little café somewhere, he thought - just take an hour and share it together. It would help him to remember what was real. "You're sure it wouldn't be a pain?"

Mycroft smiled, settling back against the arm of the sofa. "Not at all," he said. He regarded his partner fondly for a moment, sipping at his coffee. "We've endured plenty of difficult weeks together, Greg. Don't worry. I doubt this one will be anything we can't handle."

As the car drew up outside New Scotland Yard, at ten minutes to nine the next morning, Greg realised he was no more ready for this than he was to swim the channel. Jameson pulled to a stop, and the doors unlocked with a quiet clunk.

Beside him sat Mycroft, immaculately dressed for work and wearing an expression of the deepest pity. He laid a gloved hand atop Greg's own.

"Sally will look after you," he said.

Greg raised an eyebrow without reply.

Mycroft reached across, gently adjusting the collar of his jacket. Greg had it draped over his right shoulder, the brace now worn visibly over his shirt to stop people knocking into him.
"Please remember to keep walking around," Mycroft said. "Your rib will give you hell tonight if you don't."

"You... promise you'll be there for lunch?"

"I promise. Then Jameson will pick you up tonight at five, and I shall be home as soon as I can." Mycroft looked very seriously into his eyes. "This first morning will be the hardest," he murmured. "Just make it to lunch, and I will be there."

"Alright..." It was now or never, Greg thought. If he didn't get out of the car, he never would. "I love you."

"I love you, too. Have a wonderful day. If you can't, then simply have a day. I will supply the 'wonderful' later."

Greg smiled, thoroughly miserable inside. He reached over, taking Mycroft's face in both his hands.

Jameson, exquisitely trained, did not notice as they kissed.

"I love you," Greg mumbled again, as they finally pulled apart. He opened the car door.

"It will be fine," Mycroft promised. He handed Greg his bag. "I am one phone call away. As always."

"Okay... I'll miss you."

"Not for long," Mycroft said. "I love you."

The car door closed.

Greg heard the car pulling away as he walked, heavy-hearted, up the steps. He turned to watch it drive off. He couldn't see a thing through the tinted windows, but lifted a hand anyway. The car turned the corner onto Richmond Terrace, and was gone.

He turned to face the glass doors.

"Here we go," he sighed, pushed them open, and told himself it was only four hours until lunch.

As he stepped through the door into his division, heads turned with delight towards him.

"Boss!"

"Inspector, you're back!"

"Sally! He's here!"

Some of Greg's hardness softened at once - people were getting up from their chairs, smiles breaking out. They looked genuinely thrilled to see him. Sharon from Reception - in a rather aspirational v-neck sweater - leapt up from her desk and ran to take his jacket.

"Ah - no, thanks," he said, dodging away from her assistance. "Fine with it myself."

"You sure?" she soothed. "It's so good to see you! Let me get you a coffee."

"Sorry, Sharon," said his sergeant's voice - and Greg had never been so glad to see Sally Donovan
in his life, striding his way with a mug of something so black it absorbed all nearby light. "Beat you to it..."

Sally grinned, pushing open the door of Greg's office for him.

"Nice to see you back, skip," she said. "How are you feeling?"

"Sore," he said. "Did you torch my in-tray? Or should I brace myself?"

"Sorry, boss. Turns out health and safety don't like us gutting entire offices with open flames. I thought coffee might take the sting off."

Greg smiled. "S'good to see you, Sally."

She flashed her eyebrows at him. "You might change your mind in a minute, when you see all the paperwork I'm bringing you."

"That's… paperwork in addition to my in-tray, is it?"

"Sorry, boss. Should I have made you a bigger coffee?"

"Depends what proportion of it is actually coffee, and how much is whiskey," Greg sighed. "Right. Well, let's get this over with..."

As DI Lestrade stepped into his office, he uttered something that made everyone nearby snort and hide their faces.

Sally emerged fifteen minutes later.

"Who had 'seven hundred and twelve' for the e-mail sweepstake?" she called. Everyone started looking for their tickets.

"How many are from the Chief Super?" someone asked, to stifled snorts of laughter.

Sally smothered her smile. "Only about half." She leant through the door of Greg's office. "I'll get that extra paperwork, boss."

There came a strained groan from inside. Everyone smirked, bending back over their keyboards.

Maybe I could get myself arrested for something, Greg thought, staring at the architectural marvel that had formed in his in-tray. A nice quiet day in the cells would be lovely. If it was someone good on duty, they might even let him keep his phone.

Or there was Subway, he thought, just round the corner from his house - they were looking for Sandwich Artists. He could manage a career change at forty-four. Sandwiches had to be easier than violent crime.

His phone vibrated quietly in his pocket.

It was as if a gentle hand had suddenly laid upon his shoulder. Greg reached for his phone at once, feeling his heart thump in response.

And... breathe...

M.xxx
Greg photographed the ten-inch stack of papers awaiting his signature, attached it to the message, and hit send. There was a pause.

He watched the typing bubble appear.

*And... breathe deeply...*

*M xxx*

It was not often you got to feel despair and joy in absolutely equal measure, Greg thought. He typed his reply quickly, imagining Mycroft just arriving at Whitehall - stepping from the car, entering his wood-panelled office, Sophie taking his bag and his coat. It made him feel a little calmer.

*Holy shit I miss you. Please come kidnap me. I won't resist.*

Sally reappeared in Greg's office. She was carrying another foot of paperwork, binders, treasury-tagged reports and bits of post.

"Jesus and all the angels..." Greg breathed, eyeing the stack.

"Some of this isn't *extremely* urgent," she reassured him. "It's only *very* urgent."

"I will give you fifty quid to break my collarbone right now."

"Seems reasonable," she said, resting the enormous pile on the edge of his desk. "I've been trying to keep on top of your post - opening anything obvious and dealing with it... luckily, you don't get that much by name. It's all 'the investigating officer', which went onto DI Chandler. Oh," she said, tugging something from halfway down the pile, "and there was this."

She laid a manilla envelope down on his desk.

Greg could not have reacted more severely if she'd dropped a tarantula into his hands.

He lurched back from the desk, knocking the coffee mug straight over the edge - Sally jumped and snatched the paperwork aside. The mug smashed against the floor as coffee flooded the desk and the carpet. Greg scrabbled to pick it up with his good arm.

Sally dumped the paperwork in the chair by his door.

"I'll get a cloth," she said, and hurried out.

Alone, Greg stared in white-faced horror at the envelope now lying on his desk. Coffee was seeping across the polished surface towards it - but he didn't want to touch it. He didn't want to lay a hand on it, because then he'd know it was real. He'd know he wasn't just imagining it.

At the last second, his hand shaking, he reached out and picked the envelope up.

The postmark on it was dated two weeks ago.

Sally was on her way back. He could hear the approaching stride of her high heels on the corridor outside. He tugged open his desk drawer, threw the envelope inside, and closed it smartly.

Sally breezed in with a roll of tissue from the cleaner's cupboard under her arm. She tore some off and started to soak up the mess on his desk.

"Sorry," he managed, tight-throated, reaching for the roll of tissue. He unwound it shakily around
his good hand. "Still clumsy."

"Don't worry," she said. "Happens to us all."

Together, they got rid of the worst of the spill. Greg could barely see his hands in front of his face. His carpet would smell of coffee for a while, he heard her say - but it might help him get through the paperwork. He thought quickly, desperately, as they mopped up the flecks of coffee, gathered the broken shards of ceramic inside a clump of tissue. By the time the mess was dealt with, he knew what to do.

Sally went off to make him another coffee. The moment the door shut, Greg reached for his desk drawer.

He did not touch the envelope.

Instead, he picked up his phone.

He opened his contacts, whirled silently down to 'M', and hit call. His heart hammered as he did it, but his thoughts were running calm. This was what he should have done the first time. It would be alright.

The line picked up.

"Hey," he said, before Myke could speak. "There's another letter. It got here two weeks ago. I recognise the address label."

Myke took a moment to process this. "Have you opened it?" he asked.

"No," Greg said. He breathed in slowly, feeling his broken rib aching in protest. "No, I just saw it, I knocked coffee all over the floor, and then I called you."

"Right." Mycroft's chair squeaked. "I will be there in twenty minutes."

"Are you - sure you can - "

"I said 'one phone call away'. I meant 'one phone call away'. Make yourself another coffee and answer some e-mails. I'm on my way."

Mycroft hung up.

Greg sank back into his office chair, swearing under his breath. He covered his face with his hands.

Seventeen minutes later, Sharon glanced up from her game of Minesweeper to find a pristinely-attired gentleman in a suit, carrying a black umbrella, approaching her desk. His expression was set in calm resolve.

"Mycroft Holmes," he said to her. "I'm here to see Inspector Lestrade."

As Sharon searched, confused, for the day's appointment list, there came the muffled crack of a door opening, the sweep of its metal edge across the carpet. She and the visitor looked around to see Inspector Lestrade standing in the door of his office. He was a little pale, Sharon noted.

"Inspector," the visitor said, cool.

Lestrade's expression flickered. "Mr Holmes... come on through."
The inspector held the office door for his visitor as he entered. He then closed it behind them with a snap.

Sharon watched, quiet-eyed, as Lestrade reached for the blinds.

"I'd recommend you leave those," Mycroft murmured, seating himself before Greg's desk. He curled one hand around the handle of his umbrella.

"You sure?" Greg said, unsettled.

"Mm. We are being observed."

"Who by?"

"A number of people. Rest assured that I am also observing them. Come and sit down."

Greg left the blinds open, drawing in a long breath. The cord tapped gently against the window as it swung. He crossed his office, hollow-stomached, and sat himself down behind his desk.

"Before we begin," Mycroft said, idling one leg across the other in a perfect display of casual business acquaintance, "I would like you to know that I adore you, and that everything is going to be alright."

Greg gazed at him across the desk. It was so strange seeing him here, he thought - not Myke his lover, but Mycroft Holmes, political predator and power of the British nation. The tailored coat, the hand-made shoes, the umbrella - they suddenly made for one hell of a reassuring sight.

Mycroft knew it. He smiled, just a little, lifting his chin and letting Greg look at him.

"Take a breath," he advised. "Then tell me what happened."

"Don't you - want to see - "

"In a moment. Before we're swamped with data, let us deal with what we have."

Greg breathed in, steadying himself. "Sally brought it… said it came with my post. She just put it on my desk and I - panicked."

"How did she react?"

"She... went to get tissue - mop up the coffee I spilled."

"Was she surprised by your reaction?"

"God… I don't know. I think she assumed it was just my collarbone made me knock the mug."

"What did you do then?"

"I…” Greg closed his eyes for a second, forcing himself to remember. "I threw the envelope in my drawer. Sally came with the tissue - helped me to - "

"Did she notice the missing envelope?"

"I - what?"

"In the time she was gone, it had vanished. Did she notice its absence?"
"I… she didn't say anything - but it all happened so fast. I wasn't really looking."

Mycroft thought about it for a moment, flexing his fingers around the handle of the umbrella. Greg watched him run his tongue behind his teeth.

"Who normally deals with incoming post?" he asked.

Greg hesitated. "D'you need to ask?"

"And does Sharon also handle internal mail?"

"Yes."

Mycroft settled back in his chair, brushing a speck off his cuff. "Show me the envelope."

Greg opened his desk drawer, as casually as he could. Everyone outside the office seemed to be busy working. He could see Sally updating the whiteboard of developing inquiries, adding names and dates with a marker pen. Sharon at Reception was filing her nails.

A few members of Computer Crime were arriving to use the meeting room opposite. Roy was amongst them, easily spotted in his marmalade-coloured jumper. As Greg watched him, quietly, Roy seemed to sense his eyes and glanced around. He caught sight of Greg through the open blinds of the office. A startled smile lifted his features, and he waved.

Greg gave him a tight smile and a nod in return. He waited with the drawer open until they'd all entered the meeting room.

His wrist shook a little as he handed over the envelope.

Mycroft's grip was perfectly steady. He examined the envelope with a reactionless cool - almost absent-minded, studying the label, the seal and the corners in turn.

"Do you know the most dangerous kind of person in the world?" he asked Greg at last, with interest.

Greg tried a weak smile. "You?"

Mycroft huffed, regarding him with a brief flash of lover's eyes. "I come a poor second, I'm afraid."

"Who to?"

"Someone ordinary." Mycroft turned the envelope in his hands. "Someone who buys their envelopes from a post office, with cash… prints a label at work, on work paper… adheres it with cheap sellotape. A genius will always need to make their mark. They cannot help it. But someone ordinary…"

He reached for a letter-opener from Greg's pen-pot, unsheathed it, and slit open the envelope. Greg's stomach lurched as he watched.

"May we all live in fear of the ordinary evil," Mycroft murmured.

He removed the paper from inside, and opened it with the disregard one might give to a monthly gas bill.

His eyes scanned it quickly - flickering with disinterest over the picture, then reading the demand. He gave a soft snort. Greg was surprised to see amusement touch his features.
"What…?" he said, desperate.

"Do you remember the night with the Haagen Dazs?" Mycroft murmured. "It's from towards the end of that... encounter. We'd not quite ruined the sheets yet, but we were well on the way. Rather tasteful profile shot. Probably 'Greg', judging by the vowel sound in the lips... at some volume, if memory serves me rightly..."

"The demand, Myke, what's the - "

In response, Mycroft offered him the paper.

Greg opened it, searching for the number. As he saw it, the bottom fell from his stomach.

"Jesus - actual - Christ."

"Ambitious," Mycroft remarked, coolly. "At last, they're playing the game... what a shame that I have finished playing."

Greg's horrified eyes had noticed something else.

"Myke, the date - today's the - ..." He looked up, pale. "It was yesterday. They wanted it yesterday."

"Mm... apparently they expected you back to work before now," Mycroft said. "You'd think that our blackmailer, of all people, would possess ample evidence that you and I have far too much fun to be parted swiftly."

"But - but what if - "

"I think it unlikely." Mycroft extended a hand for the paper. "That figure is not to be given up lightly. This used to be about humiliating you; it's now about how much of a fortune they can make out of me. They want the money. It gives us power. If they'd not been given their first demand of £500, ruining your life might have made a pretty consolation prize... but this kind of money, they're not going to relinquish so easily."

Mycroft studied the demand once more, smiling to himself.

"If they release the photos," he said, "they know they shan't get the money. Petty cruelty is no longer the prize. I suspect their next move will be a threat of further violence... they'll try to break the stalemate."

"So - what do we do?" Greg asked, his voice hoarse.

Mycroft folded the demand back inside its envelope.

"I shall speak to Sherlock," he said. "I need his opinion on something. You, meanwhile... will commence your two feet of paperwork."

"I'll - … what?"

Mycroft slid the envelope away inside his coat.

"I appreciate that's the last thing you want to hear from me," he said, "but if your blackmailer is sitting outside this office, I need them to see you calm and collected. Unafraid. There's nothing to be done until I speak with Sherlock. Tonight, at five o'clock - as promised - Jameson will be waiting outside... he shall take you home. I'll be with you as soon as I can, and we will deal with
Greg swallowed. He knew it made sense - and what else was there to do? The thug wouldn't still be there on Platform Ten, waiting for his king's ransom in a briefcase. Mycroft was so calm, so at ease - something in his small smile made Greg feel deeply, desperately safe.

Everything was being taken care of, he told himself. It would be fine.

He shuddered a little, exhaling.

"Why the… fuck did I not just tell you the first time?" he muttered. "It's no wonder everything went wrong. You're just... better at this."

"It's my profession," Mycroft said. He leant back in his chair, quite settled. "If I ever need a lot of tedious expense reports signed, I know exactly who to call upon."

Greg's mouth curved in an unwilling smile.

"Thought I was going to be James Bond," he muttered. "Turns out I'm Moneypenny."

Mycroft huffed with amusement. "How long have you been sitting in that chair?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Greg sighed. "Longer than fifteen minutes," he admitted.

"Your rib will punish you for it," Mycroft warned. "I already aggravated it last night… don't give it any more incentive for vengeance."

Greg reminded himself that his blinds were open, smothering the expression that had flashed across his face.

"Shall I escort you from the premises?" he offered.

"Mm, I think you'd better..." Mycroft stood from his chair, brushing down his coat. "Don't let the letter trouble you for another moment, dear heart. It is all in hand. Be courteous, polite and affable to all of them, and do your best to stay busy. It will make the time pass faster."

Greg got up from his desk, opening the door for Myke.

"Thank you for coming," he said, cool.

"A pleasure as ever, inspector."

They made their way past Reception together, the picture of professionality. Greg was aware of Sharon's eyes lifting briefly from her computer screen as they passed.

"Please don't hesitate to contact me if you require any further assistance," Mycroft said to him, sleekly. "I'm always happy to lend my professional opinion to those in need."
Talk

Quarter to six; traffic.

Mycroft took his mobile phone impatiently from his pocket. He had a new message waiting from Sherlock - one he'd expected. He ignored it for a moment, composing a text to Greg.

*On my way. Traffic horrendous.*
* M xxx*

He then turned, with some reluctance, to his brother's message.

'Ordinary' you said. 'Ordinary' does not make double, triple, quadruple bluffs. *The field is narrowing.* *S*

Mycroft inhaled, reading the message several times. He composed his reply without pleasure.

*I feared you would say that.*
* M.*

The traffic inched by. Mycroft realised he was drumming his fingers on the seat, and stopped. His phone vibrated.

It was Greg.

*Cool. Hope you're hungry. I made lasagne. only dropped it once x*

Even as Mycroft gazed at the message, feeling his heart tug, a second one arrived from Sherlock.

*What will you say?*
*Not welcome news I imagine. S*

Mycroft thought about it for some time. The car had advanced only half a street by the time he sent his reply.

*I will talk to him and see what he thinks of the plan. Our priority now should be we proceed… perhaps the matter of identity does not matter.*
* M.*

Sherlock responded almost at once.

*It will matter to Greg. S*

Mycroft sighed, rubbing between his eyes. "I hardly need you to tell me that…” he muttered.

He composed a number of responses, deleting each of them unsent after only a few words; he watched the traffic go by for a minute; then finally, he decided on what needed to be said.

*I need a name before I tell him. Not a shortened list. A single name.*
*Bring me a name and I will say it to him.*
* M.*

As he waited for a response, he realised he was drumming his fingers again.
This whole business was sliding fast towards its end. He could feel it - the slight quickening of his pulse; the heaviness in the air. He sensed the conclusion of it all bearing down upon them, as palpable as oncoming rain. If Greg were comfortable with the plan, it would all be triggered tonight - all of it, and all of the consequences to come.

They would not be able to return to this moment.

Mycroft became aware of his reflection in the window. He glanced into his own eyes, and his gaze focused - resolved, controlled, a little afraid.

His phone, held loosely in his fingers, gave a gentle jolt.

He glanced down at it.

joking about the lasagne... I dropped it twice.
any progress? I miss you x

Mycroft gazed at the message for a moment. His heart beat hard.

He realised, all at once, that he was finished waiting for something to happen.

"Stop here, Jameson," he said. "We're close enough... I shall walk."

"Yes, Mr Holmes." The doors unlocked with a clunk. "Good night, sir."

Mycroft let himself out of the car, feeling a text message arrive as he slammed the door.

He set off along the street, retrieving the phone once more from his pocket.

It was Sherlock.

No name yet. Just far fewer candidates.
If Greg is happy to proceed, we will force a name to reveal itself.
It is the only way. S

Greg didn't know why he found himself nervous.

He didn't want to just sit and wait - he'd been sitting far too much today, and Mycroft had been right. His rib was teaching him a lesson for it. Painkillers had helped, but not completely. He couldn't stop thinking about the blackmail demand, either - the number he'd seen printed on that paper. All day, he'd put it out of his head. Now that he was home and the flat was quiet around him, it was much harder to keep it out of his thoughts.

Instead of thinking, he'd decided to cook.

It was a strange, domestic urge. He knew it was stupid - as if lasagne would save them - as if having dinner on the table when Myke came through the door would mean things were somehow okay. He knew exactly where the urge had come from. His mum had baked when everything was awful. Towards the end of Greg's teenage years, the smell of fresh bread had invoked nothing in him but dread - dread for what he would find as he opened the front door. His mother baked like if there was carrot cake cooling on the side, then magically it would be a happy home - because sad homes didn't have things like that.

For years, he'd thought it was the weirdest thing to do.
He'd realised, when she died, that it was the only thing she *could* do. His mum had tried to make things better in the only way available to her - scones and ginger biscuits. If there was cherry bakewell in the oven, nobody would notice her black eye.

And now, thirty years later, if her son could get his lasagne to crisp, maybe all the problems would go away.

As he felt the front door of the building thump shut, several floors below, Greg hurried to lay plates. He got the salad out of the fridge, turned the radio off, and donned oven gloves. As he jemmed the lasagne free from the lower shelf, his collarbone gave a vicious twinge that made him hiss - but he held onto it.

The lasagne hit the heatproof mat in the centre of the table just as the door to the flat clunked open.

"It's me," he heard Mycroft call. Greg examined his lasagne quickly - the top had crisped to perfection. His heart flushed with relief. "I'm sorry I've been delayed… the traffic in this city - "

The kitchen door opened.

Greg looked up, still wearing his oven gloves as Myke appeared in the doorway.

Mycroft's brain seemed to restart itself at the sight - table laid, dinner ready. Greg hesitated, holding his breath.

After a second or two of silence, a worrying possibility began to dawn.

"Please tell me you *like* lasagne," he said.

Mycroft was gazing at him as if they'd never quite seen each other before.

He put his umbrella to one side, placed his briefcase on the floor, and crossed the kitchen.

As Greg's back bumped gently against the fridge, he gave a little squeak. Myke covered it with his mouth. He kissed Greg slowly, softly, his tongue flashing gently at the seam of his lips. Greg responded as much as he could with his hands still tethered together in oven gloves. He shivered as Myke's hands roamed gently under his shirt and pulled him closer, stirring in his lover's arms, feeling a rising tide of sugar-pink joy overwhelming all his senses. The kiss seemed to go on forever; it was like they'd never left each other this morning - like everything was okay.

At last - as Mycroft's lips let go of his own - Greg gazed, breathless and startled, into his face.

"... wow," he managed.

Mycroft removed the oven gloves for him. He took Greg by the hand.

"Come and eat with me," he murmured. "You've worked so hard."

Greg flushed. "It's… only lasagne…" he said, even as he felt his entire being tingle with happiness.

Myke pulled out his chair for him, kissing him gently on the top of his head as he sat down.

"You are wonderful," Mycroft murmured. "Thank you. I'm deeply sorry I'm late."

"Traffic," Greg said, understanding entirely. As Mycroft sat down, twisting off his tie and loosening his top button, Greg smiled at him across the table. "How was work?"
"Unexceptional," Mycroft said. "I may have to fly out to Athens in August… only a week. I'll make sure your Chief Superintendent understands that you are coming with me if he wants to keep his job."

Greg grinned, watching as Mycroft helped himself to salad.

"This looks magnificent," Mycroft remarked. He held out a hand for Greg's plate. "Here… let me serve… your work is done for tonight."

The lasagne dish was scraped clean by the time they'd finished. They ate happily together at the kitchen table, talking about anything and nothing, until Greg had almost forgotten the events of that morning. It felt good just to be like this. He realised more than ever why his mum had done it for so many years. Just one happy mealtime was enough to drive all the shadows back.

At last, as Mycroft transferred all the dishes to the sink, Greg lit a cigarette at the table and moved the conversation towards what they must.

"Did you… catch up with Sherlock?" he asked - like the two brothers had gone for coffee, chatted about the weather.

"I did," Mycroft said. He switched on the hot tap, reaching for dishwashing liquid. "It was a very gratifying conversation. He thinks as I do on a number of points. I asked his advice on a course of action I've been contemplating, and he's given me his opinion... I believe we can now make a decision and move on."

Greg tapped his cigarette into an empty mug, watching as Myke put the dishes in to soak.

"What decision?" he asked.

Mycroft rinsed his hands, turned off the tap, and dried them on a teatowel.

"Let's get comfortable, shall we?" he said. There was a note of purposeful lightness to his voice that concerned Greg a little - but then, this was blackmail they were discussing. It wasn't tennis. "Come through to the lounge… bring your cigarettes."

They adjourned to the sofa. Myke retrieved an ashtray for Greg from the mantelpiece, then settled beside him. He put his feet up on the coffee table. Greg settled into his side.

For a few seconds, it was as if they were about to switch on the television - to idle the evening away together, with nothing to do but relax.

Then Mycroft put an arm around Greg, gave a silent sigh, and said,

"You have made some interesting remarks to me lately. I now rather hope you meant them."

"Interesting?" Greg said.

"Mm."

"What… sort of interesting remarks?"

"That you are happy. Happy to be with me - to be seen with me."

Greg wondered where this was going. "Why would I not be happy?" he asked.

"Once, it was… rather a priority to you that no-one should know. That our arrangement should not
Greg flicked his cigarette against the ashtray, contemplating for a moment. It felt like a different person had made that previous choice for him - someone he no longer saw around town much, and no longer understood.

"Things change," he said, at last. "There are worse things in the world than people figuring out I'm gay."

It was a mark of how far he'd come, he thought, that a sentence like that could leave his mouth so easily.

"Maybe I've just tested saying it to enough people now," he went on. "Nobody cares. Nobody minds. Even people we don't know... I mean, waitresses think we're cute. It doesn't seem to matter. Not as much as I thought it would."

"People are more accepting than you believed," Mycroft said.

"Yeah... I suppose so." Greg glanced up at him, drawing on the cigarette. "Why?" he asked around it.

Mycroft looked back at him, gazing into his face. He seemed to be reading something written there.

"Do you remember our meal at Casa Becci?" he said at last. "A month ago. You said something rather insightful about the photographs."

"Remind me?" Greg said. "I've... slept since then."

"You suggested the difference between one person's scandalous secret, and images stolen from an established couple... how one is often received very differently to the other. A couple's privacy is more likely to be respected, and grieved."

Greg remembered.

He also now had a feeling he knew where this was headed - what course of action was about to be recommended.

Once, he would have shot it down in flames. He would have flung it out of consideration before another word could be said on the matter.

Now, he rested his head on Mycroft's shoulder. He blew out a column of smoke.

"Can I make a deduction?" he asked.

Myke regarded him closely. "You may."

Greg took another drag on his cigarette; he tapped away a little of the ash.

"I think you're going to suggest we take the power out of it," he said.

"By?"

"By going official. Being open, and out - everywhere - friends, family, strangers. Tell the world, and deal with it. Then, if the photos leak, it's not 'Sherlock Holmes brother in viral gay porn scandal'. It's a private couple, who happen to be gay, have a phone hacked in an ugly violation of
privacy. People still see what they see, but we get sympathy. Not mockery."

Mycroft said nothing for quite some time.

"How might you feel about that?" he asked Greg, at last. His voice was small in the quiet.

A year ago, Greg thought, he wouldn't have believed if someone told him the conversation he'd be having right now.

*I'm not gay,* he'd have said. He could hear it in his own voice, affronted. *Sherlock's brother - the stuck-up one? Are you actually fucking serious?*

Now here he was - lasagne dishes soaking in the sink; their cluttered flat around them; their whole life ahead of them.

He looked up at Mycroft, the cigarette still smoking between his fingertips.

Mycroft looked back at him, apparently not daring to speak.

"I think we should do it," Greg said. His eyes lit up in a smile.

Mycroft attempted to conceal his overpowering rush of relief. It didn't work. Greg saw it suffuse desperately through his face. "It's - an irreversible decision," he warned, all the same. "The closet is a one-way exit. I don't suggest this lightly."

"Myke, I am happy. Genuinely, actually happy. I waited forty-four fucking years to feel like this. I'm not answering you lightly. I'm not ashamed anymore. And I'm definitely not ashamed of you."

Mycroft's expression tautened with joy and fear, matched in perfect symmetry. It took him a second to speak.

"There is another consideration," he said, tense. "It may change your mind."

"Try me."

"Sherlock has predicted - and unfortunately, I find his logic to be sound - that if we follow this course of action, the blackmailer will release the photos."

Greg frowned. "That seems vindictive," he said. "And stupid... why would they just - "

"Vindictive and stupid is this blackmailer in a nutshell. They've set their heart on a fortune. Based on two successful demands so far, they think they're going to get it. When they realise they are not, they're likely to lash out with the only weapon at their disposal... spite."

Greg rubbed his lower lip between his teeth; the scar was still there from a month ago.

"You mean they'll try to punish us," he said. "For undermining them."

"Yes. Sherlock and I are quite certain."

"But then - your career - "

Mycroft shook his head, eyes hard. "Not a concern."

"It is a concern, Myke," Greg said, fierce. "You've spent decades on it. I know you think it's romantic to jettison it out the window without a thought in my honour, but look - I'm not okay with
that. It's part of who you are. If doing this is going to blow things to shit for you, then maybe - "

"It's possible it will," Mycroft admitted. "But it's not certain."

"What d'you mean?"

"I will lose influence with some agencies. Let it be lost. Sherlock believes I might actually gain some standing with others. Sympathy is a powerful emotion. We all pity a person who is blackmailed - especially if their supposed 'crime' is no more than having intimate relations with an long-term partner."

Greg followed, nodding. "So... it's not all lost," he said, as he ground his cigarette out in the ashtray.

"Not necessarily." Mycroft hesitated, watching him closely. "We have reached the point where risks need to be taken. Damage to my career would be my risk to choose. I would willingly choose it."

Greg raised his eyebrows slightly. "The prime minister's going to see your come face," he warned. His lover winced - but held firm.

"So be it," Mycroft said. "If I have to endure an awkward cabinet meeting or two, it will be a small price to pay for some peace in our lives." He looked into Greg's eyes very seriously. "You are in the videos. At least some of your colleagues at Scotland Yard will view them."

"Are you serious? They'll hold a special screening, Myke. They'll be selling popcorn and souvenir t-shirts."

Mycrof frowned. "Joking aside."

Greg gave a shrug; joking aside, his answer was much the same. "I coped with Sally," he said. "I'll cope with the others. So people will find out I have a partner, and we do what partners do, and I love him to pieces - so what? Let's do it."

Mycroft seemed unconvinced; tension lingered in his face.

"Did Sherlock say anything else?" Greg said, hoping it fell in his favour.

Something strange passed over Mycroft's expression - something Greg had not expected to see. It was there for less than a second, but Greg had spotted it as clearly as if a stag had just fled from the kitchen into the hallway.

It was not tension; it was fear.

"Whoa - " he said. "What's that look about?"

Mycroft attempted, far too late, to adopt a neutral expression. "What do you - "

Greg snorted, cutting across him. "Don't sell me a dog, Myke," he said. "If I had you in an interview room, and you gave me that look, I'd be getting someone to call you legal aid."

Mycroft said nothing, pained. Greg gazed back into his expression, hating the apprehension he saw there. There was something hiding behind his lover's eyes. He wasn't interested in letting it evade him.
"We promised," he said. He watched Mycroft's face open. "No more lies. No more keeping things. No more trying to protect each other. I told you straightaway about the letter... now tell me what Sherlock's said."

Mycroft took a moment to speak. He fortified himself with a breath.

"Sherlock and I - noted a point of interest," he said, at last. "It is... to do with timing."


"The most recent letter." Mycroft hesitated, searching his face. "Greg, I - … perhaps I should wait until I have a clearer conclusion for you. We have no answers. Only indications. I have no wish to give you a false - "

"Timing of what?" Greg said again.

Mycroft swirled something around his mouth.

"The latest letter was sent to you at work," he said. "It... arrived two weeks ago. The deadline was last night." He paused. "It suggests that the blackmailer believed you were there to read it - to act on it."

Greg stared into his eyes, trying to see the jump he was missing.

"I... work there," he said. "Why wouldn't they believe I'm - "

"Greg… if you were being blackmailed by an employee of New Scotland Yard..."

Something flashed into place in Greg's mind. It lit up the insides of his head like lightning - sudden, cold white insight.

"They'd know I wasn't there," he said. "They'd know I would miss the deadline. Why would they bother sending it there, knowing I wouldn't - ..."

His throat constricted.

"So it's - not - ..."

"Not Scotland Yard," Mycroft said. His eyes were filled with regret.

"But that would mean - …" Greg managed.

He stared into Mycroft's eyes, seeing the awful truth reflected back at him.

*Family.*

Who else was there who ever got near his phone for any length of time? Work; family. The two spheres of his life.

Greg felt the whole world close down, rewrite itself, and open up around him once again.

He couldn't believe it.

It couldn't be true.

"Maybe it's a bluff," he managed, after what seemed like an hour of silence.
Mycroft had not moved a muscle. His expression remained completely calm. "Perhaps," he said, quietly.

"If they - ... maybe they want us to think..."

"As I said, we have... no answers. Only indications." Mycroft hesitated, reading Greg's eyes carefully. "We know little more than we did before. It's - a logical assumption. That's all."

Greg realised the true despair of the situation as he listened to a Holmes refer to a logical assumption as 'that's all'.

"It can't be my dad," he managed, his throat thick. "He'd - just kill me. He wouldn't blackmail me."

Mycroft said absolutely nothing.

"It's not my dad, Mycroft. He's not cunning. He's not clever. He doesn't even know how to work a phone. Besides, he'd rather die than let everybody know he's got a faggot for a - "

"Do not ever refer to yourself as that word in my presence," Mycroft breathed, white-pale.

Greg's throat suddenly felt like cold claws were tightening around it.

"It's not him," he managed. "I know it's not."

He heard his own voice crack.

"But then - ..." Oh, fuck. Oh fuck, no. His throat closed under the grip of those claws. He couldn't say it. "If - if it's not my dad - ..."

He watched Mycroft's heart beginning to break for him. "I shouldn't have - ..."

" - but she's my - ..."

"I - truly, sincerely doubt that Rachel would ever - ..."

The sound of the name snapped the last of Greg's composure. He covered his face with his hands and sank back into the sofa, shaking, swearing softly to himself until the panic began to pass. For just a few seconds, he was fifteen again - fifteen and cowering petrified until a table.

Then gentle hands closed about his wrists; he looked up.

Mycroft, pale and fierce, gazed down into his eyes.

"I am about to tell you who your blackmailer is," Mycroft said.

Greg's heart and pupils shrank to half their size.

"No - " he gasped. "No. Don't. I - I don't want to - ..."

Something satisfied itself in Mycroft's expression; his wild eyes calmed a little. His grip gentled on Greg's shaking wrists.

"Listen to me," Mycroft murmured. "Just listen to me, and breathe."

Greg said nothing, silently fighting panic.

"When you picked me up at Heathrow," Myke began - and it was strange enough to disarm Greg,
to jolt him briefly from the grip of his fear. "You left your phone on the table to run to me. Here is what transpired. Someone - a stranger, a nobody - an utter non-person - took your phone, took the photos from it, and took your name from your texts. They researched you. They got in touch. Your blackmailer is one of those featureless faces you pass everyday, a face that means nothing. It is no-one. It is a stranger. Now that you know, you can forget about them."

Greg knew exactly what this was. He knew what Mycroft was doing. He knew the mechanism his brain was being put through, and he knew it was nonsense just to settle him - to give him a theory, a suspect and a story that didn't hurt, so he could make decisions and move and keep going.

Mycroft knew it, too. He was staring into Greg's eyes with that same forceful protectiveness, willing him to accept it, to take it, even though it was bullshit and they knew it, just so they could bloody keep going.

"It doesn't matter who they are," Mycroft said. "It doesn't matter why they're doing it. It doesn't matter what will come after. What matters is how we proceed."

Greg looked up at Mycroft, pale; the decision overwhelmed him in a perfect rush.

"I... need to come out with you," he whispered. "I'm so tired of all this."

is breath caught in his throat.

"I want to stop being afraid. I want to stop looking at them all, trying to - ... I just... want to live. Fuck. I don't care which of them it is any more. I just want it to be over."

Mycroft's hands slowly surrounded his face. "We can move swiftly," he said, "if you want to."

"Yes." Greg's heart was pounding itself to pieces; he stared into Mycroft's eyes. "I'm ready. No more being frightened. No more waiting. We take control of it - you and me."

Mycroft gathered him close, leaning in. His lips were soft, and desperately gentle. Greg ached his fingers up into Mycroft's hair as they kissed, needing him, terrified and overjoyed at once.

They were going to do this. The secret was over - three long decades, choked by a single secret. It would all come to light - then come what may.

"What do we do?" he asked Mycroft between kisses, afraid.

Mycroft's voice came tenderly across his lips - a low, gentle rumble.

"There would be two parts... though I can handle official channels entirely. I shall take care of those."

"Official...?"

"You will need to be added to my government files. MI5 may need a word. I will ensure it is a very short one."

Greg's head spun slightly. "Okay - ..."

"Otherwise, this is a social operation... a few tactical appearances as a couple would start the word circulating... I hoped, with your permission, to suggest that we have been an established couple for a while. Only recently choosing to be public."

"That sounds - fine - "
"On your part," Mycroft murmured, "simply go about your daily life..." His eyes flared. "... openly. Add my name to conversations. Kiss me goodbye on the steps of Scotland Yard. Perhaps put a photograph of me in your office. Do, in essence, all those things that you would do if the world knew already and you were not afraid."

Greg swallowed, processing this. "Fine," he said. "That's - … I can handle that."

"And I shall need you to come to dinner with me one night this week. Saturday, perhaps. I have to present you."

"... present me?"

"A social convention. Don't worry." Mycroft tilted his chin upwards gently. "I shall take care of everything. All you'll have to do is dress and have dinner with me... nothing more. Do Scotland Yard still take to The Red Lion on Fridays?"

"Yes," Greg said, his heart tightening. "They do." He gripped Mycroft's hands slowly in both his own. "Come with me - this Friday. We'll go together."

Mycroft gripped his hands in turn; their fingers flexed together. "I shall," he promised. That will handle all of your workmates."

A shiver passed down Greg's spine.

"Fuck, Myke," he breathed. "We're doing it. We're actually doing it."

"If you aren't completely certain," Mycroft said, his eyes entirely serious, "then this would be the opportune moment to tell me."

"No." Greg steeled himself. "No, I'm certain. This is happening. It's the only way."

Mycroft's expression softened. "So Sherlock believes, too."

"And the blackmailer - "

" - a non-entity. An irrelevance."

" - and the money - "

" - will not be paid. I will be spending the demanded figure on a long, very luxurious holiday for both of us, as soon as this hideous mess is dealt with."

Greg's throat contracted.

"And my dad," he said, at last. "He's - going to hear about this." It was the final knot of fear; it turned his insides to rock. "Last - time that happened - ..."

"Last time this happened," Mycroft said, his eyes blazing, "you were in the care of a man who broke you down... he smashed you into pieces, and left you to try and make a life out of the rubble. This time, you are in the care of a man who shall build you up. I am going to support you, and adore you, every step of the way, and so help me Gregory Lestrade, I shall make you so happy that it causes your enemies physical pain to behold you."


"Now get your jacket," Mycroft said, as he removed himself from the sofa. "We are going out."
"We're - what?" said Greg, bewildered. "Where?"

"To Casa Becci," Mycroft said. "Their lasagne cannot hold a candle to yours - so, with that course completed, we are going for desserts, wine, and plenty of both. We will then come home and go to bed, where I will endeavour to make you come so hard that half of Greater London know you are mine before morning. It might take several attempts. We will persevere. Any objections?"

Greg got his jacket.
Roses

It was a blistering, glorious Friday in July, and The Red Lion was packed.

Scotland Yard had sweltered all day in the building's temperamental air-conditioning. Little work had been done. Greg had let a number of office-wear violations slide, too hot and exhausted after his first week back to do anything about it. If Sharon's spaghetti straps got any thinner, she was going to cause a health and safety hazard. Most jackets had been abandoned by eleven AM, ties not longer after, and, in a few unhappy cases, shoes, but Greg overlooked it all.

He kept his eyes on five o'clock - on the pub, and the first of the three tasks that lay ahead of them.

He'd spent the week building up his courage with small test rounds, littering casual conversations with references to 'Myke and I' - weekend plans, restaurants they'd tried, opinions of films. Not one person had questioned it. A few, he thought, might have asked other casual listeners once he was out of the room ("I didn't know Lestrade is…?"), but nobody had said a word to him.

"You two are pretty serious, aren't you?" Sally asked on Friday morning as he buckled himself into the car. They were investigating an assault over in Camden. It was an open and shut case, but you had to do the legwork.

"Been serious for a while, you know," he said. "It's not just wearing each other's dressing gowns and disturbing his posh neighbours... he's coming to the pub tonight."

Sally grinned as she turned the key in the ignition. "Really?" she said. "So you're... officially out now, are you?"

"I guess I am," he said, with a smile.

"To everyone?"

"Yep."

"Good," she said, pulling away from the kerb. "Because I've had about four people ask, and I can't keep fobbing them off."

Greg grinned, wondering what he'd do without her.

"Tell them," he said. "It's fine. Just make sure you clearly specify which Holmes brother, will you? That's the last thing I need right now."

As half past four crawled around, a few people started to sneak away to the pub. Greg let them go. It was too hot to do anything but drink in this weather, and he didn't blame them for getting out of here. He ploughed on with paperwork until five minutes to five, then sent a quick text as he packed his bag.

Have you got away ok? will meet you outside x

A reply arrived within a few moments.

Just about to leave. I love you.
M xxx

It didn't matter how many times he heard them, Greg thought, or saw them written down - those
words still made his insides turn to fuzz. He smiled, reading the text several times. The door of his office opened.

"Coming?" Sally asked, brightly. She'd already changed into jeans.

"Coming," he said. He slipped his bag carefully over his good shoulder, turned off his office light, and followed her out of the building.

They reached The Red Lion a few minutes later. The benches out on the street were crammed with drinkers. Little of the bar could be seen through the windows, obscured by people laughing and enjoying themselves after work.

"Wow," Sally said. "It's packed… good job we got here early."

"Go get yourself in the queue," he advised. "I'm just waiting for Myke. He'll be here any minute."

"What are you having?"

"Oh! Strongbow would be great, cheers."

"And for your other half?" she asked, smiling.

"Let's start him on a house white," he replied, with a grin. "Then we'll see how it escalates from there."

"Alright," she said, opening the door onto a wall of noise, and disappearing inside.

Greg pushed his hands into his pockets while he waited. It was hard not to feel a little nervous. It was a good nervous, though. There was something dizzying about the thought of it - just being there beside Myke, casually together as a couple, sharing a drink after work on a Friday.

Mycroft arrived on foot within a couple of minutes, coming from the direction of Downing Street. How he managed to stay cool in a three-piece suit in this weather, Greg did not know. The mid-grey suit and ice-blue shirt looked as pristine as they had when they were first put on this morning. The sun didn't seem to be fazing him at all. He strode along the street towards Greg with a small smile, apparently oblivious to the drum roll he was causing in his lover's chest.

"Inspector," he said, as he came within speaking distance. His eyes gleamed with playful affection. "How nice to see you."

Greg grinned, shaking his head.

"Don't you 'inspector' me," he chided, meeting Mycroft with a slow hug that lingered much longer than he'd meant. They held onto each other in the street, happy, and Greg kissed his jaw. He could feel his heart bubbling away to itself with contentment, scared and excited and glad all at once. "Hi," he said.

"Hello..." Mycroft murmured in his ear. "Good day, I trust?"

They drew apart, admiring each other at arm's length.

"Very good," Greg said. "Only getting better by the minute."

"How are the war wounds?"
"Fine… no more paperwork for two days will help. Maybe a hot shower when we get in. How do you feel about white wine?"

Mycroft groaned a little. "My hero," he said.

Greg pushed open the door for him, grinning. "Sally's just in the queue," he said. "Don't think there's much chance of getting a table…"

"No last minute uncertainties?" Mycroft checked, glancing back as he stepped inside the packed pub.

Greg smiled. "Not one," he said. "Let's do this."

They found themselves a space at the end of the bar, and Greg went to help Sally carry drinks. As he returned, handing Mycroft the glass of white wine, his partner gave him a look of keen adoration.

"Cheers," Greg said, offering out his pint of Strongbow.

Amused, Mycroft chinked their glasses together. "Cheers," he said.

They drank, eyeing each other over the rim of their glasses. Sally was opening a packet of Mini Cheddars to share on the bar.

"I can't believe how busy it is," she said. "Nearly everybody's here… even Computer Crime have turned out."

Greg followed her eyes across the crowded pub, to where a familiar knitted jumper could be seen, surrounded by the other techie types in one corner. Computer Crime never looked quite at home in the pub, Greg thought. There weren't nearly enough wires around.

"And Sharon's proving popular," Sally added, a little tartly.

Their receptionist and her spaghetti straps had amassed a modest collection of front-line officers. They were currently out of their uniforms, and all gathered round in the hope of relieving her of hers. There was a lot of laughter going on. She was drinking something deep pink with an umbrella in it and a frosted rim, which Greg suspected was not her first.

Across the bar, Kelly and a few other girls from HR were sharing a bottle of rosé. They were deep in conversation, fanning themselves softly with bar mats.

"I'd better go say hi to Angie's wife," Sally said. "See how she's doing..." She slid down from her bar stool.

Greg felt a hand rest, gently, on his back.

"Kelly and I haven't been introduced," Mycroft said in his ear. "Perhaps we should be."

Greg smiled. Every Human Resource department he'd ever encountered had boasted a grand council of master-level gossips, and Kelly was sitting at a table full of them. Mycroft - probably well aware of this fact - was nothing but efficient. The news of Inspector Lestrade's Whitehall boyfriend would be known in every corner of Scotland Yard by Monday.

Greg picked up his cider.

"Come say hi," he said. "You're... probably about to be thanked a thousand times. Just to warn
you."

Mycroft smiled slightly. "I'm sure I'll cope."

As they crossed the pub, Greg tried not to be aware of something monumental taking place. He told himself it was a normal Friday night, just two people at the pub - not a life-changing moment - and that heads were not turning to watch them pass. Pride and fear burned in him as they made their way through the crowd. With each step, the pride glowed stronger and brighter; the fear began to shrink away. He could feel its claws retracting from around his throat, dissipating into smoke. This had been his very worst fear once - his worst case scenario. Now, it was as easy as walking. They passed Sharon, who openly turned from her admirers to watch them, open-mouthed. Mycroft's hand stole into his; Greg's heart leapt like a boxing hare. He gripped Myke's hand, wrapping their fingers together as he pulled Myke on through the crowd. A bright call came from the table across the pub.

"Inspector! Happy Friday!"

It was Roy, genial lord of Computer Crime, surrounded by his bespectacled compatriots. Greg grinned, lifting his cider. "Alright?" he called. "Drink later, yeah?"

Roy toasted him with his pint of pale ale. Computer Crime returned to their conversation, gathering together once more. Greg looked back at Myke and grinned; Mycroft was watching him with utter, bright-eyed delight.

He caught up to Greg, leant low, and spoke in his ear - playful tones just audible over the noise of the bar.

"You are my pride and joy," he said. "Are you aware of that? It's... good to see you happy." They were nearing HR's table. "Remind me of the little boy's name?"

"Daniel," Greg said, smiling. "Surprised you're not a godfather."

As Kelly glanced up and saw Greg approaching, her face opened in delight - she then caught sight of the man that he was leading by the hand. She cried out and leapt from her chair at once, flinging her arms around Mycroft without the slightest hesitation.

"At last!" she cried, hugging him hard. "Thank you - thank you, thank you… oh, it's so good to meet you…"

If the rest of Scotland Yard hadn't noticed yet, Greg thought, they had now. Nearby heads turned with casual interest towards the scene - Kelly, flustered and overjoyed, her arms around a bewildered man who was patting her on the back with an embarrassed grin; beside them, DI Lestrade, so proud that the smile barely fit on his face.

As Kelly hunted quickly through her phone for photos of their son, Greg took the opportunity for introductions.

"Myke, this is some of our HR team - so Megan, Nicola, Emma and Hannah… HR team, this is my partner, Mycroft." Greg's heart swelled with his grin. "He pulled some strings for Kelly and her Mrs. It's a long story."

He would treasure forever their expressions of delighted surprise. Mycroft was brightly greeted by everyone, and at Kelly's invite they took a seat, joining the HR team at the table along with Sally.

Kelly settled herself next to Mycroft, smiling from ear-to-ear as she eased her mobile phone into
his hand. The screen showed a baby boy bundled into a towel robe that had teddy bear ears, fresh from a bath.

"If it weren't for you," she told him, as Mycroft gazed at the picture, "he wouldn't be coming to us soon… I wouldn't have that photo. He wouldn't ever be my child."

Only Greg caught the movement of Mycroft's throat as he swallowed.

"You're too kind," Mycroft told her, gracious and embarrassed. A little colour had come to his face. "A phone call or two… that's all. I'm - deeply glad if I could clear an obstacle for you."

"He's good at that," Greg said, with a grin.

Mycroft cast him a fond look, as he gently scrolled through Kelly's photographs of her son. "I hope everything's proceeding smoothly…"

"Like a dream," Kelly said. "We've spent every minute we can with him…I just can't wait until it's every minute, everyday. We're all on track. It's just a case of waiting now."

"He's quite beautiful," Mycroft said at last, smiling to Kelly as he returned her phone. "You must be thrilled."

"Everybody wondered why Greg Lestrade was so happy lately," she said, amused. "Then we found out he's dating a miracle worker."

Greg got up late the next morning.

Their evening at the pub had gone on a little longer than intended - but the first of three tasks was now done, and done brilliantly. The night had sped by in a whirl of chat and laughter, curious co-workers coming over to take a look for themselves at this intriguing new face: the partner of DI Lestrade. The revelation that he was indeed Sherlock Holmes's brother had led to various fascinated questions, and then a number of stories from Mycroft which had gone down a charm with the Scotland Yard crowd. Sherlock might not be able to show his face there for a while. Greg had sat by his side, laughing along with the rest, so proud just to sit beside Myke that he hadn't ever wanted to leave.

The second task of three would not be so easy. It left him reluctant to get out of bed - especially with Myke stirring against him like that.

"Morning," he rumbled, as he spooned gently into his lover's naked back.

Mycroft made a little noise of amusement into the pillows, red hair astray. "Good morning…"

"What's funny?" Greg inquired, as he brushed his mouth over Myke's shoulder.

"Your appetite," Myke told him, softly. "You're insatiable."

Greg trailed a hand gently down Myke's bare side, idling over his ribs and then his waist, down to rest a little possessively at his hips.

"I am." He nuzzled into the back of Myke's neck, letting his breath curl hotly across the sensitive skin there; he picked up on the shiver it caused with great interest. "Sate me," he murmured. "Just a little…"

Myke's breath caught. "Greg…"
Greg eased an arm around him, splaying a hand across his stomach. Myke arched back against him and gave a faint sigh. It hitched to a moan as Greg soothed his hand lower, curled his grip around the growing hardness he found there, and began to stroke.

"Everyone loved you last night," he whispered, as Myke gave an almost feline stretch, pale neck arching, mouth opening. "M'so proud to have you..."

"Then have me," Myke breathed. He pushed back against Greg, fingers digging restlessly into the pillow. "Take me - …"

Greg tightened his grip on Myke's cock, grazing his teeth over the sensitive join between his neck and his shoulder. Myke hissed softly at him - pushing back against him, sleepy and wanting.

"I love you," Greg husked against his neck.

Myke's throat muscles contracted as he swallowed. "Prove it," he murmured.

When Greg began to rock inside him, Mycroft let out a ragged groan and stretched. There was something about his back, Greg thought - pale and perfectly smooth. It was always the first place to pick up a shine of sweat. He was white-pale, and as tempting as untouched snow. He was beautiful. Greg had never adored him more. A firmer stroke; a cry, soft, stifled into the pillows. Myke's gorgeous back flexed beneath his hands. He answered the wordless plea for more and drove himself gently deeper, glorying as Myke gasped with it, desperate hands fisting at the pillows.

Greg decided he could watch this all day.

"Please..." Myke breathed to him. He placed a hand between Myke's shoulders, pinning him gently to the bed. Myke whimpered, tightening around him and grinding desperately back against his cock. Greg couldn't fight a groan; his eyes fluttered shut with the sensation of it. He eased himself deeper still.

"Oh, God... " Myke whimpered. "Please... don't tease me..."

With six months of practice, Greg had become an expert in reading the rhythm of Mycroft's breathing; the pitch at which he moaned; the intensity of the shivers that passed along his spine. He knew when something was just right. He knew when something was desperately, barely, just not enough. He also knew how to idle tantalisingly between the two.

Twice, he coaxed Myke to the brink.

Twice, he let him cool back down - delighted by the slew of blasphemous reproach that it earned him both times.

Mycroft was on the verge of disembowelling a pillow when Greg finally worked him back to the sharper, white peaks of pleasure - steady strokes that almost completely left his body each time, deep and relentless and firm.

"Don't stop," Myke begged as he was fucked - seething, clawing at the pillow, writhing back against Greg in despair. "Don't stop, don't stop…"

Greg knew better than to dare. Teasing twice was fun; three times wasn't worth his life. He dug his fingers into Myke's hips and began to slam into him, hard and fast and without stopping.

Myke let out a cry so desperate it made Yuri drop a mug on the floor below.
The security agent paused, listening sharply for a moment through the ceiling.

At the ensuing "God fucking damn it, Greg...", he went back to drying-up.

Ten minutes later, Greg too dried up a mug.

He filled it with coffee, sat down at the kitchen table, and contemplated the mobile phone now waiting for him beside the fruit bowl. As he thought, he passed a hand back through the post-coital mess of his hair. His forehead was still damp with sweat.

The calm that came after coming - especially like that - would make this easier. Mycroft was still in the shower.

Greg picked up the phone, scrolled slowly through his contacts to the name he needed, and hit call.

Rachel, with two young children, had been out of bed for four hours now.

"Hey! How's your weekend?" she chirped as she recognised his voice, bright as a blackbird. "You getting up to anything fun?"

Greg contemplated both his coffee and his Rothmans. He reached, quietly, for the Rothmans.

"Dinner tonight," he said, as he lit a cigarette. His collarbone twinged a little. His own fault, he thought - but well worth it. "I'm being taken out on the town, would you believe?"

"Ooh," his sister soothed. "Somewhere fancy?"

Greg smiled, putting down the lighter. "Yes, apparently… it's - a French name... I forget. All I know is that everyone who's anyone eats there, and I'm not to freak out if I recognise anybody famous at the next table."

"Oh my God, really?" Rachel said. "What sort of famous?"

"A-list, Myke says. It's… sort of my... 'presentation' to his circles... all the movers and the shakers. Got to let them have a good look at me."

"Wow - so you're - …?"

And oh God, what was that note in her voice? That hesitation? Greg didn't want to hear it. He didn't want to think it.

"So you're coming out, then?" she said. "You're making it all official?"

"Yeah, squirt… it's - official." Greg smoked in silence for a moment, hating himself. He was listening to her like a criminal, he realised. He was about to test her like they were sitting in the incident room, checking her for reactions, and he knew it - he hated it. He hated himself for it. "There's… a reason. I wanted to ring you and warn you first."

"Warn me?" she said. He heard her pause. "What about?"

"Myke reckons he can handle the papers, if they hear about it... but there's nothing anyone can do about the internet. If we're lucky, nobody will care. I don't know if we'll be lucky though. Not with Sherlock such hot property right now." He steadied himself, listening for her response. "Someone… got into my phone, Rach."
"I… don't understand," she said.

"They took a load of photos off it. Me and Myke. Nothing weird, nothing most of the population hasn't done." Greg dragged on his cigarette, quiet. "They want money. We're - being blackmailed. And we're saying no."

"Oh…" The single breathed sound was full of everything; Greg couldn't make out exactly what was there. If he tried, he could hear guilt - but he could also hear shock, and pity, and sadness. There was too much in it. "Oh, G - I'm so sorry… that's awful. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said. He paused, testing her again. "Somebody won't be, when Myke finds them."

Rachel hesitated. "I hope he does," she said at last. "That's - horrible, G. I can't believe someone's done that to you."

"Probably someone who thought I'd fall apart, if it got out that I'm gay." Greg flicked the ash from his cigarette. "Didn't realise what Myke had done for me… how close we are."

"So it… might hit the papers?"

"Sherlock's well known now, so there's a chance it'll spread. 'Brother of famous detective cops a feel'. You know the sort of thing. Myke has enemies who'll happily agitate it, so…" He paused. "I just thought I'd warn you."

"You - didn't have to warn me, G. It's fine. I'm just sorry someone thinks they can do that." Her voice was full of sorrow. "Did you say - someone got into your phone? Hacked it?"

"Hacking doesn't happen that often, apparently. More often this stuff gets stolen from online accounts - cloud storage things - or just from some grubby-fingered chancer who knows your passcode."

"Right… so - do you know who got into your account?"

Interesting, he thought, that she'd assumed that.

Or wanted him to think she had.

*Please, squirt. Please don't let it be you. Anyone else in the world but you.*

"Honestly, Rach, I don't have that much to do with the internet… don't even have a laptop anymore. Cindy took mine when she left. Looks like someone got into my phone manually."

"Oh God… so - someone at work?"

Greg closed his eyes, the cigarette burning silently between his fingers. "Suppose that's the only place it could be."

He dragged on the last of it, stubbed it out, and said,

"Either way… just tipping you off. Don't google me for a while."

She made a little sound. For a second, he wasn't quite sure what it was. Then there came a second little sound, and he realised.

It was a snort of laughter.
"G, you… shouldn't take dirty pics," she chided. "You're meant to be clever. Everyone knows dirty pics'll get you into trouble."

He found himself smiling. Just the sound of her laughter made his heart tug.

"Heat of the moment," he confessed. "We were young. Reckless. Learnt our lesson now, believe me."

"What sort of - …"

"Ah..." Greg said. "A variety."

"Jesus… is it that bad?"

"No, that's not - a euphemism, Rach. It's nothing filthy. Nothing you need a hoist for, or a mop standing by. Just… you know." He hesitated, grinning a little. "Friday night. Try everything once, and all that."

Her laughter rang down the phone; he felt his own heart ringing with it, too.

"You've got two kids, Rach," he grinned. "You've been there too."

"Sure," his sister said. Something new had entered her voice, he realised. It was gone before he could give chase. "So, you're… going to be shown off to all Myke's posh friends, are you?" she said. "D'you need to go buy a new shirt? I could come with."

Greg found himself kindling a smile once more.

"No, I've… got something. Myke's sorted it out." From what he'd heard, the people he'd be encountering tonight would not be impressed by a new shirt from Debenhams. It was a rather more exclusive affair than that. "I promise I'll ring if I meet Johnny Depp."

"Oh my God," she mumbled. "Please do. We can share him."

"I'm - ..." He'd almost said 'a happily married man' to her, and laughed at his own internal mistake, reaching for his coffee with a grin. "... - attached, thanks. So are you. And he's got nothing on Myke, so…"

"God, you're so cute..." she crooned. "Okay. M'gonna have to go… washing machine's done - enjoy your posh date - remember to curtsey, and cutlery goes from the outside in. Don't slurp your soup. Love you."

"Love you, squirt. 'Bye."

He hung up - half-smiling, half-sad. He placed the phone to rest on the table beside him.

The second task was now over.

Only tonight left to go.

"Who has nothing on me?" inquired a voice from the door.

Greg's sadness flickered away. He smiled, looking round in his chair.

"Nobody has," he said, as Myke idled into the kitchen - completely naked, damp-haired, and with a love bite on his shoulder the size of a half crown.
As Greg reached for him, coaxing him to sit on his lap, Myke protested in the strongest possible terms.

"Your collarbone," he said, "is still healing… and your rib is barely - "

"I'll have double painkillers," Greg said. He cajoled Myke at last to settle down on his knee, arms looping carefully around his shoulders. "See? M'still in one piece..."

Mycroft smiled, reluctant and bemused. "I'm... hurting you."

"Does this look like pain?" Greg soothed. He nuzzled into Myke's neck, his heart as happy as a songbird inside his chest. "Remind me where we're going tonight. Pizza Express, wasn't it?"

"La Fleur de Verre," Mycroft murmured, eyes glittering. He soothed his fingers gently over the back of Greg's neck. "At The Elrington. For eight."

"I hope you announced our attendance under high society events in today's Times," Greg said, playful. "I don't want all the plebs there with us to think I'm anything less than a huge fucking deal."

Mycroft's eyes lit from within.

"You are not to say 'fucking' tonight," he warned. "You are not to use any variant of that word."

"Not even quietly?"

"No. You're going to behave very nicely."

"But what if something tastes really good?"

"Then you can say it to me later," Mycroft murmured, grinning. "Not while we're there. You're not to blow your nose on the tablecloth either, or address the sommelier as 'mate'."

"Point out which one he is," Greg said, "and I'll make sure not to call him that. Got a temper, has he?"

"He'll be the one choosing our wine." Mycroft gazed into Greg's eyes, wild and full of joy. He placed a kiss at the top of Greg's nose. "I'll make sure you are alright. I promise."

"And I'll do my best not to embarrass you."

"You shan't." Mycroft smiled a little, stroking his jaw. "How is Rachel?"

"Fine," Greg said. "I've… warned her what might be coming."

"What did she say?"

"A few things. All… nice, normal things." Greg hesitated, glancing up into Myke's eyes. "Promise me this is going to work," he said. "It's - going to end it. All of it. And we can just live our life together."

Mycroft's chest expanded against his own.

"I promise," he said. "Everything will work out for the best. Until then, we take matters one thing at a time… tonight, dinner. Let us concentrate on that. And then the rest is just the rest."
Nerves began to kick in at around four. Greg had cheese on toast to fill his stomach. He ate it on the sofa as he watched a few minutes of *Deal Or No Deal*, suspecting his evening meal would be taken under slightly different circumstances.

Mycroft spent the afternoon getting work done, growing perceptibly more serious as the hours whiled by.

At half past six, he herded Greg into the shower with the instruction to wash behind his ears. Greg was almost sure he was joking. He did it anyway just in case, dried himself off and shaved with care using his fragile right arm, listening to Mycroft lay out the contents of a suit bag on the bed.

"Alright?" he checked, as he entered the bedroom in a towel.

Mycroft discreetly inspected his jaw. "Perfect," he said. "I have made a sartorial decision for you."

"Right," Greg said.

"The restaurant operates a smart dress code for dinner."

"No trainers?"

Mycroft winced a little. "There's - rather more to it than that." He indicated the various pieces of clothing now laid out on the bed. "Suffice to say, jacket and tie are optional. I was thinking a jacket for you, but no tie. Nobody is going to believe that you are the Eton-educated, horses-and-hounds type, and nor would I ever wish them to. I'd like you to feel comfortable just as you are."

Greg found himself more than a little relieved, gazing at the outfit laid out for him on the bed.

"Wow," he said. "I - worried you'd have me in a black coat with tails… white tie…"

Mycroft despaired briefly. "You - would never wear a white tie with a tailcoat. Tailcoats are morning dress. White tie is formal evening wear. And neither of them would be going to a restaurant on a Saturday night."

"Duh, of course. How forgetful of me."

Mycroft took the towel off him, regarding him with fond reproach. "Let's start with underwear… then we'll handle the other layers."

"What are you wearing?" Greg asked, as Mycroft tossed him a pair of boxer shorts from the drawer.

"Pinstripe," Mycroft said. "Dark red for the accents... I want to project authority."

"But - dark blue for me?"

"I'm not being so obvious as to match us." Mycroft's expression flickered for a moment. "I... also rather like you in dark blue. Boxers, please. First things first."

Mycroft was quiet in the car. Greg sat beside him, quiet as well. They stroked each other's fingers as they wound through central London, watching the first of the evening's lights go by.

"You look handsome," Greg offered at last, nervous.

Mycroft smiled a little, glancing at him. "Thank you. You are, too... even with the shoulder brace."
That shirt is my every teenage dream."

Greg smirked, looking down at their joined fingers. His midnight blue silk cuff was nestled alongside Myke's starched-white cotton, cufflinks glinting just where they should be.

"Do we - need a safe word?" Greg asked.

Mycroft flashed him a look of brief concern.

"I mean," Greg said, "if I'm doing something to embarrass you… if you want me to shut up or stop."

"You're not going to embarrass me," Mycroft murmured. "You're going to have dinner with me."

"I know, but… this is your world." Greg hesitated, reading his lover's expression closely.

"Politicians. The rich and famous. The glitterati. I'm just… some upstart from the East End. I don't know how all this works."

After a moment, Mycroft put an arm around his shoulders. He drew him close.

"How this works," he said, "is that I am very much in love with you - that you are my partner, and I am prouder to have your love than I am of anything else in my life. The world revolves around you. So help me, it will accommodate you just as you are. You cannot embarrass me. Just… have dinner with me. Let the world see what it sees."

"And don't call the - wine man 'mate'."

"The sommelier," Mycroft said, fighting a smile. "Nor should you call him 'the wine man'."

"How about you talk to the wine man?"

"Agreed." The car pulled to a stop; Mycroft breathed in, steeling himself. "These… people are going to see me fucked on the internet soon," he mumbled.

Greg gripped his hand.

"So let them see you happy," he said. Myke's eyes lifted to his. "Let them see you're in love. Then it's not… 'fucked on the internet'. It's an outrage made against a great guy who's got a right to a private life, and his happy bit of East End rough who loves him to pieces."

Mycroft's expression softened. He smiled, wrapping their fingers tight.

"You are not East End rough," he said. "You're magnificent."

Greg smiled back at him. "Prove it," he said.

Mycroft's eyes flared.

"Thank you, Jameson," he said, as he opened the car door.

They stepped out onto the street. Greg's heart began to pound in his ears. The Elrington was so fucking enormous he could barely look at it, with a colossal arched entranceway lit from below. It made Mycroft's multi-million-pound home in Belgravia look like a cowshed. The place was so posh that Greg felt his soul wither in immediate disgrace.

Mycroft, moving around the car to his side, laid a supportive hand on his back.
"The restaurant has a side entrance," he murmured. "This way."

Even as Greg panicked in silence, concentrating on the sensation of putting one foot in front of the other, Mycroft seemed to be gaining in strength. Something calm had come over him - something collected.

This was Mycroft's profession, Greg realised. It was what he was best at.

Greg decided to trust in that.

Mycroft opened the door of the restaurant for him, giving him a reassuring smile.

"No last minute uncertainties?" he checked.

Just twenty-four hours ago, they'd been sitting in The Red Lion. Two worlds, Greg thought; each as important as the other. Mycroft had endured all the fascinated attention of his workmates. Now, he could endure some scrutiny for Myke.

"Not one," he said, found a smile, and stepped inside.

A man in a crisp navy suit came forwards to meet Mycroft. Greg took a discreet glance at his badge and discovered he was the Deputy Manager.

"Mr Holmes. How good to see you again."

"Luke… thank you for fitting us in."

"Not a problem, Mr Holmes. And Inspector Lestrade - it's a pleasure."

He extended a hand. Still petrified, but reassured by what looked like genuine friendliness, Greg smiled and shook the man's hand.

"Let me show you to your table," the Deputy Manager said. "We've been told you have a sweet tooth, inspector. Tonight we have a cherry and lime soufflé you might take rather an interest in."

Greg was almost glad he'd come. "Really?"

"Mm... and a caramelia mousse," the Deputy Manager said, leading them through to a dining room that was at once cavernous and intimate - an impressive wood-panelled room in the round, with discreet chandeliers, full-length windows that showed the darkening hotel grounds beyond, and the supremely tasteful lighting of truly luxurious surroundings. "My team are expertly trained to help narrow down difficult choices," the Deputy Manager added, smiling. "Do call on them if they can be of service."

As they made their way between the tables of other diners, Greg made the mistake of glancing at some of the faces. His heart lurched as he recognised a Premiership footballer, halfway through his salmon starter - then two tables away, the Foreign Secretary and his family. He swallowed, unnerved, telling himself he was fine.

Mycroft, ever protective, appeared at his side.

His hand rested on Greg's back, guiding him gently and without fear between the tables.

"May I show you something interesting?" he murmured.

Greg tilted his head towards Myke, a little surprised. "Sure."
"A piece of modern high society etiquette," Mycroft said to him, in conspiratorial undertones. "Exclusive to here. Rather fascinating… and a sign of the times. Note the candles."

Greg glanced, carefully, at the tables they were passing - arrangements of candles that at first meant nothing to him: some tall and thin, some discreet clusters of tealights. Some of them were shorter, gathered in trios of delicate glass roses at the centres of tables.

"Tealights," Mycroft said, quietly, "for business… a more functional relationship. Less intimate. Tapered candles for larger groups and families. The light fills the larger space better… illuminates the diners' faces equally."

Greg's eyes skipped to the next table-for-two that they passed - a recognisable BBC journalist, having dinner with a man over a trio of glass flowers. He was stroking her left hand, rubbing her diamond ring with his thumb.

Greg cottoned on.

"Roses for couples," he said, quietly.

"Mm," Mycroft murmured. "Once, they were only ever found upon a table shared by a married man and a woman in possession of a single surname. But now…"

They had reached their table.

"As requested, Mr Holmes, by a window," the Deputy Manager said.

Greg glanced, holding his breath.

In the centre of their table were three glass roses. The candles within them were shining - tiny, pale gold flames.

As Greg's heart expanded to fill the size of the room, Mycroft drew out a chair for him.

Carefully Greg took a seat. He didn't dare to look around and see if anyone had noticed them. He just concentrated on sitting down without knocking the cutlery everywhere.

When he was safely seated, the Deputy Manager handed Greg a menu.

"Might I bring you a drink while you decide?" he said, directing the question neatly to Mycroft. "We have a magnificent Château Léoville Poyférre at the moment, if the night is young - or perhaps the Domaine de Chevalier, if you'd prefer something fresher. Pessac-Léognan, 2006. Rather crisp."

Mycroft smiled a little at Greg's expression. "Red or white," he translated.

Greg gave a nervous grin. "White?" he tried.

"The Domaine de Chevalier," said the Deputy Manager, serving Greg a discreet smile. "An excellent choice, sir. Katerina shall be with you shortly. Please do enjoy your evening - La Fleur de Verre is delighted to host you."

As he moved away across the dining room, Greg looked nervously across the table at Mycroft. His partner smiled back at him, apparently enchanted by something.

Greg unleashed a shaky breath.
"That's - expensive wine, isn't it?" he said, keeping his voice down. "I heard numbers."

"Alternately, I could buy you another car," Mycroft said. His eyes glittered. "I suspect you rather need expensive wine right now."

"Oh, God..." Greg found himself frightened to touch anything in case he broke it. "This is the poshest place I've been inside in my life."

"Including me?" Mycroft murmured.

Greg snorted with laughter - he stifled it quickly, mortified, and cast a nervous glance left and right. Nobody seemed to have noticed. "You can't say that here," he breathed.

"Why?" Mycroft inquired, smiling slowly. "Am I at risk of relaxing you?"

Greg grinned a little, still flushed. "Sorry, I'm just... wow, this is crazy."

"You're doing magnificently," Mycroft assured him. "I am unspeakably proud of you."

"All I've done is walk in and sit down."

"And all that remains is to stay sitting, and have dinner with me." Mycroft regarded him with warm eyes. "Will that be alright?"

"I think so," Greg said. He bit his lip a little. "You - said this was my... 'presentation'. So... it'll be known that we're a couple now?"

"It will."

"I - don't see how. Everyone's just having dinner, aren't they?"

"Take a look around," Mycroft murmured.

Greg did so, as discreetly as he could.

"Do you recognise them?" Mycroft asked.

"Um... one or two. Famous types. The rest are... just ordinary people, I think."

"I recognise every face in this room," his lover said. "And they recognise me. Those 'ordinary people' are government officials, high society figures, or people of other significant influence... ambassadors. Diplomats. Civil servants. Every one of them noted our arrival. They will have noted our roses, too. All of the work is now done. A hundred mental dossiers about me have just been updated - with you."

Greg smiled a little, unsure if he was unnerved or thrilled. It felt like a good measure of both.

"It's... that easy?" he said.

A waiter was approaching their table with a bottle of white wine wrapped in a snowy-white cloth.

"That easy," Mycroft murmured. "You are no longer my secret. Simply mine."

Something soft settled in Greg's chest. "That's... fine by me," he said. "Feels good to be yours."

The waiter presented the bottle to Mycroft, who glanced over the label and gave a gracious nod.
"Shall we take a look at the menu?" he said to Greg. "I believe I spotted a fillet of Buccleuch beef somewhere… but then the morel and baby spinach ragoût sounds interesting, too."

As Greg was handed a glass of wine by the waiter, he felt another knot of tension unwind in his chest. This was… nice, he realised. Mycroft's world. It was good just to feel a part of it - to know that Myke wanted him here. Not a pastime; not a plaything. A partner, sitting across from him at a table with glass roses. When the world thought of Mycroft Holmes, they would think of Greg as well.

It might not always be easy. When the photos leaked, there would be difficulties - and when his dad found out, there would be difficulties. Not everybody would be supportive. Not everybody would understand.

But somehow, it didn't seem so bad.

Mycroft's light lifted every shadow.

Greg glanced at Mycroft's hand, resting casually on the tablecloth as he studied the menu.

He reached out - cautiously, ready to be batted aside if this was not okay. With tentative care he slid his fingers gently over Myke's - ghosting across his palm, and over his wrist - coming to rest just inside the cuff of his shirt.

Myke glanced up from his menu in quiet surprise. He looked at Greg's hand, easing tenderly into his own.

A smile crossed his face; he slipped his fingers gently between Greg's.

"I love you," Greg said, quietly. "I mean it."

Humour touched Mycroft's gaze as he played with Greg's fingers. "We were joking until now?"

"No, really… I - mean it." Greg swallowed a little. "I - want to do this forever."

"You were petrified when you walked in… now you don't want to leave."

"Not - this," Greg said, glancing at the opulent surroundings. "I mean… this."

He squeezed Myke's hand.

Myke's smile illuminated his heart.

"I'm very glad," Myke murmured to him, softly. "I'm… sure you're aware of how important you are to me by now. Your place in my life. It's - reassuring to hear you feel the same."

"Spell it out for me," Greg said. He smiled. "Just for my... mental dossier."

Mycroft swirled the words around his mouth for a few moments, testing them like the wine. As he spoke, his eyes shone as bright as the candles.

"Greg, I… think it's quite apparent that you and I shall share a surname one day. We both know the only question is when."

Greg's heart heaved. He gripped Myke's hand, hard, feeling the entire room and everything in it rush around him - the colours jewel bright, the whole place full of stars.
Holy fuck. That's my husband. There he was, watching Greg with perfect love across a restaurant table, their fingers entwined - glasses roses glittering in the candlelight. This was actually happening.

It was really, truly happening.

"One day," he said, his heart still whirling and wild.

"One day," Mycroft murmured. He squeezed Greg's hand. "I - see no reason to rush."

"No," Greg said. "No, that'd be…” Sarah would be flowergirl; his sister would wear a huge fascinator and cry a river. Something classic for the wedding car. Honeymoon on a beach somewhere. Palm trees. Lie in the sand all day; kiss in the ocean as the sun went down. Come back tanned every inch from head to foot. Holy fuck. "... crazy… so we'll just, y'know... take it easy."

Mycroft's smile curved at the edges, his eyes shining. He knew exactly what Greg was thinking.

"Not before a year," he said.

"No," said Greg. "Definitely not."

"And not at Christmas. I'm not marking the anniversary of having to give you four fingers of scotch at half past seven in the morning to avert a panic attack."

"I'd never fu-..." Greg fizzled out, quickly changed word, and finished, "...ound myself in that situation with another bloke before."

Mycroft's eyes glittered wildly as they surveyed him across the table.

It was going to be a good night, Greg thought. This place was a lot more fun that he'd hoped it would be.

"Have you chosen your food yet?" Mycroft asked him, eyebrows lifting.

"There's going to be food?" Greg said. "I'd nearly forgotten."
The boss had had a good weekend. Sally knew that grin by now.

"Morning," she said, handing him a flat white as he arrived in the office at twenty to nine. The place was almost empty so far. Nobody liked to be here early on a Monday. "Had a development on the Wilson case. Fingerprint match with the smudge on the kitchen window - the brother was definitely round there at some point. Shall we bring him in? Rattle his cage?"

"God, yeah," he said. "I've not interrogated anyone in weeks. Fantastic start to a Monday."

"And they've made an arrest over in Southbank - mugging on Saturday night. Fits the profile of the one we had two weeks ago. Might be connected."

"Bring them all in," Lestrade said, unlocking the door of his office. "I'll get practising my hard bastard copper face."

"Might be tricky… you look like you've had a good couple of days, skip."

"Do I?" he said, with a grin. "Must just be the light in here. 'Scuse me. My phone's ringing. I'll be out in a second."

Sally made a couple of calls - dispatching uniform to round up DI Lestrade's entertainment for the day, checking a few quick details with forensics. Barely a minute had gone by before her DI was back.

"Forensics are e-mailing the full run-down to you now," she told him, scribbling a note on a pad to remind herself for later. "We can hit him hard with the facts, see if he's got a new story to tell us… should I call legal to - "

"Sal," Greg said, quietly.

Sally looked up in surprise.

Her DI had suddenly aged ten years. He was still holding his mobile phone in his hand, the screen lit with a muted call.

"Greg," she said, startled. "What's - "

"I'm… going to have to go," he said. "I can't explain right now. I'll text when I can."

Sally felt the colour run from her face. She stood up, shakily, staring at him in alarm.

"Is it your collarbone?" she said - though he didn't seem to be in pain. She knew what pain looked like.

Greg hesitated. "Tell them that," he said. There was something impossibly strange in his face - like he was trying to see through her, trying to read something right off the back of her skull. "It's... not you, Sal. Is it?"

Sally searched his face, bewildered. "What's not me?"

And, to her amazement, he hugged her. It was over before she'd even really registered his arms had gone around her. He held her tight, just for a second or two, then let her go.
"Tell them I caught my shoulder in the lift door," he said. "I'm going to have it checked out."

"Okay," she said, tentatively. "Greg, are you…"

"I'll be fine." He started to leave. "Don't - watch them, Sal. Don't go looking for them."

"Don't - watch what?" she said.

As he hurried from the department, she saw him raise his mobile phone back to his ear, quickly unmuting the call.

"I'm on my way," he said into the phone. The door banged open as he pushed through it. "How long ago were they posted?"

"No more than an hour…"

Myke's voice was strained. Greg took the back stairs two at a time, praying he didn't run into anyone he knew.

"I'm afraid to say the videos seem to have been scattered across a number of amateur porn sites initially… then, they seem to have had the bright idea of one of Sherlock's fan sites. The photos were uploaded in bulk to a message board, at which point my team picked up on it. I've just chaired the most excruciating staff meeting of my life."

"Christ..." Greg hesitated, suspecting he knew the answer to his own question. "Can't you just - shut the fan site down? Stop it spreading?"

"It might have been possible for about five minutes. Unfortunately, my people are not the only ones who monitor my online presence."

"What d'you mean?"

"A number of my enemies keep a close eye on Sherlock's activities as well… it seems the more attentive ones have already spotted the photographs. They're working to circulate them faster than my specialists can shut them down. It's - happening, Greg."

"Right," Greg knew it was nothing they hadn't expected. All the same, now it was actually beginning, it made his chest feel horrifically tight. He pushed through the doors at the bottom of the stairwell, heading for the staff car park. His heart hammered in his ears. "What do we do?"

"Jameson is on his way," Mycroft said. "He will take you to Heathrow."

Greg stopped dead, his hand halfway to the security code panel.

"Heathrow?" he repeated. "Why - what to -"

"There is a British Airways flight to Berlin, leaving Terminal Five just before eleven," Mycroft said. "I will do my best to be on it with you… though I need to take care of things here first. Sophie will meet you at Terminal Five and get you boarded."

"Myke, I - I don't have any luggage, any clothes -Berlin -"

"Sophie is sorting it now. Everything will be there." Mycroft already sounded as if he hadn't slept for days. "Greg, I… can't predict how this is going to escalate. The photos are spreading more quickly than I'd anticipated. Perhaps this is an initial flurry, and then we'll discover that nobody
gives a toss about what Sherlock Holmes's brother likes most about policemen. Or perhaps it will prove to be of greater interest to the wider public than we imagined. Either way I will deal with this, but I need to know that you are safe, that you are out of the country, and that you are far from the reach of even the longest lenses. I have us booked into a hotel in Berlin. We will be guaranteed privacy there, and I can monitor the situation as it develops."

Greg could barely breathe. He found himself staring at the security keypad, his brain empty, his head ringing with panic.

"I shall be there, Greg," Mycroft promised.

*Christ. This is my life now.* It was a practice run of 'for better, for worse', Greg thought. If they could handle this, they could handle anything.

"Alright," he heard himself say, even as fear tried to cram every other thought out of his head. "Please be on the plane."

"I will try. Look for Sophie at Terminal Five. She'll take excellent care of you."

"Myke, I'm - rattled. I'm worried where all this is going to end."

"Just get yourself onto that flight, and I will be with you soon," Mycroft said. "I love you. Everything is going to be fine."

Greg punched in the code to the keypad, telling himself it was true.

"I love you too," he said, pushed through the doors to the staff car park, and found a familiar black car easing into place at the bottom of the steps.

"Is that Jameson?" Mycroft said, as Greg lunged for the door.

"Yep - he's here, he's got me..." Greg clambered quickly into the car, wincing as his collarbone gave him a sharp and indignant reminder it was still broken. "Ow - Jesus, my fucking shoulder - ..."

"Terminal Five," Mycroft said in his ear - and hung up.

Greg slammed the car door. They set off at once.

"Heathrow, sir?" Jameson said.

"Yep," said Greg. He collapsed back against the seat, panting, and lifted a hand to massage his stinging collarbone. "Christ, Archie..." he said. "I don't know a thing about Berlin..."

"I know that Bayern Munich result back in February was a disgrace, sir... a five-one thrashing for us, then a bloody draw against Berlin?"

Jameson snorted, pulled out of the staff car park, and turned in the direction of Heathrow.

"You couldn't make it up, sir," he said.

Greg might have struggled to spot the petite, trimly-attired figure of Sophie waiting for him at Terminal Five, were it not for the solid brick wall of towering Russian security guard standing beside her.

"Yuri," he said, hurrying over to them through the crowd. Sophie's face opened with relief as she
saw him. "What are you doing here? Why aren't you with Mycroft?"

"Mr Holmes sends me to escort you both to Berlin, sir." Yuri took his coat and his briefcase from him. "He wishes to know you are safe."

"Oh, God… he said he'd try to be here..."

"I have no doubt he will try, sir. For now, we must take you through security."

Sophie had a sheaf of documentation ready in her hands - passports, boarding passes, hotel reservations - and two sizeable suitcases waiting nearby.

"We should reach Berlin before one PM," she said. "Yuri, would you…?"

Yuri moved the suitcases as easily as if they were empty. They hurried through the crowd towards bag check, Sophie's heels clicking swiftly across the hard floor. Greg checked his phone as they moved. He had no messages.

In the chaos of customs and security, time seemed to lurch forward. Before Greg knew it, they were waiting at the gate and eleven o'clock was inching painfully closer. Mycroft's assistants, used to international travel, absorbed themselves in checking e-mails and a discarded copy of The Times.

For Greg, there was nothing to do but pace.

He found he couldn't look at the newspaper in Yuri's hands. He didn't imagine "two men have sex" would be riotous enough to make the front page of The Times - but then, "government official in blackmail sex scandal" was always worth a read. He'd done it himself. He was about to pay the price for it.

As the gate suddenly opened, and the other passengers began to board, Greg stopped his pacing with an immediate stab of fear.

"Wait," he said, his stomach lurching. "Is it time?"

Yuri picked up the carry-on bags, as Sophie flashed one last time through their boarding passes.

"It's time, inspector," she said.

"But - ..." Greg's heart began to pound. "What about Mycroft? He said he'd - ..."

There came the flurried bleeping nearby of an unfamiliar ringtone. Yuri, frowning, reached inside his jacket.

He answered the call with a swipe of his thumb. "Mr Holmes?"

Greg's chest contracted. He watched Yuri's face crease with a little confusion as he listened, then replied in his mother tongue.

He and Mycroft conversed in swift Russian for a few minutes. Greg understood almost none of it - catching, once or twice, the phrase 'Inspector Lestrade'.

At last, Yuri gave a stern and final nod.

"Da, Mr Holmes. Ya eto sdelayu." He hung up.
"Where is he?" Greg said at once.

Yuri regarded him with apology - then gave a sideways flash of the same to Sophie.

"I must go, sir," he husked. "Mr Holmes has important task for me. He says he will not be with you on the flight, but he will meet you in Berlin. Sophie is to take you to Hotel am Steinplatz and to look after you there."

Greg's heart fell through his feet. "He's safe though… right?"

"Yes, sir. He is very safe. He asks me to give you his apologies."

Sophie's hand rested gently on Greg's arm. "Inspector, we... should go."

Greg hesitated, staring back the way they'd come from baggage check - as if Mycroft would appear there, if only Greg looked for him: the coat, the umbrella, that perfectly calm expression that said everything would be okay.

"I - …" Something gave way in Greg's chest; he couldn't stand here wishing. The time for that was over. "Alright. Let's... get going."

As Yuri handed Sophie her beige leather carry-on bag, he said something to her gently in Russian.

She shot him a little frown, and mumbled a stilted reply. They avoided each other's eyes.

Any other day, Greg would have smiled.

"Say goodbye properly," he told them. "I'll wait inside the gate."

Ten minutes later, Greg found himself sitting on a plane. Sophie was beside him, typing quickly on her tablet. The colour was still a little high in her cheeks. Her expression as she'd joined him inside the gate had reminded him desperately of Myke.

"D'you ever…" he began, as the safety announcements were given - then shook his head. "Probably not."

She glanced sideways at him, her eyes round. "Go on."

"D'you ever find yourself just thinking… wow. This is - genuinely happening to me right now."

She smiled a little, looking back down at her tablet.

"More often than one might suppose," she said.

"How d'you handle it?"

She thought about it for a while. "I do what I can," she said eventually. "And I trust in Mr Holmes."

Greg rested his head back against his seat, trying to take the advice to heart.

He couldn't help but wonder where Mycroft was now - what he was doing. 'Taking care of things', he'd said… it could mean anything. The urgent recall of Yuri had put a bubble of worry in Greg's chest that would not leave - but there was nothing he could do about it now. The doors were sealed. The plane was taking off. Myke had told him to make the flight, and he had.
They weren't playing in Greg's world anymore. This was Mycroft's world; it was Myke who knew the rules.

Greg sighed a little, shutting his eyes as he recalled their perfectly ordinary morning. Weetabix and the radio; some discussion about lamb casserole for dinner. They were running out of toothpaste. Now he was fleeing the country.

'For better, for worse', he thought.

There was nothing left to do but trust.

He just hoped to God that Mycroft was okay.

As the car pulled to a stop outside an address in Croydon, Mycroft distantly registered the sound of an alert on his phone.

He didn't need to check to know what it was.

Ten to eleven - the plane would be leaving.

He curled his fingers into his palm, exhaling slowly.

The greatest concern was now dealt with.

The photographs were continuing to spread - in some corners of the web, at frightening speed. A number of his rivals were busily agitating their proliferation, with an imaginative zeal that he almost had to admire. It was only a matter of time before someone made the jump to a journalist. "Have you seen this thing going round online…? It's Sherlock Holmes's brother… people are sharing them like crazy. Isn't it awful?" At that point Mycroft needed Greg out of the country, behind a locked door, where nobody with ill intentions could get anywhere near him. He would not have Greg suffer a flicker of distress more than he had to, nor the barbed inquiries of some grubby-minded hack.

But everything was in action now.

The plane would be in the air soon. With his heart secure, Mycroft could let his head proceed without fear.

At least, he thought, with less fear.

He sat in silence for a moment in the back seat of the car, contemplating what was about to occur.

"Sir?" Jameson said at last, unsure.

Mycroft put an end to his stalling. This has gone on long enough. He twisted open the handle of the door.

"Get comfortable, Jameson," he said. "I might be some time."

As he walked quietly up the path, he checked his phone.

A message from Yuri, confirming that his assignment was now ready to commence as planned; an email from Sophie, assuring him that she and Greg were both onboard; and an update from Mycroft's technical specialists, with no good news for him, but with the final confirmation that he needed to proceed: a credit card transaction made four years ago. The address and the amount were
exact. It was true, and he should have known it from the start.

Mycroft pocketed the phone.

He steeled his resolve and knocked, briskly, on the door.

It was some time before it was answered.

Through an open window on the second floor, he could hear a vacuum being switched off. He waited, estimating the time it would take to walk down the stairs, as he ran his tongue quietly around his back teeth.

Finally, the front door opened.

Rachel appeared in the gap - her hair in a messy ponytail, her cheeks a little grey. She looked a lot more like her brother when she was tired.

"Oh!" she said, surprised.

Mycroft pressed his lips together. "Might I have a word?" he asked.
Wait

They arrived in Berlin in the early afternoon. Sophie conversed with a taxi driver in fluent German, who drove them half an hour across the city to the sweeping architectural glory of the Hotel am Steinplatz. Its elegant Art Nouveau frontage was the crowning glory of a leafy Charlottenburg square, surrounded on all sides by high buildings and restaurants. The lobby resembled an exhibit from the ritziest modern art gallery; the staff who took their bags were paragons of service.

In the opulent black-and-cream surroundings of the premier suite, Greg then began the longest afternoon of his entire life to date.

For much of it he smoked, pacing from window to window and looking down on the square below, watching in silence as the cars and the people came and went. The mirror detailing on the walls and furniture reflected back to him shards of his own disquiet - tense shoulders, dark glances and his greying expression.

Sophie, working at a table through in the lounge, was good enough not to mention his unease. She did not try to lighten it, either. She just let him pace. At about three o'clock, Greg came to the realisation that she was used to tense silence from Mycroft. It did not settle him in the least. His hesitant texts went unanswered, and the hours crawled by on their fingertips.

He didn't want to imagine what Mycroft was doing - but it was almost impossible not to.

Just before four, the phone in his hand began to ring.

Greg glanced down at the screen.

Incoming Call from John Watson.

Not the name he'd hoped to see - but right now, everything seemed important. He answered it with a flash of his thumb, lifting the phone numbly to his ear.

"Hello…?"

"Hi Greg," said John. The breezy tone was not nearly enough to fool a Scotland Yard detective. Something was wrong. "We're, ah... trying to get in touch with Mycroft, actually - but he doesn't seem to be answering his phone... are you with him?"

Greg's heart thumped. "No," he said, watching a taxi pulling up in the square. A woman in a polka dot scarf got out. He frowned, looking away. "I'm... in Berlin."

"Oh - right," said John. "D'you know where he is at all?"

"I wish I did. What's wrong?" Greg said. "Or... do I not want to know?"

"We've, um... just had a slight problem with my blog."

Greg knew at once what had happened. He took a careful breath, readying himself to hear it.

"The photos," he said.

"Ah - yes. I'm not really sure what happened... there seemed to be some sort of auto-post - several times a minute - we were trying to get rid of them, but they reappeared as soon as I deleted them, and... well... people noticed..." He hesitated. "I've got - several thousand subscribers."
"Can you just - pull the whole thing?" He said.

"It… collapsed from all the traffic a while ago," John said, awkwardly. "It's down now."

Greg covered his face with a hand, rubbing between his eyes.

"We just wanted Mycroft to know," John went on. "He's - probably dealing with much more than this right now, but… well. When it rains, it pours."

"Honestly John, I don't know what he's doing... he could be anywhere. He was meant to be here by now." Greg hesitated, feeling his throat contract a little. "Are you… following what's happening? I've not dared to look."

"Mycroft called us this morning," John said. "He's warned us there might be journalists. He says he'll put someone outside our door, if it gets that bad. No sign yet... but…"

"... but you just auto-emailed your several thousand subscribers."

"Um, yes. Unwittingly." John cleared his throat. "Several hundred times each."

"Right," said Greg. "I'll… see if I can ask Sophie. She might know more than I do."

"Are you okay?" John asked, tentatively.

"Ask me in a few days, mate. I'll - be better when Mycroft gets here." Greg hesitated. His chest ached, desperate to confide. "Just worried about him, that's all."

John made a little sound - a half-laugh.

"Yes, I… I know that feeling."

For the first time all day, Greg gave a tiny smile. "We should form a support group," he suggested. "Just the two of us. Long-Suffering Boyfriends of Holmes Brothers."

John laughed, embarrassed. "Well, I'm… sure you're suffering a lot more than I am at the moment."

"I'll be fine when he's here," Greg said. "Besides, you… had your turn last year, mate. Got some distance to go to top that."

"Maybe chaos is just part of loving a Holmes," John said. Greg could hear the smile in his voice. "Only the bravest need apply."

It was true, Greg thought; his heart stirred with it. The love made the bravery as easy as breathing. John knew that, too.

"I… hope you don't end up mobbed by press, guys," he said. "I'm sorry if you do."

"We've had worse," John promised him. "Why are you... in Berlin?"

"I'm here for my own protection, I think."

"Wow, really?"
"I should count myself lucky I'm not in a dragon-guarded castle, to be honest..."

"Still waiting for your dragon to arrive," John said, amused.

Greg grinned. It faded, but the slight cheerfulness remained. "Sorry about your blog, mate. And sorry if you - saw some things..."

"Oh, they'll... disappear from my memory in time, I'm sure." John cleared his throat. "And Sherlock will forget some day, too."

A clearly audible voice in the background said, "I shall not."

Greg smiled, rubbing the side of his neck. "Thanks for the tip-off, John. I'll... speak to you later."

"Bye, Greg. Keep your chin up."

The call cut off.

Greg thought for a minute or two, watching cars curving around the square far below.

He wandered through to the lounge, hands in his pockets.

Sophie was lost in the screen of her laptop computer, cross-referencing something on the tablet at her side.

"Hey," he said, breaking an almost two hour silence.

She looked up from the desk, startled. Her eyes focused on him in the door. "Oh... hey."

"Have you - heard anything?" He gave her a look of apology, biting the inside of his cheek. "I know you're used to this. I'm just worrying."

She smiled a little. "I'm sorry... not yet."

"Anything from Yuri?"

"No, he's... also occupied. I imagine we'd have heard if there were a serious problem."

"Right." Greg hesitated, not wanting to dwell on that possibility. "What's Myke doing? Is he - trying to get rid of the photos?"

"Oh - no, the tech specialists are on that... it's rather a lost cause though, I'm afraid. Doctor Watson's blog has an unfortunately wide readership."

"So... what's he...?"

"I - understand that he's pursuing a number of leads."

Greg pulled a face. "C'mon, Sophie. That's the kind of crap I tell journalists every time there's a murder and we don't have a blind clue who did it."

Beaten, she smiled and gave in. "All he told me was that he needs to deal with someone," she said. "When that's finished, he should be on his way."

"Needs to - ..." Greg stared at her, realisation dawning. "You mean he - knows? He knows who it is?"
Sophie did not reply. Her eyes were guarded, her expression calm.

"And what does he mean, 'deal with someone'?” Greg demanded, as his pulse began to race.

Sophie's face remained impassive. "Inspector, I only know what Mr Holmes has told me."

Greg bit the end of his tongue, annoyed.

"You're sly, you know that?” he told her. "I'm sure it's a good quality in a political assistant. And I'm pretty certain you learned from the best. But it's bloody irritating."

She took this with good grace. "Mr Holmes will be here soon."

"If you promise me that once more, I'm going to start wrecking the place. It's clearly not true."

"Would you like me to have food sent up?"

Greg's jaw set. "Half the internet,” he said, ”is currently gloating over the contents of my phone. Someone at Scotland Yard will be finding out any second. John's blog has spent the afternoon spewing out naked photos of my boyfriend like it's a haunted postbox - my boyfriend who has gone completely off the grid, 'dealing with' probably one of my closest friends or family, by which I'm starting to suspect means he's lowering them in iron chains into the Thames as we speak. I'm out of cigarettes. I'm shattered, I'm scared, and I've been exiled to Germany, to yet another posh hotel where I don't dare touch anything in case I break it. Weirdly, I'm not all that hungry."

Sophie processed all this, utterly patient. Greg wondered how many hours a week Mycroft spent shouting at her for her to become so completely unfazed by it.

"Would you like me to have cigarettes sent up?" she said.

Greg's expression shifted.

"Yes," he muttered after a second. "Thank you."

He resumed his pacing. After a few minutes' thought, he came back.

"Which of them is it?" he demanded from the door.

Sophie didn't look up from her laptop. "Mr Holmes hasn't shared his conclusions with me."

"That's a lie," he said. "And for the record, I know it's a lie. But fine. So what the hell's Yuri doing, if Mycroft is 'dealing with' someone already?"

Sophie picked up her tablet, swiping through a few screens.

"Your cigarettes will be here soon, inspector," she said. "Why don't you watch a film?"

Greg did not watch a film. He paced until he'd finished the new packet of cigarettes, then paced some more without them.

A tray of sandwiches mysteriously appeared in the room. Greg did not touch them. He considered making himself coffee, then decided that the last thing this situation needed was the addition of caffeine.

Soon, it was seven o'clock.
"He's not going to be here tonight, is he?" he said, as Sophie appeared in the doorway to the lounge.

She raised an eyebrow, her tablet in her hand.

"I've... just had an e-mail," she said.

Greg's phone began to ring.

He lurched to answer it.

"Myke," he gasped. His ear was filled at once with a loud ringing and buffering sound, as if from some enormous machine.

"I'm on my way." Mycroft was half-shouting to be heard over the thundering of his surroundings. He sounded exhausted, but deeply calm. "Yuri and I are leaving London in the next few minutes. Are you alright?"

Greg put a hand the back of the sofa to steady himself, his chest almost caving under the weight of relief.

"I'm fine," he promised. He wanted to grab Myke - hold him - not let him go for another second of their lives, not again, not ever. "How long until you'll be here?"

"Two hours. I have work to do in Berlin, but I will do it beside you." Mycroft's voice cracked slightly. "Greg, I will explain everything. I promise. I am desperately in love with you."

Greg had never heard it shouted over a jet engine before. It made his heart ring with wild, raging joy.

"Get here," he begged. "Just... get here now. Get here and nothing else matters."

"Eat something," Mycroft ordered him.

Greg shook his head.

"No," he said. "I'm not eating until you're here. I'm not doing a thing."

"Then tell them to have food ready for nine o'clock. You can eat as I work."

"I love you," Greg said again, desperate.

"I love you too," Mycroft said. "I - need to go. Two hours, Greg. Not a moment more."

The call ended. It left, in its wake, a ringing and desperate silence.

Greg stared down at the phone, feeling his heart try to beat itself free of his chest. It was all coming to an end, he thought - all of it. Before they slept, their fate would be sealed and all the questions would be answered.

He just hoped he was ready for it.

At ten to nine, Sophie received another e-mail.

"Inspector?" she said, as she stepped into the door of the lounge. "They're approaching."
Greg vacated his armchair at once. He stubbed out his cigarette and headed for the door without delay, Sophie moving briskly in his wake. He had been waiting for this moment for twelve hours. Out of the room, they turned right towards the lift, and a porter in a black and cream uniform opened the door for them.

"Lobby, please," Greg said.


The porter nodded, pressing the button. "Madam."

"Rooftop?" said Greg, as the three of them stepped inside.

"Yes, inspector." The lift began to rise. Greg's stomach was rising faster. "We were able to charter a private flight… it saves us the inconvenience of airport security."

From the roof of the Hotel am Steinplatz, Berlin in all its glory reclined beneath a blood-red satin sky, oiled with black and gold and pink. The sun was setting over the city. Grand buildings stood proudly illuminated against the gathering darkness, while lit-up taxis wound like bright beetles far below. Greg had expected to hear traffic and noise, like in London at night - but this far up, there was nothing but a deep, settled hush - nothing but the oncoming night.

A few minutes passed. Greg couldn't even bring himself to smoke.

"Sir," Sophie said to him, at last - and she pointed out a newborn star.

It was low to the horizon, just visible across the city.

Greg's heart heaved.

"This must get to you," he said to her, weak. "This... can't ever feel boring and normal. It just can't."

Sophie smiled a little. Her brown curls stirred in the night-time breeze.

"Some moments," she admitted.

They watched the star approaching across the city.

As the helicopter came into land, Greg pinched himself hard in the leg.

It was like a great metal dragonfly - hovering, blades chittering, its forward beams blazing in the darkness like great white eyes. Dust whirled and fled the rooftop as the helicopter ghosted low towards the landing pad. Its tail spun slowly into place, scarlet light flickering and fluttering. Greg watched, his heart leaping, and the chopper alighted with little more than a bump. The blades slowly wound to a stop, though the engine continued to roar.

After a few seconds, the door to the cockpit cracked open.

As Greg laid eyes on him, all restraint vanished.

"Myke -..." He took off from Sophie's side, running across the rooftop. "MYKE!"

As he spotted the figure racing towards him through the dark, Mycroft's expression opened into utter relief. Greg saw him breathe his name. Myke abandoned the bag he'd been carrying - dropped it beside the steps like litter - and he ran.
They'd met this way before.

A terminal building at Heathrow, what felt like a lifetime ago - before Myke had known a thing about his father; before 'I love you'; before the blackmailer, before the broken bones, before the world had done its best to shake them apart. Back then, they hadn't dared to kiss.

This time, Greg dragged Mycroft close with all the desperation of the past eight hours. Myke seized him too, and kissed him so hard it hurt - his mouth, his broken shoulder, the rib he'd thought was healed - but they didn't stop. Greg wanted it to hurt. He needed to know it was real. He drove his fingers into Myke's hair, kissing him in despair, and Mycroft's arms tightened around him as if terrified he would vanish. The jet engine raged on beside them, drowned into nothing by the pounding of Greg's heart.

Only the eventual need for oxygen pulled them apart. Greg realised he was panting - Mycroft stared at him with wild love, pupils enormous.

"You're exhausted," Greg gasped, cradling his lover's face.

"I am," Mycroft managed. The sound of his voice - here, right here - almost broke Greg's heart afresh. He gazed into Greg's eyes, overcome with relief. "I... still need to make some calls. This isn't over yet."


Mycroft pushed their foreheads together, hard. Their eyes closed as one. "You are what matters."

Yuri appeared discreetly beside them, carrying Mycroft's bags and a laptop case.

"Yuri," Mycroft said. He did not let Greg go; he did not open his eyes. "Kindly take the bags to my room - you and Sophie are then relieved for the night. Inspector Lestrade and I shall take care of ourselves. Tell Sophie I will need her back in my suite for nine." He reconsidered, breathing in slowly. "Make it ten."

As Greg followed Mycroft into the suite, the addition of his lover seemed to have transformed it into a different room - the lights softer, the windows larger, the furnishings more comfortable. In their absence, extra food had been laid out on the table in the lounge. Mycroft ignored it entirely, stripping off his coat and casting it over one of the sofas. He immediately began setting up his laptop.

Greg watched, uncertain, as Mycroft started loading programmes.

"What is it you need to do?" he asked.

"Give me a single hour," Mycroft said, removing a headset from the laptop case. "I have to make some phone calls… after that, I've done everything that I can. We shall just have to see if it's enough."

Greg carefully took a seat on the other sofa, wondering if he was allowed to be in the room for this part. Mycroft, locked into work mode, didn't seem to notice him.

"Myke," Greg said, unable to stay silent.

Mycroft looked up, halfway through fitting the headset into place. He paused. "Yes?"
"Who - was it?"

Mycroft’s expression faltered. It took him a moment to speak.

"One hour," he said, at last. "Then I will explain."

Greg hesitated. He didn't know if that was okay.

"I know this is frustrating," Mycroft said, his features fraught with regret. "I tried to do as much as I could before leaving England. But this next hour could make the difference between my life spent as a laughing stock, and my life as a temporary figure of pity."

Greg's heart ached. "Do what you have to," he said. "I'm - just going to sit and eat. Okay?"

"Eat," Mycroft said. He twisted the microphone round towards his mouth, clicking it into place. "At ten o’clock, I belong to you for the night... if I'm still typing, pitch my laptop out of the window."

Greg gave a small smile. "Alright."

Mycroft flashed him a final look of affection, then picked up his phone, flicked through a long list of contacts, and hit call. It was a few seconds before he spoke.

"Dawn," he said at last. "It's Mycroft Holmes." He typed for a moment, listening, then answered with a snort. "A very busy day, as it happens. I'm here to sell you a much better story."

Greg took a first small sandwich from the tray. He hadn't eaten in over twelve hours.

"I'm thinking 'government official and partner hounded by anti-gay trolls!'," Mycroft said. "Mention Sherlock if you must, but I'd rather make this about me. I might be his brother, and I'm sure you found out because of John Watson's damnable blog. But you and I both know the British public would prefer to read a serious discussion of the social issues surrounding this event, rather than a tawdry list of my favourite positions. If you have a pen, I have an exclusive statement for you."

Mycroft leant back into the sofa, preparing the words in his mouth.

"My partner and I," he dictated, flawlessly," are experiencing the deepest possible distress in the wake of this incident. We are an intensely private, ordinary couple who are horrified to have had these photographs stolen from one of our phones. We beg that the public respect our privacy at this upsetting time."

Mycroft laughed softly as the listener replied.

"I know, Dawn... but if I can't play the victim card now, then when can I?"

Greg couldn't fight a smile, starting on a second sandwich. He was a devious bastard sometimes, and Greg loved him.

"Perhaps," Mycroft said, his eyes guarded, as something was asked of him over the headset. "The ship has... rather sailed for media exposure of me, but I want to keep Greg out of this as much as possible. I shall consider it, Dawn. How's that?"

Greg strongly suspected he'd just dodged a front-page interview. He peeled a little cucumber out of the sandwich.
"Oh, and a quote from Sherlock," Mycroft went on, "if you want it: 'My brother and his partner are private citizens, and I find it deplorable for anyone to be sharing these images.' That should do it, don't you think? Oh, and... Dawn - I'm sure you wouldn't be so unwise as to actually print one of the wretched things. I'd hate to have to block those 'freedom of the press' motions that keep your well-oiled machine running so smoothly."

Mycroft smiled, slowly, at the response.

"How gratifying," he said. "Do have a pleasant evening."

He hung up, selected a second number, and hit call.

"Hello Simon... it's Mycroft Holmes." He listened, then gave a bark of laughter. "You've seen the video, Simon. Take one look at him and I think it's patently obvious why I've had a spring in my step..."

Greg grinned into his third sandwich. Mycroft's eyes flashed into his, admiring him for a moment from the sofa.

"Mm, he rather is," Mycroft said. He listened, smiling. "Yes, the hero of the Spitalfields case... I'm impressed by your memory. Mm...? Well, Simon, as luck would have it, I'm here to sell you a much better story."

For the next hour Greg listened in wonder as Mycroft exerted an iron-clad grip upon the British media. One major newspaper editor after another was beguiled, charmed or elegantly threatened into compliance, with the serpentine ease of a master statesman. Greg counted nine separate requests for interviews, all sleekly declined, before he lost track.

At last, as ten o'clock approached, Greg picked up a caramel wafer from the scattered remains of the food. He idled back towards the couches with it. Instead of settling on his own, he eased himself carefully onto the sofa beside Mycroft - currently in negotiation with the editor of the London Evening Standard.

Mycroft laid an arm around Greg's shoulders. Greg rested silently against his side.

" - understandable from your point of view, Richard. All I would suggest is that in future, my brother might be more willing to work with those agencies not nakedly profiteering from his family members' personal distress..."

Mycroft tapped, gently, on Greg's shoulder. Greg looked up to find the blue-grey eyes gazing down at him, fond; they cast the caramel wafer a pointed glance.

Greg smiled, offering it up. Mycroft ate half an inch of it from his fingers, chewing as he listened to what sounded like a reluctant apology.

At last, as the clock on the screen of his laptop flicked to 22:00, Mycroft swallowed the wafer, sighed, and interrupted.

"Richard, this is all quite academic," he said, shortly. "I'm sure your situation is clear to you. Unless you wish to stay with a minor rag all your life, you're not going to print the photos. Your coverage of the story will be brief and sympathetic. I look forward to reading it tomorrow morning over my coffee. Good night."

Mycroft ended the call.
He removed the headset, closed the laptop, and pushed it away across the coffee table.

"Come here," he said.

Greg came here. As he climbed astride Mycroft's lap, he watched the years rolling back from his lover's face - one, then two, then five as Greg gathered his face in his hands. As their lips came apart, it was nearer a decade.

"I'm sorry," Mycroft murmured, gazing up at him. "That took far too long."

Greg was in a forgiving mood. "D'you think it'll work?"

"I... think it has a chance. It's hard to judge the reaction of the British public. We are a society of many moods and many convictions. If you and I are lucky, then… at least some damage has been averted."

"That makes it worth it," Greg said. He looked into Myke's eyes.

For a moment, there was silence. They simply looked at each other, realising they were fully alone at last.

One question, above all, pounded against the inside of Greg's skull. He'd waited thirteen hours now. He couldn't wait any longer.

"Myke," he managed. He swallowed. "Who… caused all this?"

Mycroft took a few moments to reply. His expression was unreadable.

"Someone who has... stalked the edges of your life for some time," he said. "And yet, remained almost entirely undetected."

His eyes darkened with apology.

"I should have seen it from the beginning, Greg. I was - compromised. Emotional. It clouded my judgement."

Greg could feel his throat closing over. "Who?"

Myke gazed into his face.

"My... technical team traced the upload of the photos to a single IP address in London," he said. "We knew its location within a minute of them hitting the web."

"Who?" Greg said.

"The internet service provider will be able to confirm the account holder's name in time. But for now…” Mycroft lowered his eyes. "My team managed to gain access to the device remotely. It had very little security. An ordinary household laptop, used for ordinary evil. It was even registered in the name of its owner."

Greg started to shake.

"Mycroft," he begged. "Who?"

Mycroft paused; his gaze flickered.
"It was registered… in the name of 'Greg Lestrade'."
It took Greg several seconds to speak. He stared into Mycroft’s eyes, trying to figure out what it was there looking back at him.

"I…” His brain lurched, lost. "You're - saying it was registered in my name."

Mycroft said nothing, watching him closely.

"I don't have a laptop," Greg said. "I - barely know how to use my stupid phone. You can't - think that I - …?"

"This entire disaster could have been averted long before it began," Mycroft said quietly. "If only I'd been paying attention."

Greg could not speak. He could barely breathe.

"I had my team trace the laptop back to its original point of sale," Mycroft said. "They even managed to locate the transaction… a credit card, registered in the name of G. A. Lestrade. Four years ago."

"Four - …" Greg's head whirled. "But I - …"

"The first time I visited your flat," Mycroft said, "you told me something… a small scrap of conversation. I filtered it from my memory - too preoccupied with you, with the future we could make, to worry about the minutiae of the past. Then the trace returned your name, and it came back to me… the single remark you had made."

"I - didn't do this, Myke." Greg's throat had almost closed over. "I don't - know what the hell's going on, or why it would be in my name, but - "

"Do you remember what you said?" Mycroft said. "Standing in your kitchen. I'd barely been in the flat for a minute."

"I - I don't - …"

"You told me you'd decided to split half-and-half." Mycroft held his gaze, perfectly still. "She kept the 'nice stuff' - you could take 'the old shit'. And, among the nice stuff…"

Greg's heart turned at once to ice.

"My laptop," he breathed.

"With the photos of your niece on it," Mycroft murmured.

Greg felt his chest splitting apart with the weight of the realisation.

"Holy -shit…" he whispered. "She texted me… texted me during the Spitalfields case. Asking if I was seeing anyone. I thought - thought she was just being - … holy fuck."

"She was there from the start, Greg. Not one of us thought of her."

"Oh God - when I fucking met him, I thought - thought he was just the sort of guy she used to - … oh, fuck ... "
"That night at the tube station... you heard 'she'. I heard 'he'. We couldn't be sure which it was, but we both heard that something was wrong. The simple truth is that it was neither."

"It - what - ?"

Mycroft stared into his eyes. "It was 'C', Greg."

"Oh - fuck..."

"If you hadn't destroyed the phone, we would have known within minutes."

Greg groaned, burying his face in his hands. "Oh, for - for fuck's sake - why did I - ... but - how did she even get hold of my - "

"I'm sorry, Greg."

"And I've been - oh, Christ - I've been staring at them - all of them - thinking - ..." Greg's heart began to break. "Oh, shit... at one point I even thought - my sister - my fucking sister, my Rachel - ... how fucking could I - ...

"Greg, there's... more."

Something in Mycroft's voice stopped the racing train of Greg's thoughts in its tracks. He looked up at his lover, falling apart. There was no colour in Mycroft's face - no comfort in his eyes.

"What... d'you mean, 'more'??" he said, his voice cracking.

Mycroft swallowed, silent for a moment.

"I - made a mistake."

"A mistake?"

"A fairly unforgivable one." Mycroft hesitated. "When we'd traced your laptop, and I realised in whose hands it must now lie, I... made an assumption. I let myself be compromised yet again. I should have thought. Instead I acted. I am deeply, truly sorry."

"What assumption?" Greg said, shaking. "What the hell are you telling me?"

Mycroft breathed in.

"I... assumed that Cindy was working alone."

Just under twelve hours earlier, Rachel gazed at Mycroft nervously from her front door, embarrassed to be caught in her messy ponytail and house-cleaning clothes.

"What did you want a word about?" she asked, tentatively.

Mycroft fortified himself with a breath. It had not been easy to come here - but he knew he was making the right decision.

"I... hoped you might help me with something," he said. "It's rather delicate. I need someone to help me be indelicate."

"Indelicate?" Rachel smiled; her eyes brightened a little. "Well... you chose right with an East End
girl... what's wrong, treacle?"

Mycroft's heart contracted slightly.

"I - understand you've had previous dealings with the ex-Mrs Lestrade," he said.

Rachel's expression shuttered. She looked awkward for a moment, and quietly angry.

He'd rather been hoping for that reaction.

"She's... still 'Lestrade'," Rachel said. She visibly bit her tongue. "She likes the sound of it, apparently. She used to be Cindy Nutt, before she got her claws into Greg. Then she ditched him… kept his name, and all his stuff…"

"Yes," Mycroft said, quietly. "In fact, that's why I'm here."

Rachel came to her senses with a little shake of her head. She held the door wide open.

"What am I doing, keeping you on the doorstep like the Kleeneze man?" she said. "Come in."

They sat in her tiny kitchen and talked, as Toby crawled sputtering about the floor - mismatched mugs of builder's tea, half a packet of bourbons from the cupboard over the sink. The tea was too milky and sweet for Mycroft's taste, but he drank every drop of it.

Some of the situation, Rachel knew already. Some, she did not.

"So - so it was Cindy paid some guy to batter Greg half to death?"

"I'm afraid he wasn't paid," Mycroft said. "The gentleman in question is her current partner - they live together in Bethnal Green. I imagine, having discovered your brother was now in a relationship with another man, one or either of them hit upon the plan to blackmail him… it took them a few weeks to drum up the courage. Sadly, by then, they had plenty of material in stock…"

"Jesus." Rachel shuddered. "How did she get hold of it all?"

"I can't be certain. Greg maintains he's never used cloud storage... but knowing that Cindy took his laptop, we have to consider it as a possibility. If the laptop was linked in anyway to your brother's phone - backups, perhaps - any kind of photo storage - then Cindy will have had access to the contents of his life for two years now. A few months ago, those contents will have started featuring me."

Rachel breathed out. "Yeah, she'll have… got a kick out of discovering that. She was that sort of person."

She hesitated, looking down into the dregs of her tea. A great deal of pain tightened itself into her face.

"Cindy was just - … she just loved it, knowing she could humiliate Greg again and again, then make him forgive her... she was the kind of person would flirt with your fella in front of you, just to make sure you knew... knew she could have him, if she wanted him. All over Graham at parties. She had this little smirk she used to do. I - hated her on sight."

She shivered a little, shaking her head.

"Sorry," she mumbled. "I just… Greg went through so much. He deserved better. God - and she's still trying to ruin his life."
Mycroft put his empty mug aside. He reached across the table, gathering Rachel's hands in his own.

"I need your help," he said to her, quiet and urgent. "I need to retrieve the laptop. Not everything has been released. We might still prevent a few things from reaching the web. She also has a briefcase containing the better part of fifteen thousand pounds, which I'd rather she not get to spend at her leisure. And I need her to understand that her control of your brother's life is now definitively ended."

Rachel listened to him, her eyes wide.

"I have never met this woman," Mycroft said. "From what I've heard, she's a venomous bitch and fairly clever. Alone, I can't acquire the things I need. But you have experience of her - you'll be able to unsettle her - and if we outnumber her, we'll be able to overpower her."

Rachel's eyes blazed. She gripped Mycroft's hands.

"I'll do it," she said. His heart-rate soared. "I'll come with you. Do we need to go now?"

He glanced at the kitchen clock. "I can't delay for long," he said. "I have other things I need to do before I leave - the damn photos are spreading fast online, and your brother is on his way to Berlin as we speak. I'd rather be there as soon as I can."

"Okay," she said, getting up from her chair. "I'll ask Sue Next Door to watch the little fella. Then give me ten minutes to tidy myself up. If I show up looking like this, she'll eat me alive - but I'll be quick, I promise. Get yourself another cuppa if you want one."

She scooped Toby up from the floor. He emitted a startled gurgle, laughing as his mother hefted him out of the kitchen.

Mycroft determined to make himself useful.

He rolled his sleeves up, filled the sink with hot water and washed the mugs and the biscuit plate. When they were done, he started on last night's dishes - spaghetti hoops, chicken nuggets and oven chips. Only two plates had dried tomato sauce on them.

She was stretching the tins out, Mycroft thought - watering down her husband's wages.

Now, more urgently than ever.

He'd noticed those signs, too. The jogging bottoms; the single used wine glass in the washing up; the sleeplessness gently smudged beneath her eyes. Her husband knew, but nobody else.

As he transferred the plates to the drying rack, Mycroft's eyes fell on a heart-shaped, gold-painted photo frame in the window. It was clustered amongst other knick-knacks, but they'd all been shunted forward to make sure the photo was still visible.

It was a copy of the first picture he'd ever seen of Rachel - brother and sister, there at her wedding reception, Greg beaming so widely it could have been his wedding day. They had their arms around each other.

As Mycroft looked at the small frame, he saw for a moment another photo displayed beside it - one that wasn't there just yet.

Another wedding day; another fairytale reception. Another pair of people, their arms around each other, beaming on the happiest of days. Another suit for Greg; another someone who cherished
him; another person who made him smile like he had everything in the whole world.

Mycroft hesitated, quite overcome by the thought. A soapy plate still hovered in his hand. He gazed at the empty space beside the frame, lost, until the sound of Rachel hurrying down the stairs jogged him back to life.

He rinsed the plate, moving it to the drying-up rack just as she re-entered the kitchen.

"Oh God, you don't have to do that! You utter sweetheart… oh, Myke. You can come round more often."

Mycroft's mouth quirked as he dried his hands on a tea towel. Myke, he thought. Two people who were now permitted to use that name.

His future sister-in-law had dressed herself for battle - ripped jeans, black velvet ankle boots and eyeliner as dark as pitch, with a crisp application of deep red lipstick. Mycroft recognised power-dressing when he saw it. The caring mother-of-two had now armoured herself into a Spitalfields siren.

"Right… is there a plan?" Rachel asked, retrieving her purse from by the microwave. "Or are we just going to ruin the bitch?"

Mycroft breathed in, thanking the universe for the day he'd met Rachel Whittaker.

"Our first priority is access to the property," he said. "Once we're inside, most of the work is done. One of us can then detain her, while the other searches for the laptop and the briefcase."

"Right," she said. "I'll keep her talking - don't worry. I have plenty to say. You can go hunting."

It was only as they got into the car that Rachel had a thought.

"Wait," she said, holding the door open and looking across the roof at him. "Why aren't we going to the police?"

Mycroft smiled from the other side of the car. God bless her that the possibility had only just occurred.

"I'd rather retrieve the laptop now," he said, "before she can cause any more damage - the money, too. We'll involve the police, but perhaps after we've dispensed our own variety of justice. I hope that sits well with you."

Rachel grinned. "That sits just fine with me," she said, and slid into the car.

As she fastened herself into the sleek leather seat, flicking her hair back over her shoulder, she said,

"What if the bloke's around?"

"He's being dealt with separately," Mycroft assured her. "I understand that his name is Johnny. He's about to wish we'd gone directly to the police."

A touch of recognition passed Rachel's face.

"Does that name mean something to you?" he asked. The car set off, Jameson heading without comment for the pre-arranged address in Bethnal Green.

"Cindy finally left Greg for a bloke called Johnny… someone she met at the gym. That's all Greg
ever knew about him. Coincidence?"

"Little ever is," Mycroft remarked.

Two minutes from their destination, Mycroft unclipped his belt and leant forwards.

"Stop here, Jameson," he said. "We'll walk the rest. Otherwise we're going to be conspicuous."

As they slammed the doors of the car, he couldn't help but reflect that if this particular corner of Bethnal Green slid into a gaping hole in the earth, and was never seen from again, it would only be an improvement to the city. Everything was grubby, broken and pockmarked with chewing gum. Attempts to enhance the area had been met with an aggressive derision - benches dented, bus shelters spider-cracked and strewn with litter, community buildings tangled up in fuzzy black graffiti.

With Rachel at his side, they proceeded through a scaffolding-riddled residential block, passing enormous slabs of soulless, identical modern flats. Each was marked out from its fellows by nothing more than a blunt acrylic plaque affixed near each communal entrance. 'BEECH HOUSE', one shouted; 'OAK HOUSE', the next; 'APPLE HOUSE' - all named, Mycroft presumed, after things that would not be found growing within a mile radius of here.

At last, they located the bleak and dank-smelling square brick entrance to Cedar House.

"Do you know which one she is?" Rachel asked, hovering by the comms pad with all the flat numbers.

"Yes," he said. "But we're unwise simply to announce ourselves..." Mycroft studied the pad for a moment, frowning. "No video - in our favour - but she's unlikely to admit us on voice alone. If she has any sense at all, she'll be expecting retribution. Ideally we need to get to her door before she even knows we're here."

Rachel bit her lip, searching for ideas. "Pretend to be a delivery?"

"Viable... but suspicious, if she hasn't ordered anything. Let us be reckless and try something."

He jammed every button on the pad except Cindy's, priming his mouth with a swish of his tongue. Rachel watched, curious. Mycroft waited in silence.

At last, there came a crackle from one of the other flats.

"Yeah?" grunted a voice.

Mycroft leant near to the comms pad, affecting a broad East End drawl. "S'me, mate. Lemme in."

There was a pause.

The buzzer sounded, and the door unlocked. Grinning from ear-to-ear, Rachel heaved it open and they stepped quickly inside.

"That was amazing," she gasped, as the front door shut behind them with a clunk.

"A cheap trick of my brother's invention," Mycroft said. "Though thank you. Now - flat three."

They took the stairs swiftly up through the building. There was no turning back now. Rachel strode as fiercely as a lioness at his side, the deep thump of her ankle boots on the floor like a heartbeat
they now shared.

"Is she likely to turn violent?" he asked, as they swept together towards the numbered door up ahead.

"Not half as likely as me," Rachel said.

That would do, Mycroft thought. "I propose that we not take no for an answer," he murmured, as they came to a stop at the door.

"I agree," Rachel said. She knocked three times - brisk and breezy.

A few moments later, there came the tell-tale sound of a second pair of heels striding to the other side of the door.

"Is that you?" called an irritated voice. "You forgot your key again? You better've got that job."

The door wrenched open.

Mycroft placed a foot in the gap before Cindy had even recognised them.

When she did, her expression stiffened at once. It was hard to tell which face had horrified her more. She looked from one of them to the other - Rachel, ferocious and aggrieved; Mycroft, immaculately cool - and for a few short seconds, Mycroft saw straight past the elaborate layers of make-up and artificial eyelashes to the woman beneath.

Cindy's father had left the home when she was young; she had lost her virginity to an older boy in circumstances that were squalid. She'd probably been propositioned by a teacher at some point, and accepted. She felt alive when men wanted her. She felt worthless when they didn't. She had no close female friends, and she lied like she breathed. Her broken-nosed thug was not her only current lover. She ripped out grey hairs as soon as she spotted them. She would rather die than be thought of as pale, fat or old; she'd not read a book in two decades.

As she swallowed, realising the full extent of her mistake, Mycroft regarded her with the very sleekest of smiles.

"Come now, madam," he murmured. "There's no need to stare at us like a fish. You've seen me in far more compromising positions than fully-clothed in your doorway."

Cindy's eyes flashed, disarmed, to Greg's sister.

"We're here for the laptop," Rachel snarled. She lifted her chin. "Hand it over, and there'll be no trouble."

Mycroft inclined his head. "I really do suggest you comply," he told Cindy coolly. "Rachel is rather unhappy with your treatment of her brother, as you can see… I have no doubt that trouble would fall in her favour."

Cindy took a second to compose herself, running her tongue between her glossy pink lips. She straightened up, one hand on the door.

"I dunno what you're talkin' about," she said. "And I don't have a clue who you are."

Mycroft took a smooth step forward, positioning himself more securely in the threshold. Rachel, behind him, laid a hand on the door to force it wider.
"I suppose we've not had a proper introduction," he said. "My name is Mycroft Holmes. I'm the man giving your ex-husband what you never could. You don't mind if we step inside?"

She had a modicum of cunning, he thought - and a talent for manipulating the emotions of others - but it left her vulnerable to manipulation in turn. She instinctively backed away from him as she sneered, too busy spitting venom at him to realise he was stepping into her flat.

"What," she jeered, "a cock?"

"That, and a soul," he said, pushing her aside. Rachel was following him in. They were past the threshold. It was over. "Now, if you'd be so kind… the laptop."

"What about my laptop?" Cindy said, starting to panic as she followed them down her own hallway. Mycroft scanned quickly left and right - bathroom, kitchen. Improbable. It would be in the bedroom, most likely. Association of ideas. "Oi!" she shouted. "What d'you think you're doing? My fella's due back minute - so you'd better - "

Mycroft rounded on her in a swift flash of cold anger.

"You're a bad liar," he seethed. "Try politics. It would suit you, until you were eaten whole by actual predators like me. I believe Greg swore to your emissary that I would burn you alive. Unless you'd like me to deliver on that promise, I suggest you stop being a pathetic little whore and give us the laptop."

"Get out!" Cindy shouted. It was too late for that. She knew it. "Get out! Out of my flat, now!"

Rachel pushed between them, raging at Cindy at full frenzied volume. Cindy was all too happy to scream back at her. They tore into each other, shrieking, and Mycroft took his chance.

He stormed to the end of the hall and pushed through a wooden door into a cluttered bedroom that stank of smoke and sex, strewn with perfume bottles, shoe boxes and discarded underwear. There, tucked away beside the wardrobe, was the laptop case. He pulled it out, checked it, put it under his arm, and proceeded to the lounge. Rachel had by now gotten hold of Cindy and was twisting at a fistful of her platinum blonde hair, screaming at her that she wished Greg had never met her. Mycroft pushed through the second door.

The lounge. His room. Remote control on his arm of the sofa, ashtrays piled high with his cigarette stubs, magazines and unpaid bills scattered across every surface. Mycroft scanned the room. He knew it was here somewhere. His instincts dragged his eyes to the corner - a cupboard unit, with a half-hearted display of ornaments and memories, now swamped with unsuccessful scratchcards, cigarette packets, junk mail and spare bits of change. Mycroft crossed the lounge, snapping open the magnet-closed cupboard doors below.

Spare DVDs - lesser-watched. Mostly action films.

And there, crammed in with Die Hard, Top Gun and The Bourne Identity - the briefcase.

How adorable, he thought. Association of ideas.

They thought they were spies.

Master villains.

He picked up the briefcase, swiftly checked its contents, and returned to the hallway.
"We're almost finished here, Rachel... thank you."

He pushed himself between them with the briefcase, forcing Cindy backwards and away from Greg's sister. Cindy stumbled back against the bedroom door, panting with pain and rage.

Several of her extensions had been wrenched loose. The lipstick had been slapped across her face and her tanktop was torn, exposing half a fuchsia satin bra. Her pretty face twisted with an ugly fury as she raged at him, her chest heaving.

"Fucking *cocksucker* - get the *actual fuck* outta my flat! Take that little *bitch* with you!"

Mycroft stared her down, shielding Rachel, as cold as an arctic wind.

"The little bitch and I are all too glad to depart," he said. "Thank you for your hospitality. Before I go - it seems all that remains is to burn you alive."

Her eyes flashed. For half a second, she truly believed he would do it. Silence strangled her with both its hands.

"It was *his* idea," she said, at last. "Just - get some quick money. You don't fuckin' need it, do you? Some rich prick."

Her green eyes flashed with sudden despair.

"And Greg *hurt me*," she breathed, all at once a victim. She could turn it on like a tap, Mycroft thought. Here it came: instant damsel in distress. "I always knew he was gay. And I was *nothing* but good to - "

"You're *still* a bad liar," Mycroft hissed. She cowered back against the door. "I'll warrant that you panicked when your helpful assistant came home and told you he'd kicked Greg half to death on a building site somewhere. You never signed up to manslaughter. But you're spending the money, and you're still a vicious bitch. You took it upon yourself to humiliate and prey upon a good person. I cannot let that stand."

His eyes flashed.

"The answer is *yes*, by the way."

" - 'yes'?" she said.

"To the question, *am I damaged?* - which I know you ask yourself quite often these days, and with increasing seriousness. Of course you're damaged. This is why you're no longer a glamorous detective's wife. Instead, you're a forty-six-year-old divorcee living with an unemployed lump who can't even keep it up for you anymore. You're miserable, and you reek of it. You're so broken I can barely stand to look at you. I'd burn you alive if you were worth the matches, Cindy. Instead, I'm going to leave you safe and sound in the ugly festering mess that your life has become, to live it out until the end of your days. If you dare to cross my path again - or so much as remind me of your existence - I will happily send you some more photographs to contemplate. They will feature *my* partner, enjoying every moment of his life, experiencing the kind of love and material comforts that your misshapen, deformed little soul can't even comprehend. I will paper every wall in this hovel with them. I will post you a hundred everyday until no more will fit through this door. I will force you to witness every speck, every fragment, every *breath* of joy that I'm going to fill his precious life with, and on our wedding day I will send you the biggest piece of cake that is permitted by Royal Mail. Have I made myself pristinely clear?"
The breathless silence that followed seemed to ring throughout the entire building.

Mycroft gloried in it - breathed it in.

Cindy stared back at him, as pale as ash.

"I'm... forty-two," she whispered.

His mouth curved in a smile. "Then behold the younger model for which you have been exchanged," he murmured. "By the way... you might like to buy a 'Get Well Soon' card."

"W-Why?" she said. Her voice was tiny in the quiet.

"Always a useful thing to have," he replied. "One never knows when one will need one. Thank you for the return of the laptop. Good day."

They were halfway down the hall when Cindy called after them, unnerved.

"Why're you taking that?" she said.

Mycroft almost walked away.

He would later wish that he had.

Instead he turned back to her, regarding her sharply the full length of the hall.

"Because you've used it to monitor Greg for quite long enough," he said to her. "It might no longer be connected to his phone, but I'll feel much safer with it in hands I can trust. I'm sure you understand."

As he spoke, something crossed Cindy's face - something he hadn't expected to see.

It was confusion.

"Connected to - ..." she said.

Mycroft pressed his tongue against his teeth. "I'm assuming Greg once set up shared access to the photographs on his phone," he said, coldly. "Something you have been gleefully exploiting for months. I'm sure my technical people can supply me with the exact details later."

But Cindy wasn't comprehending. She stared at him, mute, plainly trying to think faster than he could.

Mycroft's flicker of uncertainty transformed itself sharply into rage.

"Oh please, Cindy," he spat. "Spare me the performance."

"I don't know what you're talkin' 'bout," she said.

"You've been harvesting Greg's photos from his phone via the laptop you acquisitioned during the divorce. They were linked. He'd connected them. You've been watching his life like your own private soap opera for two years. That's what I'm talking about."

Nothing was registering in her eyes.

"Two years?" she said.
Mycroft felt a coldness beginning to grip inside his chest.

As the silence stretched on he stared at her, his thoughts racing, flying down every possible path. There was nothing he'd missed. There was nothing he could have missed. It was the laptop - it all made sense - it was a finished puzzle.

And yet that look of confusion was the most genuine thing he'd seen upon her face.

For a second, he didn't want to say it - because if he said it, it would be true.

But the silence was lengthening, and he was realising there was more.

"You had other access," he said at last, his voice hard.

Cindy hesitated. She said nothing. Mycroft watched her with ferocity, white-pale and waiting, knowing she would break.

Cindy's eyes then flashed, silently, to Rachel.

It was a single glance - no more - gone as soon as it had happened.

Mycroft's brow contracted. He inclined his head towards Greg's sister, uncertain; Rachel gazed back at him. She was suddenly pale.

"What?" she said.

Mycroft searched her eyes. Surely not, he thought. The person who loved Greg most in the world; the person who had suffered with him, survived with him. It couldn't be.

Then another possibility occurred - another person who had stalked Greg's life on the edges.

And Mycroft realised he'd heard it less than an hour ago.

She was the kind of person would flirt with your fella in front of you, just to make sure you knew... knew she could have him, if she wanted him. All over Graham at parties.

He turned, slowly, to Cindy.

And there was the truth. It was written, savage and triumphant, across her pretty face.

"No," he breathed.

Cindy said nothing, her chest rising and falling fast, her eyes as sharp and gleeful as a reptile's.

"What is it?" Rachel demanded at Mycroft's side, looking from one of them to the other in pale fear.

Mycroft turned to her. All colour had left his face. All authority had bled from his soul. He could only stare at her, realising in the space of seconds that her world was about to collapse around her and it was entirely his doing. Of all the places for her to find out - of all the moments for this to come to light.

"I'm - sorry," he breathed. He could barely produce the words. "I didn't realise."

Rachel stared into his eyes, her jaw set.
"How did she get the photos?" she asked.

Mycroft couldn't say it.

Cindy could.

"Sorry, Rachey," she soothed. She brushed back the clawed blonde mess of her hair, running her tongue across her lower lip with a little smirk. "That's two of your fellas I've had off you now… at least only one of 'em was your brother."

Rachel gazed at her, her mouth opening.

"Graham," she whispered.

Mycroft saw her start to fall. He swept forwards and caught her in his arms as her knees gave way. Rachel sagged against him, broken. He held her.

He could not speak.

Cindy's voice curled with malicious amusement.

"He had a nosy through Greg's phone one Sunday, Rachey. Greg was helping you wash up... so Graham went lookin' for some gossip for me. He knows what makes me smile. And boy, did he make me smile, e-mailing me those pics..."

She smirked, stroking her red tongue across her teeth.

"I mean, I coulda told you Greg was gay years ago, but… nice to have the proof." She sighed, pushing back another handful of her hair. "The money was Graham's idea, too... sexy and smart. How could anyone blame me? Don't feel bad, Rachey. You could never have been enough for him. 'Specially after the kids came along."

Mycroft breathed in. He did not know what he was about to say - what he was about to do - what possible rage he was about to inflict upon her. To tear her into pieces was too kind. Burning her would never make her scream loud enough.

Then a voice spoke, weak, in his ear.

"Mycroft..." Rachel whispered. The hatred died on his lips. He held her, shaking, feeling his heart hammering in his chest. "I - need to get out of here. Please."

Mycroft swallowed his venom.

Anger could wait. Cindy would burn - that he knew. He knew it like he knew his own name.

But family came first.

Shaking, he gathered Rachel to her feet. She gripped his hands hard as she stood. With his support, she drew herself in pale silence to her full, dignified height, hiding her face behind the veil of her hair.

She then turned, without a word, and walked out of the flat.

Mycroft watched her go, his heart in his mouth. He heard her heels echo softly away down the hall.

"You too, Prince Charming," Cindy crooned. "Get out... and say hi to Gregs for me."
Mycroft looked back at her, white-faced. She flashed her tongue across her teeth at him.

"He used to make those noises for me too, you know," she soothed.

Mycroft felt the whole world sway around him.

For just a second, he almost made up his mind to do it - to reach out, and pull the door shut, and lock it.

How easily she could fall from a window; drown herself in the bath. Pills. Hanged. He had promised to burn her alive. He could now think of a thousand more creative ideas. Behind a locked door, an hour could easily become two or three, and forensic evidence was only as good as the government ever wanted it to be. Mycroft had never killed, but he knew killers. He knew far too many of them. He'd always wondered what could possibly usher in that transition from one state of being to the other - what could make it seem like a viable option. Now he knew.

Then he heard the first sob echo up the stairwell outside.

His heart clenched.

To end an evil life was easy, he thought. But to rescue a good one meant far more.

He turned, without a word. He took the briefcase and the laptop. He left the flat in silence, and did not look back.

After ten minutes' search, he found Rachel between two blocks of flats. She was leaning against the grimy brick wall with her arms curled over her head, completely motionless.

"I'm sorry," he breathed. As he hurried to her side, she shuddered and curled tighter against the wall. "I'm - so, so sorry ..."

His first thought was to call Greg - but the plane would still be in the air. Greg was hundreds of miles away, unaware, unable to help, and Mycroft had just inadvertently ruined his sister's life.

It was not meant to be like this.

"Rachel, I - …" What was there to say? What possible comfort would change this moment? He laid his hands on her back. "If I'd known, I would never - never have - ..."

There was silence for a moment - then the figure against the wall said, quietly, "It'd still be happening. I just... wouldn't have found out."

She hesitated.

"I… wondered, a while ago. Started buying me flowers." Mycroft felt her breathe out beneath his hands. "Wasn't even my birthday."

His heart heaved. "Rachel - …"

"Can you... drive me somewhere, please?" she whispered. "I... need to do something."

"Y-Yes - anywhere."

She swallowed, pale. "Thank you. Won't take long."
They drove across London in utter silence. Rachel sat beside Mycroft in her seat, upright and composed, her face tracked by silent tears. She was turning her wedding ring loosely around her finger. Occasionally, she laid a hand upon her stomach.

At last, as they approached the offices of TechCity Solutions, Rachel looked up at him with frightened eyes.

"Would you... come stand with me?" she asked.

It took great effort for Mycroft to speak around the lump in his throat. "Of course," he managed.

She smiled a little, her eyes filling briefly with tears. She pushed them away. "It'll be like G's there," she said.

Mycroft said nothing - incapable once more.

"Anywhere here's fine," she murmured to Jameson, awkwardly, as the car drew up outside the building. He came to a gentle stop.

As Mycroft held the door for her, and she got out, Rachel slid her mobile phone from the pocket of her jeans.

Mycroft waited nearby, doing his utmost not to listen to the brief conversation she held. After some confusion and reluctance, her husband agreed to come outside. She hung up, her expression numb, and put away the phone.

She and Mycroft then waited on the steps together - both pale, still shocked to the soul.

"Are you okay?" she asked him, after a minute.

Mycroft could barely breathe. "Of the two of us - …"

"I'll - be fine." She began to shake. "Greg - won't let me not be fine."

The door of the building opened.

Graham, in suit and tie, emerged onto the steps with a frown. His eyes flashed with palpable concern towards Mycroft, then settled on his grey-faced wife.

"Babe, I'm… meant to be in the finance meeting. I can't just - "

"You son-of-a-bitch," she breathed.

Graham's expression caved. He shot an irritated look towards Mycroft, his brow darkening - as if this were all somehow Mycroft's fault. He didn't say a word, merely frowned, and waited.

"You're not even going to deny it," Rachel said, astonished. "You're just going to stand there, aren't you? You're just going to stare at me like a lump."

"I... dunno what the problem is..." Graham muttered. It was an insulting attempt at a lie. Mycroft balled his fists, struggling not to speak.

"You sold my brother out for money," Rachel said. "That's the problem. You - total and utter wanker."
"We - should go talk somewhere else," he said. "Or talk later at home."

"No," she whispered, fierce. "We're going to talk about it right here." All colour had run from her face. "How could you, Graham? How could you do that?"

Graham pushed his hands into his pockets, glowering briefly at Mycroft. He didn't even have the decency to look ashamed - just affronted.

"It was… for you, babe. For the bills. The kids."

"I don't want to pay our bills with my brother's dignity," she gasped. "He's my brother. He's everything to me. You know what we went through as kids, Graham. You know exactly what him and me went through."

Graham stuck his tongue into his cheek, annoyed. He glared down at his feet.

"Look, I - didn't want it to go this far," he muttered. "I said - just the five-hundred. It was - her… she got into it. Said we should just - "

"Her..." Rachel stared into his eyes, white in the face. "And were you cheating with 'her' before or after you started blackmailing my brother together?"


Furious, burning tears broke through in her eyes.

"My mum deserved better than him," she whispered. "And my kids deserve better than you. You - you total piece of shit, Graham - you utter, utter - ..." She drew in a breath, clenching her fists. "How fucking could you - … when Greg finds out - ..."

"Jesus Christ," he muttered, covering his eyes. "Always Greg - always your fuckin' brother - Greg this, Greg that…"

"He's my brother!"

"Yeah, I know! Funnily enough! And you know he's not a fuckin' superhero, don't you? You should talk to Cindy some time - actually talk to her, and you'll hear some - "

"She's lied to you," Rachel gasped, "you fucking idiot - because that's what she does to men. That's all she ever does to men."

"Whatever," he muttered. "Tell yourself what you want. Go… tell Captain Greg. You spend more time on the phone with him than you ever do with me anyway, so what's it matter? You think he's gonna marry you and raise the kids, do you?"

He glared at Mycroft.

"Fat chance of that now."

Mycroft placed a hand, quietly, on Rachel's shoulder. He felt her soften under his touch - comforted.

He stepped forwards, fixing her husband with a look of silent fury.

"I've met some brainless pieces of plankton in my time," he breathed, "but you're on an entirely different level. You dishonour the loving mother of your children for the favours of a damaged,
vicious little tart like Cindy Lestrade. Take one look at the woman you married. You are a fucking idiot."

Graham grimaced, saying nothing. He did not look at his wife.

"Well?" Rachel said. She stared at him, shaking. "Mycroft's talking to you, Graham. Are you not even going to look him in the eye?"

"I've... seen plenty enough of him," Graham muttered.

"You present this as somehow my fault," Mycroft seethed. "Were you forced to go rooting through Greg's phone?"

"I'm... done with this," Graham grunted. He turned away, back towards the office. "I'll - see you at home, babe. And we'll talk. I'm not discussing this in front of other people."

As he headed back up the steps, Rachel reached down to her left hand.

"Graham," she said.

Her husband paused, glowering down at her from the top step.

She cast her wedding ring at him - it skittered wildly across the concrete steps.

"We're not talking about anything at home," she said. "And I won't see you there."

She turned, and strode back towards the car.

"Babe," he shouted, weary. He stooped to catch her wedding ring. "Babe."

Rachel did not look round.

Mycroft regarded Graham for a moment more, disgusted. He then walked down the steps after Rachel.

As they got into the car, Graham began to shout.

"Babe, come on… we needed the money! I didn't know you were gonna find out, did I? And I just sent her the photos! I didn't fucking beat him up!"

Rachel slammed the door. Mycroft slammed his too.

"Anywhere, Jameson," he said. "Get us out of here."

Jameson started the engine.

"Babe!" Graham roared, as they pulled out of the car park. He grew smaller and smaller in the rear view mirror, still standing on the steps as they drove away.

Ten minutes down the road, they reached another commercial estate. Jameson pulled into the car park, parked them in the very furthest corner, then accepted Mycroft's suggestion that he go and stretch his legs.

For twenty minutes, Rachel wept without pause into Mycroft's shoulder. He held her, and listened to her cry.
It had been among the most hideous days he could remember - and they were barely into the afternoon.

He could not stop hearing Cindy taunting him - goading him - that thought of Greg making noises for her. It made him feel sick to the soul. He couldn't stop seeing her little smirk. He couldn't forget Graham's affronted glower - as if Rachel and Mycroft had a nerve showing up and expecting him to explain himself. All this, while the graphic details of Mycroft's sex life were still circulating at speed through the internet. Greg was hundreds of miles away in Berlin, waiting for him - and he was no closer to getting there than he ever had been. This had all gone so wrong. Horrifically, shatteringly wrong.

It was all he could do to hold Rachel, and stroke her hair, and let her cry.

He would have to explain everything to Greg soon. Where the hell would he begin? Where the hell would it all end? He suddenly realised he'd sent Yuri on by far the easier mission - he wondered if it were still too late to swap.

They should have called the police straightaway, he thought. It had been insanity to attempt this alone.

All he'd succeeded in doing was to take a wrecking ball to his sister-in-law's marriage.

They were both covered in tears and mascara by the time he took her shaking hands, wrapped them in his own, and said,

"There are - no words I can tell you to undo this. There is nothing I can say to repair this. But there are things that I can do."

She listened to him in silence as he spoke, weeping softly still.

"The briefcase," he said. They had thrown it into the footwell along with the laptop. They lay together now in a discarded pile. "It contains at least fourteen thousand pounds. Greg has - told me about the childhood you shared. How you were often deprived. I know that raising a family isn't easy, even in ideal circumstances - and there is no value can be placed on a loving mother. But... for everything else, money is - ..."

He was rambling. He gripped her hands, breathing in.

"The money is now yours," he said. "For immediate expenses. For everything you need."

Rachel paled, staring at him. "I - I couldn't - …" Her eyes began to fill with tears afresh. "Really, you're - so kind - I just - …"

"It is rescued money," he told her, firmly. "As good as lost to me. I won't hear a word more about it. Take it, use it, and let it bring some comfort. For the love of all that's holy, I need to see some good come out of this."

She said nothing, crying more desperately than ever. He kept hold of her hands.

"You will be alright," he swore to her, quietly. "Greg will not see you suffer. I will not see you suffer." He hesitated, his heart wrenching at its ribs. "Rachel, all - four of you will be looked after. I promise you."

Misery wracked her features.
"How did you know?" she wept, shaking.

"A - few small signs," he confessed. "You're opting for soft waistbands. One wine glass by the sink. I… don't think Greg has realised yet."

"We - …" She sobbed. "We were - waiting for twelve weeks - j-just to be safe…"

"I shan't tell a soul. I promise."

She gripped his hands, hard, fighting her rising panic. "Oh, God..." she whimpered. "I - I don't want to do it alone - "

"You won't be," Mycroft breathed. "Not for a moment. We will be there, both of us, for everything you need. Greg will not let you be alone." As her fearful arms wrapped tight around his shoulders, he held her close and rubbed between her shoulders, shutting his eyes. "I'm - so sorry this came to light. I'm sorry for my part in it. If I could undo it - if I could have brought you better circumstances to discover - …"

"You're - s-so kind - you don't need to be sorry to me. Not after all you've done for G. Not after - the m-money - …"

"Come to me when you need more. Any amount. For anything."

"Oh - God - you're so k-kind - "

"I'm not kind," he told her. "I'm unfairly fortunate. I happened to be born to parents who had everything, and could pass it onto me. Now I want to support you and the children however I can. You have helped me more than you will ever know. Please - let me return your kindness."

She shivered, letting out a faint sob. She hugged him tight around the neck.

"Been worried enough as it is," she whispered. "Just - lying awake… thinking."

Mycroft had laid awake many nights of his life. Not one of them had been over money.

He couldn't imagine living under such a gutting, physical fear - how to feed the children; how to buy them what they needed; how to produce food and clothing from thin air.

Greg and Rachel's mother had done it alone. She had produced two wonderful human beings, in spite of every possible obstacle in the world. She hadn't even been able to enjoy her twilight years with grandchildren and family around her. Mycroft didn't want her daughter to struggle as she had.

"Greg and I will take the worries from your hands," he said. "Every worry. Every last one. I would be - honoured, Rachel. Truly. And I know your brother will feel the same."

Rachel held onto him tightly.

"Thank you," she whispered, at last, in his ear.

Mycroft closed his eyes. "It's a pleasure," he told her. "An utter pleasure."

"You're - a miracle," she mumbled. "That's what you are."

"I'm not," he murmured. "I'm lucky. Desperately, undeservingly. And I will not see someone deprived when I have the means to help them."
She sighed against his shoulder, breathing in very deeply.

"What - do we do about Cindy?" she whispered. "I - I feel like - we can't just - … I mean, Graham gave her the photos, but she - ..."

"I know," Mycroft murmured. "I - would like her to suffer, too."

"But... what can we do?"

Mycroft sighed, lifting a hand to the burgeoning pain between his eyebrows. Really, he was amazed it had taken a headache this long to develop. The day showed no signs of shortening.

"I believe it's now a matter for the police," he said. "We - cannot harm her. Threats aside, Greg will not thank either of us for earning ourselves a lengthy prison sentence. We should contact Sergeant Donovan, and tell her what we know."

Rachel shivered slightly, unleashing a sigh. "You're right... of course you're right. I'd - love to see her burn, but..."

"With blackmail, sending malicious communications, and accessory to serious assault, she faces several years in jail... I will ensure she receives and serves every second of it."

"But - what about the guy she sent to do the talking?" Rachel bit her lip, wrapping her arms around her stomach. "I mean - ... he could have killed Greg. Cindy's a bitch and a whore, and - and Graham's a thick twat, and an arsehole, but - ..."

Mycroft reached for his phone, drawing it quietly from his pocket.

"Cindy requires the punishment of the law," he said. "As does Graham. They have the capacity to reach some place of remorse - to sit in prison, and understand the consequences of their actions. Graham, in particular, will regret the day he betrayed your trust for the rest of his life. That, I do not doubt. But for a man who attacks a stranger with a brick, and leaves him to die on a building site, there is only one language worth speaking to him... I could have lost your brother thanks to his decisions. His lesson in consequence requires a slightly different format. It will be learned nonetheless."

As he selected Jameson's number from his contacts, and hit call, Rachel's expression opened with comprehension. She said nothing as she contemplated his words. There was no distress in her face - no disapproval.

Mycroft held the phone to his ear as it rang. He glanced gently into Rachel's eyes; she responded with the tiniest of smiles.

After a second, Jameson answered. "Yessir?"

"Thank you for that, Jameson. We're ready to move on now."

"Yes, Mr Holmes. On my way."

"If you could take us to Scotland Yard - we need to speak to Sergeant Donovan quite urgently - and then to Barclays Bank on the Strand, where Rachel needs to make a sizeable deposit. And if all this could happen via somewhere that sells very large, very decadent takeaway coffees, Jameson, that would be sublime."
Some distance away, standing at the front gate of a warehouse in Peckham, Johnny was rethinking his decision to come.

Something about the place was giving him the creeps.

Only the thought of the money kept him standing there.

Fifteen quid an hour - not to be fucking sniffed at, and just for wandering about a warehouse all night. It beat trying to keep control of a student bar somewhere.

He'd get to be away from Cindy four nights a week, too. The sad truth was, if he could afford the rent on his own, he'd have moved out months ago.

She'd been all smiles when they were sneaking around behind the husband's back - all fun and games. Now she had him to herself, all she could do was moan about how much he saw his daughter. She didn't even appreciate when they did have time together. Every other night she had a migraine now, or her nail polish was still wet, or she was apparently on the rag. He was starting to worry he could only get a hard-on with his porn mags. He'd even started to wonder if she even had another fella on the go - spent half her time texting and smirking.

So four nights of peace each week - at fifteen quid an hour, no less - was sounding pretty peachy right now.

He hadn't recognised the name on the phone. Friend of a friend, the guy had said - used to work with him on events - recommended him for the position. It could be anyone, really. Johnny had worked with a lot of people. He'd had a lot of jobs. None of them had ever paid this much, though.

And now Cindy had released the photos, they wouldn't be getting any more cash out of her queer ex-husband and his toffee-nosed friend. They had to find it from somewhere.

As he gazed up at the warehouse, hands stuffed in the pockets of his zipper jacket and a thin wind feeling across the back of his head, he realised that someone was crossing the yard towards him.

The guy was a brick-wall - six-foot-five at least, in a smart grey suit and tie.

"Mr Barker?" the brick-wall inquired, as he came up to the fence.

Johnny sniffed, lifting his head a little. He'd caught the hint of a slightly strange accent - Polish, maybe. Something foreign.

"Yeah… Johnny Barker," he said.

The brick-wall unlocked the fence with a thick ball of keys, pulling it back for Johnny to step through.

"Thank you for coming," he said. "My name is Yuri. I am our night-team supervisor."

"Right."

"Let me show you around the building. Please, follow me."

He locked the fence behind Johnny with the big ball of keys, then led him across the yard, up a creaking metal staircase and in through a side door.

"You have worked in security a long time?" Yuri asked, as they stepped inside. The place was cold, dank and no less creepy on the inside, full of rusting metal walkways that looked like they could
collapse at any moment. Johnny reminded himself how much he fucking needed fifteen quid an hour, and kept on.

"Oh - yeah," he said. "Most of my life."

"Why did you leave your last job?"

"Just a bad fit, really. Wasn't workin' out."

"Mm."

As Yuri locked the door behind them, and led Johnny deeper into the building, he began to develop the weirdest sense that something strange was going on. This didn't feel like a working warehouse. It didn't seem like the kind of place that would need a security guard at all - a few rounds of explosives, maybe, but not a watchman.

Something about Yuri's enormous size and stern demeanour made it difficult just to stop, though. He didn't have a reason to give - just a general feeling of being creeped out. He found himself following Yuri though the warehouse as placid as a sheep, wondering if this was how you got recruited to gangs - crime - maybe he was about to get a more unusual job offer than he'd anticipated. He'd be fine with that, though. Crime paid nice, he'd heard. Getting recommended was the problem.

"So… what's this place do?" he asked, trying to break the silence. Yuri was clearly not much of a talker.

"Order fulfillment for a website," Yuri murmured. "Honestly, I keep the place safe at night. It is all I need to know. All my team need to know."

"Oh - right, yeah. Just curious."

"It will not be too boring for you?"

"No. Used to that." He tried a smile. "If I can survive her at home goin' on at me all night, I can survive this place..."

Yuri did not laugh. He opened another door, gesturing Johnny through. Johnny found himself in a small and low-ceilinged little office, surrounded on all sides by aluminium filing cabinets and cases. There was a large black desk, faced by a single spindly metal chair.

"Please," Yuri said. "Sit."

Uneasy, Johnny sat down. The chair was just a little too small to be supportive - it made him sit with his knees tensed. Yuri strolled behind the desk and sifted through a couple of papers, but did not sit down.

"Describe yourself to me," the large man said. Johnny realised the interview had now begun, and drew himself to sit up straight, trying to remember what the hell he normally said on his CV.

Yuri was wearing black gloves, Johnny realised. Weird for July.

"Uh…. hard-working," he said. "Honest. M'good at workin' in teams, or alone. Don't need much supervising or nothing. Get on well with most folks, really. Always give a hundred and ten per cent."
"You have a family?"

"Yeah. Girlfriend at home - and my daughter. Lives with the ex mosta the time, but I get her at weekends."

Yuri had picked up a sheaf of paper, and was reading through it with quiet interest.

"So you are a man of good character… yes?"

"Oh - yeah. Sure. Always played a fair game."

"Do you ever have a problem with your temper?"

Johnny was pretty sure he was nailing this. He knew all the answers he was meant to give - maybe he'd just had enough practice at saying them by now. "Never," he replied. "Pretty calm sort of guy, me. S'just the business, innit? Gotta keep your cool. Stay calm under pressure."

"That is good to hear," Yuri murmured. He read the piece of paper in his gloved hand for a moment, thinking. "Do you have criminal record?"

"Oh - speeding, once." It was suspicious if you just said 'no'. It made it more believable if you admitted a little thing. "Done my course, though. Nothing else major."

"Nothing else major," Yuri inquired, "or nothing else?"

"Oh, well… had a row with my ex once - she... got a bit hysterical, called the police - it was all a mistake just got out of hand. She ended up sayin' I'd pulled a knife on her. Wanted custody of our daughter, y'know… so… that'll be on my record, but it ain't a problem."

"You have never hit a woman?"

"No. Not really."

"You have been involved in violence not part of your duties?"

"Again, not… really. Nothing you'd call 'violence'..."

Yuri was wandering out from around the desk, still idling over his sheaf of papers. He disappeared from view for a moment - closed the door quietly, with a snap, then returned towards the desk.

"Fractured collarbone," he said, quite distinctly in the silence.

Johnny looked round. "Sorry?"

He realised the guy was reading something out from his papers.

"Blunt force trauma to back of skull," Yuri went on, his brow furrowing slightly as he read. "Two fractured fingers on right hand. Black eye. Severe bruising to cheek and jaw. Severe internal bruising to the left-hand side below the ribs..."

He laid a piece of paper quietly down on the desk.

"And one fractured rib," he finished.

Johnny found himself staring down at a printed copy of a medical report - trauma centre, Royal London.
It meant nothing to him. He didn't know what the guy expected him to say.

"I - don't - ..."

"You recognise these injuries?" Yuri asked.

Johnny pulled a face. "No," he said. He could feel the hair rising on the back of his neck, though he wasn't sure why. "Why? What are they?"

Yuri selected another piece of paper.

He laid it, quietly, beside the medical report.

It was a photograph of a man - smiling next to some bird in her wedding dress. He didn't recognise the bird. He knew the bloke though. He knew his face well.

As he looked down at the photograph of Detective Inspector Gregory Lestrade, Johnny went completely still.

"You recognise this man?" Yuri asked him, his voice as soft as cobwebs.

Johnny swallowed. "No."

There was a pause.

He bolted from the chair.

Yuri seized him by the right arm, twisted it behind his back, dropped him to his knees and broke two of his fingers without blinking.

Johnny Barker's screams echoed off the metal floor and cabinets. He jerked in the Russian's vice-like grip, howling with pain, writhing as he tried to free his twisted arm.

Yuri, expressionless, hauled him up to his feet.

"Mr Holmes asks me to reassure you," the enormous Russian said, even as Johnny kicked and struggled in his grip like a captured rabbit, gasping with panic and pain. "He appreciates this is difficult for you. But do not worry. You suffer nothing Inspector Lestrade has not suffered."

The black eye and severe facial bruising were most easily administered. During the process, a convenient fall against the desk meant that blunt trauma to the back of the skull was also completed, though Yuri finished it off to be certain - gripping the bastard by the jaw and cracking him once or twice against a filing cabinet. By that point, Mr Barker had become a very accommodating participant. Breaking a single rib was tricky - precision not an easy thing when someone was shrieking so much - but Mr Holmes had hired the best, and it was done.

At last, with the bloodied mess of a man writhing on his back against the floor, shuddering in silent paroxysms of pain, Yuri stepped closer. He opened Mr Barker's arms with a kick, then applied his foot downwards in a single, clinical crush to the collarbone.

The scream perished its way to every corner of the warehouse. Every wall, every walkway, rang with it.

Yuri calmly collected up his papers.

He exited the room, leaving the sobbing figure on the floor behind him.
As he left the warehouse complex, calmly depositing the keys in the nearest bin, Yuri took out his phone and called 999. He reported an attack in a warehouse in Peckham, not far from Burgess Park. He hung up on the request for further details, then made a second call as he walked.

"Yuri?"

"It is done, Mr Holmes... I will join you now."

"Fine," Mr Holmes murmured, in Russian. "Please meet me at the office. I need to spend the afternoon with the technical team, then we depart for Berlin this evening."

"Yes, Mr Holmes. I will be there soon."

"Yuri?"

Yuri stopped, about to hang up. "Da, ser?"

"Did he - admit fault?" Mr Holmes asked, quietly.

"He said to me at one point it was 'her idea'. But he was... distracted at the time."

"I - hope you took no pity on him."

"No, Mr Holmes. This man understands now his actions against Inspector Lestrade. He is very sorry. I imagine he shall treat people with more care in future."

"Good." His employer paused, voice briefly strained. "Thank you, Yuri. This business has been unfortunate. But it is now at its end."

"Pozhaluysta, Mr Holmes… we do what is needed. I will join you shortly."
Bathe

Nine hours later, and seven hundred miles away, in a hotel bedroom in Berlin, Mycroft looked up into his lover's face.

It had taken some time to tell Greg everything. He had left no detail out - Cindy, Graham, the warehouse in Peckham. Greg had listened in pale, deepening silence, growing greyer and greyer as the story unfolded.

At last, all of it was told. It was over.

In its wake, Greg said nothing - his eyes were haunted. He had aged ten years in an hour.

"Are you alright?" Mycroft asked, after several minutes of damning quiet.

Greg's eyes shuttered. He looked as if he were about to vomit.

He got off the sofa, shaking.

"I - need to call my sister," he mumbled. He headed into the bedroom without a backwards glance.

Mycroft closed his eyes; exhaustion lapped at the edges of his mind. This day had been the length of five. He pushed his hands over his face, willing himself just an hour's more strength for the sake of the man he loved. He lifted himself wearily from the sofa.

Greg was sitting on the bed in the dark, cross-legged, his phone held tightly to his ear as it rang. Mycroft stepped quietly into the doorway, his footsteps silent on the carpet. He waited.

Greg tensed as the call was answered.

"Squirt?" he said. "It's - me..."

At her response, his expression crumpled. He put his hand to his mouth, tears brimming at once in his eyes. Mycroft's heart fractured into pieces as Greg began to cry, curling in on himself in despair and shaking.

"R-Rach - I'm - gonna look after you - … I'll do everything. I promise. I'll be their dad. That - cunt - and with her, her of all fucking people - I should have known… squirt, d'you want me to come home? ... I can get the first plane - … no, Rach. Fuck the papers. Fuck them inside out. If you want me there, I'll - …"

He listened, confusion tensing his features.

Mycroft moved, silent and soft as a shadow, into the bedroom.

"... you're -..." Greg's brow contracted. "... as in The Beaumont?"

Mycroft moved quietly around the bed, laid his hands on Greg's shoulders, and began to rub.

"Yeah, he… he is too kind." Greg rested his forehead on his hand. "Well, if you're okay in a hotel, squirt… how's Sarah? Have you - … God, I don't know… how do you explain that to a six-year-old?"

Greg shook his head, despairing.
"...'Daddy and Auntie Cindy stole Uncle Greg and Uncle Mycroft's homemade porn, and put it on Google.' Christ... we'll - think of something, Rach. We'll figure out how to tell her..."

In the darkness, as he listened to the phone, Greg reached up to his shoulder - he caught one of Mycroft's hands.

Their fingers knotted, tight.

Mycroft let go of a breath he'd been holding for nine hours.

"... yes, I meant it," Greg said, quietly. "I already love the two of them like they're mine, Rach. We'll get a house. I'm serious. I'm going to be the best gay dad-uncle in the whole damn - ..."

He went quiet.

"... what - d'you mean, 'three'?" he said.

Mycroft gripped his hand, hard.

A moment later, Greg made a sound he would never forget.

"Rach - ... you're - ..." As Greg covered his face, shaking, his entire body curled under the weight of it. Mycroft surrounded him with his arms, holding him tightly as he caved. "Holy shit," Greg breathed. "Holy - actual - ...

"It will be alright," Mycroft murmured against his shoulder, as he broke down. "It will all be alright."

Greg did not speak for some time.

"... yeah, he's with me," he mumbled at last into the covers. "He's - looking after me, too."

Mycroft couldn't fight a small smile.

"... no, he - turned up in a helicopter like a bloody action hero. He's just spent an hour threatening newspaper editors. Now he's here."

Mycroft began to rub Greg's back in slow, steady circles.

"M'sorry, squirt," Greg mumbled. "I feel like this is all my - ... well, she's my mad ex… yeah, I know he's your husband, but - ... I - … okay… no, that's fair… well... maybe they do deserve each other..."

He sighed, slowly straightening up from the covers. Mycroft saw him grimace as his collarbone uncurled.

"I don't know," Greg said, tired. "A few days, probably - unless you need me… you sure you're alright, squirt? - … is she really? Isn't it past bedtime?... okay, put her on."

A moment later, his voice brightened.

"Hey, tiny person… what are you still doing up? You having fun in the posh hotel?"

Mycroft leant down, placing a quiet kiss on Greg's shoulder.

"I'm going to make coffee," he murmured to his lover, soft. "Take your time."
It occurred to Mycroft as he drank his coffee, looking down into the brightly-lit square below, that he hadn't consumed any physical food since breakfast. He had navigated this day on caffeine and adrenaline alone. Nothing had been further from his mind than food; he didn't think his stomach would let him eat anything now. He would just have to start afresh in the morning.

By the time that Greg emerged ashen-faced and exhausted from the bedroom, Mycroft's cup was almost empty.

He put it aside, crossing the lounge at once.

He gathered Greg into his arms.

"How is Rachel?" he murmured.

Greg held onto him tightly. "Fine," he managed. He had to bite the word out. "She's - being brave. For the kids."

His fingers dug into Mycroft's back a little.

"I need to be there for her."

"We do," Mycroft agreed.

"I - mean it, Myke. Right there for her. She's - due in February. Christ - ... three, on her own - "

"She shan't be on her own," Mycroft said. He pushed his fingers through Greg's hair, gathering him closer, closing his eyes. "Better by herself, with our support, than with an unworthy husband. Your - mother comes to mind."

Greg exhaled very slowly.

"We'll be fine," he mumbled into Mycroft's shoulder. "All - six of us."

"Seven," Mycroft said. "Boofle."

"Christ. And Darth Vader and his farm... how will we all fit in the flat?"

"We shall figure this out," Mycroft said, quietly, "in the weeks to come. For this moment now... how are you feeling?"

Greg laughed; there was no joy in it. He took a moment to find words.

"Angry," he said. His voice tightened. "Really fucking angry, if I'm honest. Horrified. Scared for my sister." He shuddered a little, breathing out. "Stupid. Because I should have known."

"You couldn't possibly have known, Greg. None of us could."

"Seriously? Who in this world enjoys torturing me more than she did? I should have thought of her the second this started."

He shook his head.

"I just - got fixed on the idea it was a hacker. Some enemy of yours. Then I got fixed on the idea it was one of my workmates - then I just couldn't - ..."

Mycroft laid a quiet kiss upon Greg's neck.
"We were both compromised from an early stage of this inquiry," he said. "We've... been in Danger of Instant Dismissal from the beginning, Greg. We couldn't have known." He hesitated. "Especially Graham's involvement."


There was silence for a moment.

"So you met Cindy," Greg said, his voice tight.

Mycroft felt his soul darken slightly. "I did."

"How did that go for you?"

*He used to make those noises for me too, you know.*

Mycroft selected his words with great care.

"She - has a talent for getting under the skin... I'll give her that." He ran his tongue around his back teeth. "She's also the most poisonous and damaged little whore that I've ever had the misfortune to meet."

Greg's expression shuttered. "You're - not wrong," he said. "Has Sally - …?"

"Yes," Mycroft said. "Sergeant Donovan has already laid hands on them. I believe Cindy was in the process of packing a suitcase when your Scotland Yard colleagues arrived at her flat. She and Graham have both been charged."

"Jesus, already?"

"Graham has been very forthcoming with his information," Mycroft said. "They arrested him from the middle of a board meeting. Rather embarrassing for him, I imagine. He claims Cindy was the brains of the operation."

"And... Cindy claims that he was."

"Mm. It seems Johnny will have the deciding vote, when he finally surfaces - though, seeing as he was entirely unaware of Graham's existence until now, I imagine it can only possibly go one way."

"Have they - tracked him down yet?"

Mycroft looked into Greg's eyes, coolly. "Sergeant Donovan has yet to locate him," he said.

Greg visibly bit the side of his cheek. "Have you told her to check the city's trauma centres?"

"No," Mycroft said. "I shouldn't dream of doing Sally's job for her - she is, after all, a very good detective. I'm sure she'll hit upon the idea sooner or later."

"And when a guy who blackmailed and attacked me is found to have been given remarkably similar injuries by a mysterious Russian stranger?"

Mycroft raised an eyebrow. "A man like Johnny Barker makes many enemies."

"You'd better be prepared to cover this up," Greg muttered. "I'm - washing my hands of it. All of it. I need to be there for my sister and her kids. You had him battered. You deal with it."
"Entirely fair."

"And I don't care what happens to Graham and Cindy. So long as she isn't near me, I don't give a shit. I don't want to hear her name again. Ever. Not as long as I live. And I want Graham to stay away from my sister, too - he doesn't deserve her. Where him and Cindy go, or what they do, I don't care. So long as they're gone."

"It's done, Greg. I'll handle it."

Greg breathed out slowly, shaking his head. "What a fucking mess," he muttered. He covered his face briefly with his hands. "And I'm stuck in Berlin while - … Christ, I've barely even thought about the photos. Everyone at Scotland Yard will have seen my cock by now. John Watson's blog was hacked, did you know? It was spraying the pictures out to every single one of his subscribers. Hundreds of e-mails each."

"So I was informed. One of my various rivals, no doubt. They've all had a rather busy day ensuring the widest possible coverage of the photographs... to distribute them via John's blog was something of a master-stroke, I must say. Cindy might have made the initial upload, but we have the dedication of my enemies to thank for the worst of this."

"Thank God the blog crashed under the traffic," Greg said, "or it could still be e-mailing people now."

Mycroft raised an eyebrow. "It didn't crash under traffic," he said. "My technical team had it put out of its misery."

"... of course they did," Greg said. He sighed, passing a hand over his eyes. "Of course you assassinated John's blog. Is there anything else I should know? Before my brain actually caves in... or, if your technical team could just put me out of my misery too, that'd be great..."

"My technical team can't," Mycroft said, simply. "But I can."

He took Greg's hands.

"Come and sit with me," he said. Greg followed him weakly across the lounge, too emotionally drained to resist. "You have undergone a great deal of pain and stress - most of it unnecessary. Now sit, and know that it is over."

Greg covered his face as he sat down, rubbing at his temples with a weary despair. Mycroft sat beside him, put an arm around him, and coaxed him gently closer.

"There will be no more letters," he told Greg, quietly. "No more blackmail demands. No more waiting for the next to arrive. What has transpired has been horrendous, but it has passed. You are now safe within the system of MI5 spousal security. I will have the same extended to your sister and her children. If you want a home beside theirs, we will find one. We've done all we can to safeguard my professional standing, and I am now in the hands of the nation. In the morning, we'll discover how many of the nation's newspaper editors are clever enough to do as they're told. If they crucify me, they crucify me - but I am quietly optimistic. All that remains for us to do is wait here until initial interest has died away - then return to our lives, go home, and do our best to put all of us this behind us."

As he finished, Greg shivered a little in his arms. It reminded Mycroft immediately of Rachel.

"How long are we staying here?" Greg mumbled to him, weak.
"A few days," he said. "Until there are no longer reporters waiting for us outside the flat, at least. It might be best to err on the side of caution."

"Okay." Greg swallowed. "I... don't know if I'll be able to sleep."

Mycroft kissed his temple, quietly. "Then we shall stay awake."

"You're shattered, though. Look at you."

"Thank you for that..."

"No, I - ... c'mon, Myke. You know you are. You've still got my sister's mascara all over your collar."

"I washed the rest off my neck and jaw. And I am shattered, yes... but the coffee here is just about drinkable, and I have no wish to leave you alone tonight. Not for another moment."

"Myke..." Greg drew in a shaking breath. "Tell me it's over. Tell me it's done."

"It's over," Mycroft murmured. "It's done."

He ran his fingers through Greg's hair, stroking the back of his neck.

"The danger is dealt with," he promised. "All that remains now is to heal."

He felt his lover breathe in the words, marvelling over them. There was quiet for a moment. The world was falling to sleep around them, Mycroft thought - leaving them alone for the night.

"No-one knows where you are," he whispered in Greg's ear, running his hands slowly down his back. "Until morning, you belong only to me - with only the walls to watch us. You are perfectly, indelibly safe."

Greg shivered again. "Myke..."

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting all day."

"I'm sorry my crazy ex-wife put our sex photos all over the internet."

Mycroft's mouth twisted in a smile. "Hardly your fault," he remarked. He paused, holding Greg a little more closely. "It - will be alright, Greg. All of it. You will be alright, too. So help me."

He felt Greg smile a little against his jaw.

"I - know I will be," he said.

Mycroft felt something perfect and profound stir in his chest. He kissed Greg's temple, breathing his scent. As he did, a wave of overwhelming contentment washed over him.

The worst was over, he realised. Somehow, by some miracle, they had made it to the other side. The world was still here, born anew, and Greg was still in his arms - they had survived, against all odds, and it was done.

Whatever else came afterwards, they would be fine.

They would stand against it all together.
He took Greg's hand, lifting it to his mouth to kiss it. He pressed his lips gently to the base of Greg's third finger, and let his eyes close. How he would wait at least a year to place a ring there, he didn't know. It was not going to be easy.

"So - what do we do now?" Greg asked him tentatively in the quiet.

Mycroft didn't need to think about it. "Rest," he said, brushing his lips over Greg's fingers. "Together, in safety, far from the madding crowd. We rest until we are ready."

Greg smiled a little, watching him with softened eyes. "Surprise city break to Berlin."

"What can I say? My penchant for romance. I imagine you've not seen much of it yet."

"Well... the airport, a taxi, and this room... but I'm enjoying it so far." Greg grinned quietly as Mycroft turned his palm over to kiss it. "To be honest, you're in it - so it's the best place in the world right now..."

Mycroft's heart heaved in his chest. "Greg, this - might go without saying..."

"Say it," Greg breathed. His eyes shone as bright as the capital city beyond the window. "Please... don't ever let it go without saying."

Mycroft gazed up from his palm, feeling his throat thicken.

"I love you," he murmured. He laid his lips upon Greg's wrist. He felt his lover's pulse flutter beneath his touch, calling out to him, and felt his own heart call in response. "You are the best of me."

"God..." Greg breathed in, slowly. "Mycroft..."

"Full name...?" Mycroft raised an eyebrow, his lips curving as he began to kiss Greg's fingers in turn. "Am I being that evocative?"

"I love you," Greg whispered.

"I love you, too." He brushed his tongue gently at the base of Greg's ring finger. "I shall make an art form out of loving you... you are my life's work. My reason. All else is secondary."

"God, you're - ... I love you..." Greg shifted a little on the sofa as Mycroft's tongue idled gently between his fingers. "Myke - "

Mycroft lifted his eyes. "Mm?"

Greg's pupils were huge, growing a little more as Mycroft flashed his tongue across his palm. "Um, this is - kinda working for me."

"Entirely why I'm doing it," Mycroft murmured against his palm. He drew two of Greg's fingers gently into his mouth.

As he sucked on them, Greg gave a quiet noise and a shiver, breathing his name. Mycroft's stomach curled in response. He realised he wanted more of those sounds.

It felt like months since they'd made love with no worries - no broken ribs, no blackmail letters, no frightened lies. Just sensation and skin. After the day's litany of horrors, part of him couldn't even credit that he now wanted what he wanted. The rest of him knew beyond doubt that he'd never had a better idea in all his life.
And those words - those awful, venomous words - had spattered like a stain inside his mind.

He needed to wash them clean.

He knew they were lies. After all, it was the only thing Cindy ever did to men - lying.

All the same, he needed to hear those sounds. He needed to know they belonged to him, and him alone. He needed to know they were a product of his creation, and that only he in the world had the power to bring them forth.

"You're exhausted," Greg said, even as Mycroft's arms wrapped tighter around his waist.

"I am," Mycroft murmured. He pulled Greg gently to ease astride his lap, resting a possessive hand at the base of his spine. *Mine,* he thought. All of you, mine. "Exhausted… but not sleepy. I've had a supremely long day… I would - appreciate your help to settle my thoughts."

He felt Greg's chest expand slowly against his own; those dark brown eyes looked down at him, soft and full of love.

"What can I do?" Greg murmured.

Mycroft gazed up into his eyes. "Greg," he whispered.

Greg's eyes glittered.

He rocked his hips down slowly, bringing the fastenings of their trousers to press together. Mycroft shuddered at once and ground against him, breathing a little hard. Their growing erections nuzzled. Mycroft felt his heart tighten.

"Greg," he said again, weak. His lover's hands lifted to cradle his jaw. "Tell me this is alright."

"It's alright…" Greg's mouth brushed across his. "I - need you too. It's been a fucking awful day. We can still make it a good night."

As Greg kissed him, Mycroft's knowledge of the world outside dissolved away into nothing. In its place, there rose up only joy. Tomorrow morning would bring whatever it brought.

Until then, there was only the man he loved.

They kissed for some time - quietening each other, bonding, kissing away the sharper horrors of the day. Mycroft lost himself in the peace of it: the ardent hands around his jaw; Greg's tongue restlessly parting his lips; the rasp of stubble across his chin. Every passionate kiss they ever shared reminded him of their first - the shaking man he had pinned to a hotel bedroom door, all those months ago. How much had changed. Once, Greg had kissed him like he was afraid the whole world might smash apart - now, like they were a single soul shared between two sets of lips.

He stroked his hands down Greg's back as they kissed, gently rounding his arse and pulling his hips closer. Over long minutes they ground together slowly - a little too gentle, a little too shy - just perfect. Mycroft eased his tongue into Greg's mouth, restless, and Greg kissed him harder - held him tighter. He could feel his breath beginning to shorten already.

"I love you," he breathed, as their lips next came apart. His chest heaved. "I need you."

Greg's pupils flared above him.

"There's a bath," he said.
Mycroft stared into his eyes.

The heat of the water was like heaven; the wet body against his own was perfection. They got in when the vast pool was only half-run, unable to wait, and let it fill slowly around them as they kissed and rocked together, bare skin sliding, wet and slick and warm - stoking each other - desire building, desperation growing. A bottle of something honey-coloured from the side, and clouds of fragrant steam were soon swirling in the air around them. Mycroft eased Greg onto his back in the water.

He licked every inch of skin that he could reach without drowning, delighting in his lover's heartfelt moans - his heart leaping, soul soaring at the sound of them. Greg whimpered his name as they ground together. He clung to Mycroft's shoulders, gasping for him, begging softly. With each desperate sound he coaxed forth, Mycroft grew more and more certain.

Cindy had never heard these sounds.

If she had, she would never have let him go.

No human soul who'd heard Greg Lestrade make these noises could then have watched him walk away. It was a physical impossibility in this world. The seas would no sooner dry out, nor the stars suddenly put out darkness instead of light.

They kissed, caressed and coaxed each other slowly to a single breath away from the point of no return, then eased back - cooling, calming, retreating to the very softest of kisses. They relaxed in the water, shivering together. The urgency slowly unwound. Mycroft pulled Greg onto his lap, washing his back for him. The softer, more vulnerable sounds of pleasure it produced were a salve to his very soul.

"I love you," Greg whispered, as Mycroft's tongue laved slowly at his earlobe. The gentle brush of teeth made him shudder. "Oh, God... that's - ..."

He sighed as warm water and bubbles cascaded down his back, shivering.

"Myke..."

Mycroft scraped his teeth over Greg's earlobe again, relishing the strained groan it brought him. "I don't know if I want to be inside you or on top of you," he breathed.

Greg's arms tightened around his shoulders, shaking, fragrant foam sliding wetly across his skin.
"Both," he whispered.

"Ambitious," Mycroft murmured against his gorgeous neck. He lapped the wet skin there with his tongue.

"We're not sleeping tonight," Greg husked in his ear; Mycroft's eyes flickered shut, breathing deeply. "We're going to fuck until dawn Myke, and you know it."

Mycroft dug his fingers into Greg's hips. Greg ground down against him, perfectly slick, the water swirling in a hot rush around them. Their shared groan echoed softly against the tiles.

"If I'm going to be in the papers for fucking you," Greg whispered in his ear, making his pulse-rate leap, "then I'm going to spend the night fucking you."

Mycroft shuddered to the soul, swiftly losing hold of his control.
"If you say that word to me once more..."

"You mean 'fuck'...?" Greg murmured. He slid his wet hands down Mycroft's back, beautiful brown eyes gazing deeply into Mycroft's own. "As in, if we're not fucking within the next five minutes Myke, I'm going to lose my fucking mind..."

With a great surge of water, Mycroft pushed up beneath him and tipped him onto his back. The kiss that ensued was frenzied, almost desperate. Greg's hands slid beneath the water and wrapped snug around Mycroft's cock, working him firmly in the rhythm of their tongues. The pleasure was exquisite - hot water, tight hands, not a whisper of friction. Mycroft shuddered, tugged on Greg's lower lip with his teeth, pushed him to lie back against the side and insistently coaxed his lover's thighs apart.

Greg shuddered as he opened them, panting.

"Fuck," he whispered, as Mycroft's fingers toyed slowly around his entrance. Mycroft kissed his perfect mouth, fluttering the hot water in swirls around his fingers as he stroked. "L-Lube...?" Greg gasped against his kisses.

Mycroft hesitated, realising. "Through in the suitcases."

"... fuck." Greg groaned, his head falling back. "Bubblebath - ?"

Mycroft kissed him again, standing up.

"Stay here," he breathed. "We are not improvising lubricant."

He trailed wet footprints across the expensive carpets without a care, wrenched open his suitcase and hunted through it. Where in God's name...?

"Myke?" came the call from the bathroom after a minute.

If Sophie hadn't packed it, Mycroft thought, upending a toiletries bag across the floor, he was going to march naked to her door, drag her off of Yuri and fire her on the spot.

Amongst the shaving cream, soap and toothpaste that scattered across the carpet, a familiar tube rolled out. She'd packed the silicone. Sophie was thorough, if nothing else. Mycroft sighed, took hold of it, and returned to the bathroom.

Greg's pupils swelled as he reappeared, looking up wet-haired and wild-eyed from the bath. "Have you got...?"

Mycroft climbed back in, eased himself back between Greg's legs, and kissed him until he was shaking. Greg raked wet hands through his hair, moaning for him softly as he coated his fingers. He then lowered his hand beneath the water, between Greg's thighs, and stroked gently at his entrance. Greg shuddered and gasped.

"Please - ...

"When have I ever not given you want you want?" Mycroft murmured, slowly easing the first inside his lover's body. Greg's head fell back against the side, pleasure fizzling across his face.

"I missed you," Greg whimpered - he bit down on his lip. "I missed you so much. I was scared out of my head..."
Mycroft's heart contracted. "I know, love..." He kissed Greg gently, easing a second finger inside his body. He watched his face for discomfort; there was none. "You like the water..."

Greg shivered, swallowing. "F-Feels good - s'warm." Colour rose in his face, cheeks flushing as Myke gently began to stir his fingers. "Oh ..."

"We need somewhere with a bath," Mycroft murmured, kissing him. Greg pushed up against him as their tongues coiled.

By the third finger, he was gripping the side of the bath and panting with pleasure. Mycroft had to break the kiss just to let him breathe. Greg's eyes hazed out of focus, his whole body shuddering as Mycroft coaxed his fingers in and out. "Oh fuck..." he half-sobbed.

Mycroft gazed into his lover's eyes, drinking in the pleasure he saw fogged there. Nothing in the world made him feel as powerful as this - as protective, as needed. He pushed his fingers a little deeper, a little higher, and watched the perfect moment that those deep brown eyes crossed and shut tight.

"Oh God," Greg whimpered, his head dropping back. "Now, Myke..."

Mycroft reached for Greg's lips. Now; he thought.

He slowly sheathed his cock inside Greg as they kissed, panting against each other's lips amidst the steam. The hot water seemed to soothe all initial discomfort. Greg's hands were urgently gripping his lower back straightaway, his bitten lips producing the tight sounds of need that said he wanted Mycroft to move in him. He closed his eyes and gave a few first, gentle thrusts - and dear God, how could this feel so good? How could Greg's body wrap his cock in such sheer, slick, perfect pleasure? He didn't care; he just didn't want it to end. Greg's hands tightened wordlessly on his lower back, needing him to move more - needing Mycroft to fuck him - desperate, deep gasps broke from his lips. Mycroft kissed him to comfort him, gently easing his tongue into his lover's mouth. The warm water eddied and swirled around them as he rocked himself inside Greg, stoking him - giving him what he wanted.

With steeled restraint, he kept the rhythm just a little too slow - enough to have his lover arching, moaning, panting his name in desperation, but not coming.

"Please..." Greg managed after a torturous eternity, gripping hard at Mycroft's lower back. He was beautiful - all brown eyes and jaw. Mycroft just wanted to gaze at him all night, watch him enjoy being fucked. No wonder the internet was losing its mind. "Please, faster..."

"You said 'until dawn'," Mycroft breathed. He soothed Greg with a kiss. "I'm not finishing you after fifteen minutes."

And, to his lover's stuttering despair, he carefully withdrew.

"W-Wait..." Greg gasped. "Seriously? You can't just - ..."

Mycroft shifted, easing in the water to kneel astride Greg's thighs. As he reached again for the lubricant on the side of the bath, Greg realised and gave a shudder.

"Here..." Greg took the tube from him with a shaking hand, eyes darkening. "Lie against me."

Mycroft settled against his lover's wet chest, shivering a little as a tender hand soothed down his back and firmly encircled his arse. He swallowed, spreading his thighs. Greg coated his fingers one-handed, tossed the tube away across the bathroom with a clatter, and eased his hand beneath
"Oh God," Mycroft said, as Greg slowly circled him with a fingertip. A sudden shiver of need rose up and he hissed. "Just - now… please."

Gently Greg pressed, easing that first careful half an inch inside. Myke grazed his teeth over his shoulder and shuddered, aching. It wasn't enough.

"Now," he begged. He arched against his lover. "Not gentle - just - "

Greg's eyebrows quirked. "Really?" he said.

"Do it," Mycroft breathed. Greg pushed a first finger inside him, watching his face closely. It still wasn't enough. "More - ...

Two - and the spike of mingled pleasure and pain made Mycroft hiss and arch his head back, gasping with it, his entire face tightening. Greg stiffened a little.

"Are you -"

"Have me," Mycroft gasped - he pushed back against Greg's fingers, dropping his forehead to his lover's shoulder in desperation. "Just have me. Now."

Greg's fingers began to thrust inside him, steady and slow. Mycroft arched like a cat and groaned, digging his teeth into his lower lip.

"More..." he gasped again, heart heaving.

Greg nosed at his ear; hot breath ghosted over Mycroft's wet skin.

"You're coming on my cock," Greg breathed, "or not at all. I'll decide 'more'."

Mycroft felt something in his chest implode. "Holy God..."

"I love you," Greg murmured, and stroked a kiss across his jaw. "I love you more than my life."

Mycroft dragged in a breath, so desperate he could barely form words. He'd never needed to be taken so much in his life. Just as he began his first ardent plea, three fingers breached him slow and hard - he cried aloud with it, heaving, bucking back against the sensation - too much, not enough, too sharp, too good - the fingers began to steadilyfuck him at once.

By the time he was lowering himself onto Greg's prick, Mycroft's thighs were like rock.

"Steady - steady..." Greg gasped, gripping him hard. Both of them were shaking, every muscle tense, as they eased together inch-by-inch. Mycroft's fingers had become white-knuckled claws on the side of the bath. He felt like he was burning up with pleasure. He concentrated on the rhythm of Greg's breathing, counting each gasp one-by-one, as his lover slowly buried in him to the root.

As they came flush together Mycroft swallowed, his head rolling back. He was so close he could finish with a whisper.

"Don't come," Greg warned him, thick-throated. He gripped his hips beneath the water.

Mycroft almost laughed. The flicker of clarity was enough to haul him back from the edge. "I'm on your cock," he breathed, barely able to form words.
"Still not allowed to come," Greg told him. He slid his wet hands up Myke's sides slowly, easing them round to stroke his chest - long, gentle, flat-palmed caresses. Mycroft focused on them, breathing, letting the tender petting cool the frantic urge to come. "We're not going to last all night, are we?"

"Where's your sense of ambition?" Mycroft said, earning himself a grin and a laugh. He gazed down into Greg's eyes.

His whole body shivered as he realised it - the love of his life, beneath him and inside him - the man who would grow old with him, here, safe. They'd made it. The world had tried to rip them apart, yet here they were.

"Dear God," he breathed. "You're - magnificent..."

Greg's expression lit with joy. "Myke..."

His deep brown eyes lost their focus as Mycroft gave a first slow rock of his hips. Pleasure spiked between them; as one, they groaned. Mycroft drew in a long breath, gripping the gentle hands that reached for and took hold of his own. Their fingers knotted together, tight.


"Always..." Greg murmured, and pushed up into him gently.

Mycroft swallowed - this could not be more perfect. Warm water and pleasure lapped at his lower back, curling up through his soul, his lover's hands gripped tight with his own. He rocked down onto Greg's cock with a shiver, filling his lungs with steam and warm air as he breathed deeply. Greg shuddered beneath him, his face opening with calm and relief, his eyes full of love.

They eased into a rhythm together - slow.

They had all night, after all.

Sophie hurried to the door of the suite the next morning, a little late. She fretfully smoothed her hair as she ran.

Yuri had been rather hard to leave - rather hard in general.

She just hoped Mr Holmes was in a good mood.

He usually was when he'd had enough time with Inspector Lestrade, but one could never be sure. His draconic reputation was well-earned, and would not be dismantled by a few indiscreet photographs. The world had not experienced the last of Mycroft Holmes. That much, she knew beyond anything. Regardless of what happened with the press, with the photographs, the great game was far from over.

As she approached the door, she spotted a note on the hotel's headed paper trapped beneath the handle.

_Sophie,_

The scrawl was loose and easy - not at all like Mr Holmes's usual constricted print. The letters were in his hand, just written with a languor she had never seen before.

It made her smile.
Come back at noon. If you could bring Rothmans, Marlboroughs, and as many British newspapers as you can lay your hands on, it would be much appreciated…

Thank you for all of your assistance in this matter. We will discuss your compensation this afternoon. I also believe you’re long overdue a holiday. Perhaps Yuri should accompany you for your safety.

Please tell the front desk to order a dozen roses for me? I’d like them here for when Greg wakes up.

It has been an ordeal for all of us. But it is over now.

Kindest regards,

M.
Proud

They spent the week safe from the storm in Berlin.

Each morning, Mycroft sat by the coffee table with Sophie, toast and half a grapefruit, processing a stack of newspapers together in pensive quiet. Occasionally, he would make a comment to her: "Remind me of this moment when they next ask for a favour..."; "Rather brave, don't you think?"; "Really, the man has no sense of self-preservation at all..."

Each day, when the process was finished, the papers were gathered up by Sophie and removed.

"I shan't stop you reading them," Mycroft told Greg the first day, as he finished his toast. "I will only warn you that the public's thirst for scandal has produced a wildly speculative press... some of whom are very good at supplying what their readers want."

Greg settled beside him on the sofa in his dressing gown. It was almost one PM - late for breakfast. But then, it had been a long night.

"I trust you," he said to Mycroft, smiling. He rested his head on his shoulder. "This is what you do. It's your thing. Just tell me the gist of it each day, and I'll take your word for it."

Mycroft - fully dressed - fed him a small piece of toast with a smile.

"A mixed response so far," he said. "The nation's media are more afraid of me than I thought... most of the coverage is in a tone of 'how dreadful', rather than 'how foolish' or 'how funny'... a few dissenting voices. Overall, I'm tentatively pleased."

"Did anybody print the pictures?"

"A handful," Mycroft admitted. "They will be instructed in the art of consequence shortly."

Greg didn't know why the sound of Mycroft coolly threatening people was doing so much for him today. Maybe it was because they'd spent most of the night in one body - it just made him feel rather heated. He didn't think he'd be staying far away from Myke today.

"What would you like to do this afternoon?" Mycroft asked softly, as he eased an arm around Greg's shoulders and Sophie made herself discreetly scarce.

Greg smiled, swallowing a mouthful of toast. "There's a question."

Mycroft knew what he was thinking. His lips curved.

"Beast..." He placed a kiss on Greg's temple. "Perhaps you'd like to explore the city, seeing as we're here. The Reichstag is magnificent... Brandenburg Gate... or there are cruises down the river, if I remember rightly."

"There's a river?" said Greg.

Mycroft smiled. "There are two. Go and get dressed, and I shall take you out. Something casual, so we shan't attract attention."

"Alright." Greg leant across, kissing his cheek. "I love you."

"I love you too," Mycroft said, as Greg got up off the sofa. "Don't be long."
They spent the afternoon wandering Berlin together. It was years since Greg had been a tourist somewhere - he found himself enjoying it even more than he remembered. They went to the Pergamon Museum, where Mycroft told him all about ancient Babylon. He got a postcard for Rachel and Sarah, addressing it to The Beaumont in Mayfair. They saw Brandenburg Gate and the Reichstag, then sat with coffee outside a nearby café, talking about the whole world and everything in it. Greg had forgotten how good it was to have Myke entirely to himself - how charming he was - how funny. He set their selfie at Brandenburg Gate as the lockscreen of his phone.

As the evening drew in, they headed to a steakhouse near the hotel.

It was just past eight by the time they got back.

Greg called his sister - she was okay. She was keeping Sarah away from newspapers, lest she recognise the face of her beloved Uncle Greg and ask what 'sexploitation' was. A few family friends had rung Rachel - some sympathetic, others rather blatantly on the scrounge for gossip. Greg made a mental note of their names to remove them from the Christmas card list this year.

They called Sherlock and John, who were cheerfully under siege by half of London's press. The rest were camped outside Greg's empty flat in Marylebone. The pair were in good spirits, and glad to hear that all was well in Berlin. Tentative plans were made for a joint takeaway when Greg and Mycroft made it back from European exile. John then had to say a quick goodbye, as Sherlock started arguing with a Daily Mail reporter out of the window.

Finally, Greg called his sergeant - just a quick hello. They could get onto the questions when he was back in the country, Sally said. Justice didn't mind waiting a few days. Graham had sung like a bird, and Cindy wasn't clever enough to keep track of her lies. They were going down. Computer Crime had been forced to issue a memo reminding everyone that the downloading of obscene material onto work computers was not allowed, even if it featured a member of staff. Greg's division were now having a collection to get a calendar printed for him. Sally promised him she'd wipe his desktop background before he got back to work.

With the world taken care of for the night, they settled on the sofa together at last.

Fifteen minutes into Inception, Greg fell asleep in Mycroft's lap.

Mycroft stroked his hair for almost two hours as he slept, perfectly at peace.

The news digest of day two was largely unchanged.

"Ghoulish interest, tedious moralising and inevitable counter-moralising," Mycroft said, folding up the final paper. "Various voices of sympathy… we shall see."

"Have you heard much from your professional contacts?" Greg asked, halfway through a bowl of muesli.

"A few of them," Mycroft said, with interest. "A rather nice message of support from Downing Street, as it happens… regretting the 'lamentable' invasion of my privacy. From most of my contacts, nothing. I'll only know over the coming months what the long-term damage has been."

Greg was learning not to feel guilty about it; all the same, his stomach tugged a little.

"I hope it's not much," he said.

Mycroft gave an erudite shrug.
"What will be will be," he said. "If I'm fortunate, the game goes on. If not, I shall reapply my skills elsewhere."

Greg glanced down into his cereal bowl. "Is there anything I can do?" he asked.

Mycroft paused, reaching for coffee. He said nothing as he took a sip.

"I mean it, Myke," Greg said. He knew that look. "Just… say the word. I know most of this stuff is beyond me, but I don't want you to lose everything you've worked for. If there's something that'd help... you know I'd do it."

"Truly?" Mycroft said, one eyebrow raised.

"Truly," said Greg. "God knows you've helped me get my life back on track… so… whatever you need. Name it and it's yours."

At three PM, Sophie showed a single reporter and cameraman up to the room.

The young lady sent by Dawn was endlessly professional, sleekly attired in a grey pantsuit and heels, with a blonde chignon bun and a list of questions that Mycroft vetted at great length before a single one was asked. She made every requested change with a gracious obedience.

At last, she sat them on the sofa together side-by-side, told them to make themselves comfy, and started lining up the shot with the cameraman.

"Are you doing the talking?" Greg asked, a little nervous. His professional life had involved more than his fair share of TV cameras; this time was a little different though.

"I am," Mycroft promised. "Don't worry. My connection to Sherlock has made me the focal figure. Just lay your arm across my shoulders and look aggrieved."

Greg gave a reluctant half-smile, putting his arm carefully along the back of the sofa.

"My dad's going to see this," he managed, after a moment.

Mycroft turned to look at him, eyes gentle. "As will your sister," he murmured. "And she will be very proud of you."

Something stirred inside Greg's chest. He sat up a little, taking a slow breath.

"Fine," he said. He crossed one leg casually over the other. It seemed like the sort of thing that one half of an interviewed couple always did. "Pinch me if I say something I shouldn't, will you?"

"I shall," Mycroft promised, resting a hand on his knee.

The reporter flashed them a rather fond smile, taking her seat beside the camera.

"Ready?" she asked.

Mycroft nodded; Greg's heart contracted quietly.

"It must have been a shock for you to find the photos had been leaked online," she said, directing the remark neatly to Mycroft.

He nodded, apparently taking a moment to reply.
"I… don't think either of us will forget that moment," he said. "I had a call from a colleague not long after lunch. She reads John Watson's blog, and of course had just received the e-mail. That was… a very difficult conversation to have. I didn't quite believe it until I checked the blog myself."

"How did you find out, Greg?"

Greg supposed the truth was the truth. "Mycroft called me as soon as he knew. Yeah… pretty hard to believe."

"What was your initial reaction?" she asked them, gently.

Greg inclined his gaze to Mycroft - who gave a small sigh, shaking his head.

"Horror," he said. "Just… utter horror. Greg and I are private people. I don't think we'd ever dreamed someone would target us in this way."

"How did Sherlock react when he found out?"

"Oh, he's mortified for us." Mycroft looked down, brushing a speck of something gently off Greg's knee. "John, too. For someone to use his blog that way to humiliate us was… well, vile."

Greg realised he was rather settling into the performance, watching Mycroft contentedly as he spoke. He hoped he was coming across as the strong and silent type, rather than the nervous newly-outed type. He supposed deep down he was still a bit of both.

"What would you say to those people who've suggested these kind of images are… unwise, maybe?" the reporter asked. "That's it's a bad idea to take them at all?"

Greg couldn't hide a small laugh. Mycroft looked round towards him, interested; Greg saw the camera tilt slightly in his direction.

"I suppose we'd say… well, open your phone right now, have a scroll through your texts, pictures, your e-mails, and count yourself lucky you've not got a famous brother-in-law… everyone's got a private life. Everyone's got things they only want to share with a few people. And everyone's got a right to choose to do that."

The reporter waited, listening. With a gentle nod from Myke, Greg went on.

"Ultimately, this has caused us a lot of pain. It's caused our friends and family a lot of pain. All because we - do what couples do, y'know?"

He smiled, glancing uncertainly into Mycroft's eyes. Myke looked back at him, calm, with the smallest of smiles.

"It's really not a big deal that two people who love each other have got things they want to keep just between them," Greg continued. "That's - normal. We've been forced to share more with the world than we ever wanted to, and… well, I suppose we're lucky that people have been supportive."

Mycroft nodded, inclining his head back to the reporter.

"We're very grateful for the support we've had," he said. "Most people seem as horrified as we are."

"I imagine it's anyone's worst nightmare," the reporter said, "to have your privacy violated like
"Oh… absolutely." Mycroft looked down, folding his hands. "As Greg said… some things, you'd prefer not to share with the world. Or you'd share them differently, at least."

For all of Mycroft's excellent portrayal of a minor celebrity's mild-mannered brother, Greg found himself feeling quietly protective of him. What had happened to them had been real enough - and it had been awful. It had driven them out of the country, endangered Myke's career, and brought the world into his life whether he wanted it there or not. Throughout it, he'd been strong - strong for Greg.

Ultimately, Mycroft had had a major choice wrenched out of his hands. That wasn't okay. Greg of all people understood choices now.

As the reporter put another question to Mycroft, Greg placed a small kiss upon his head.

He hoped the whole world watched.

Mycroft's fingers flexed gently against his knee, pleased.

---

OMG you are on telly!!! Do you want us to tape it? xoxoxoxox

what no! why would I want you to tape it? Tape the news when i've caught a serial killer, not when everyone has seen my amateur porn. tell me you didn't let sarah watch it! x

No she was in bed. Maybe will show her it when she is older xoxoxoxox

y ou taped it didn't you... x

Got it on DVD. You and Mike are so cute together! So protective of him! Loved the bit where you kissed his head. Was a really nice interview. Hope you are enjoying Berlin. xoxoxoxox

Its really good. looking forward to home though. Tell favourite niece i have sent her a postcard. I know all about ancient babylon now. love you all to bits x

---

As Mycroft finished his review of Thursday morning's papers, he was smiling.

"That's a good sign," Greg remarked, loitering in the door in his dressing gown.

"The tide is turning," Mycroft told him, pleased. He folded up the day's edition of The Guardian
and handed it to Sophie. "They've all reported the interview... and it's been rather wonderfully received. We've managed to slake the public's interest whilst also providing a moral angle for them to latch onto. An ordinary couple, much in love, humiliated for having a famous sibling..."

Greg smiled, folding his arms. "If only they knew you actually own the world."

Mycroft gave him a fond flash of his eyes, reaching for coffee.

"If I'm right, there should be a marked downturn in the number of stories tomorrow... just in time for something new to dominate the Saturday headlines. I do believe we might be on our way towards the clear."

"Really?" Greg said, bright. "D'you think we'll be home soon?"

"Without complications, yes... we might even leave late tomorrow." Mycroft sipped at his coffee. "The reporters should have decamped from outside your flat by then."

As much as Greg had enjoyed not being mobbed by reporters, the thought of home did rather appeal. Berlin was great, and the hotel was the plushest place he'd ever slept three nights in a row - but it was still just a refuge. He missed his sofa, his old bed, his privacy. The real luxury in this place was Mycroft's undivided company, and he rather wanted to enjoy that at home. He wanted to see his sister, and his nephew and niece - he even wanted to see the Scotland Yard crowd. They had a whole new life together to go back to. He was rather eager to get started.

"If this might be our second-to-last day," Greg said. "There's... something I wanted to do."

Mycroft looked up from his coffee, interested. "Oh?"

"Can we - go to the zoo?"

Mycroft gave him a startled look. "Yes," he said. "Of course we can." His mouth curved, oddly pleased. "That's... rather sweet of you to want. A date to the zoo."

Greg smiled. "I need a present to take home to Sarah."

"Ah - the plastic farm expands. What new manner of livestock will Darth Vader be tending by Monday?"

"As many kinds as I can fit in my suitcase," Greg said. He grinned, deciding to lay his cards on the table. "I... also want to go to the zoo with you."

Mycroft's eyes shimmered. "Never change," he said.

"I won't. They do penguin feeding at two o'clock - Sophie got me a leaflet. Can Yuri come too? I want to compare his height to a giraffe... 'cause I'm pretty sure he's bigger."

As Mycroft finished his coffee, amused, Greg felt his phone start to buzz in his pocket.

"Well, we can leave when you're ready," Mycroft said, rising from the sofa and dusting off his waistcoat. As Greg wandered into the bedroom, he slid the phone from his pocket and checked the screen. "I haven't anything to monitor today... and after all, I suppose we've more than earned some -"

"Myke," Greg croaked.
Mycroft stopped, turning to the bedroom door at once.

Greg had gone white. The phone in his hand continue to ring, its screen brightly lit.

**Incoming Call From Dad**

Mycroft took a long, deep breath.

"You do not have to answer," he said. "I can block the number entirely if you wish. You don't need to speak to him, Greg."

Greg found himself paralysed in place. He could not answer the phone; he could not cut the call. Its rhythmic buzzing had replaced his heartbeat, thumping fear through his every vein, freezing him solid.

Mycroft closed the distance between them. He reached up to hold Greg's face, gazing intently into his frightened eyes.

"Listen to me," he murmured. "It's a phone. A device. He's not there in your hand. He's not near you. He's seven hundred miles away, and you don't need to hear his voice. One press of a button and he's gone."

Greg's breath caught in his throat. As he stared at Myke, feeling his arm pulse with each ring, he realised something that only made the fear a thousand times worse. There was something he wanted to do.

Mycroft read his eyes, wondering.

Greg saw the moment that Myke realised what was going through his head.

The blue-grey eyes widened, just a little. One eyebrow lifted gently.

"I am here," Mycroft said. It was all that he said.

And as he said it, the phone stopped ringing.

Greg's stomach clenched as the vibration stopped. He looked down at the screen. A message flashed up - **One Missed Call From Dad.**

His heart thudded unhappily in the silence, unsettled by the chance he'd now lost. Seeing it, he realised he'd wanted it. It was a monumental thing to come to.

Then a second later, the phone began to ring again. **Incoming Call From Dad.**

Mycroft reached silently for the chair that sat empty at the desk. He pulled it across, placed it without comment behind Greg, and put a hand between his shoulders.

Greg sank quietly into the seat. His throat closed completely as he swallowed.

A last second of hesitation, as his stomach threatened to leave him through his mouth. He forced it down, shaking, and answered the call.

He placed the phone to his ear, saying nothing. Mycroft knelt at his side, took his other hand, and gripped it hard.

The silence on the line was underlaid by breathing. It went on, endless. What felt like hours passed
as Greg waited, petrified, wishing his heart would just start beating again.

"Hello, Greg," the voice said at last.

Greg realised he was crushing Mycroft's hand. He tried to release his grip; Mycroft only held him harder, crushing his hand in return.

Greg prepared himself to speak.

Seven hundred miles, he thought. No belt could reach that far.

"Hi, Dad," he murmured. He hated the quietness of his own voice. Silence - deathly, thundering silence - reigned once more.

Greg wondered if his dad really had rung him purposely not to speak - just to bludgeon him with nothingness. In some ways, it was worse than shouting. Shouting, Greg could have just hung up on. It was only noise - noise that could be ended with a button. Silence was more than noise.

"You're in the paper," his father said, at last.

Greg caught the tremor in his tone. He'd heard that tremor before. For half a second, Greg was fifteen again - struggling away from the boy he'd loved, hurrying to cover himself, hearing his dad's voice and that tremor - what the hell's going on here?

He shut his eyes, gripping Mycroft's hand tightly enough to cut the circulation.

"Yeah, Dad." He swallowed. "Yeah I am."

Silence. Greg breathed in.

He realised, suddenly, that he was done with silence. He'd gone along with it for decades now.

He decided to give something else a try.

"I was on the telly too," he said. "I… think Rachel taped it, if you missed it."

The huff - that scornful huff he hated - then,

"You decided that's how you'd have me told, did you?" his father grunted. "The newspaper. The telly."

Greg's organs were crowding to evacuate themselves via his throat. He spoke anyway. He'd come too far to stop.

"I... told you thirty years ago, Dad. It's not my fault you didn't listen."

"Greg - ..." The tremor came to his voice again, harder, angrier, and Greg reeled with a spike of fear that almost wiped out his senses. He fought it. He drove it back. "After everything I did for you...

"Everything you did for me?" Greg said, as his shoulders started to shake. "You mean knocking two of my teeth out, Dad? Locking me in the bathroom for two days? Those things that you did?"

" - and now you're humiliating me - mocking me - is this what you want people to think of me, Greg?"
Greg's head whirled. He stared at the back of the sofa, still gripping onto Mycroft's hand like it was his only connection to life.

"You don't even hear it... do you?" he said into the phone. "You just... tune it out. Things you don't want to hear. You battered me, Dad. You punched me until I threw up. I was a kid. D'you even hear me say that?"

"With God as my witness, Greg... if looking after you hadn't left me so broken and old, I'd be battering some more sense into you right now."

Greg shook his head, slowly. He could feel his chest expanding as he breathed.

"No, Dad," he said. "You wouldn't. I'm with Myke now. And he wouldn't let you lay a finger on me."

"Myke," his dad scoffed, as if he'd never heard anything so disgusting and stupid in his life.

"Yeah," Greg said. "Myke. He's my partner. We've been living together for months now."

Greg found himself on his feet, shouting his father down.

"No, Dad. You fucking listen," he raged. "You battered me. You battered my sister. You battered my mum. It's called domestic abuse Dad, and I've spent twenty years locking up arseholes like you who do that to people who can't defend themselves. All along, all I really wanted was to lock you up."

A full-body shudder ran from Greg's feet to his spine, cracking open the last rock of his heart. It rushed through him, cold and clean. He gloried in it, shaking.

"I'm gay, Dad!" he shouted. "I've always been gay! You did your best to knock it out of me, but guess what? You left some. And I found it. And Myke's helped me grow it. And by the way Dad, fucking Cindy? You know she's just wrecked Rachel's marriage too, right? Paragon of dignity that she was. If you want to know about dignity, Dad, it's a shame you won't ever know your son-in-law - 'cause he's got bags of it. More than you ever did."

His father took a sharp breath to respond - but Greg wasn't finished.

"Mum was too good for you," he barked into the silence. "And my sister's too good for you. You don't love her and you don't deserve her. I do. I love her. I deserve her. Good news on that front - she's not going to be around to help you so much any more. She's got the kids to concentrate on now. That's the end of having her at your beck-and-call. Don't worry though. I've got a replacement lined up. You need any help, Dad - anything at all - you just give me a ring, and I'll send round a massive Russian bloke called Yuri to sort you right out. Nothing'll be too much trouble for him. Nothing. You want your slippers fetching, you want the TV remote moved closer, want your newspaper page turning, whatever - you just give me a shout. Alright?"

He went to hang up, then thought again. He returned to the phone.

"Actually, Dad, scratch that. Don't ever fucking call me again."

He cut the call, shaking.

Mycroft caught the phone as it dropped from his hand.
A second later, he caught Greg.

"I'm here," Mycroft said as Greg collapsed into his arms, shaking too hard to stand. He guided Greg backwards into the chair. "I'm right here. Sit. Breathe."

Greg forced his own head between his knees, his lungs heaving. The whole world lurched around him.

"Fuck," he managed.

"Yes," Mycroft said. He knelt before Greg's chair, holding him hard by the shoulders. "'Fuck'. Entirely 'fuck'. Now breathe."

"Fuck… fuck, fuck..." Greg wrapped his hands over his back of his head, shaking, screwing his fists into his hair. "Christ, I… I - actually - "

"I have never been so proud of you," Mycroft gasped in his ear. "Never."

"I actually told him - "

"You told him, Greg. You told him."

"And I told him - about my sister, too - "

"We'll make other arrangements for his care," Mycroft said. "The local health authority. The council. Not your sister. Not from now on. No more."

"Fuck," Greg breathed again. He swallowed hard; fluid welled suddenly in his throat. "Myke?"

"I'm here." Mycroft's cheek pushed against his own, fingers soothing desperately through his hair. "I'm here, Greg."

"I - feel sick."

Mycroft gathered him to his feet, swept him to the bathroom, and got his head over the sink just in time.

"S-Sorry - ..." Greg managed, retching after the first rush. "I just - "

Another lurch. Mycroft hushed him, rubbing his back, as he emptied the remains of his stomach into the sink.

"It's shock," Mycroft murmured to him, even as he spat and shuddered. Greg twisted the cold tap on with a grimace. "Stress. Three decades of it. Get rid of it."

Greg forced his mouth under the stream, gasping. His heart raged at the inside of his ribs. It was trying to get free to safety. He rinsed his mouth out, breathing hard, telling himself he was safe. He was okay. The hands on his back were Mycroft, and they loved him. The voice that spoke in his ear was Mycroft too.

"I was almost convinced it was him, you know. The letters. His - lack of compassion. Four broken bones and no call, no card... I thought that perhaps he'd found himself too old to dominate you with his fists, and decided to do it with money instead..."

As Greg rinsed his face under the tap, he discovered that his hands were still shaking. Mycroft put a towel into them gently. He dried himself, breathing slow.
After the rush, the calm had come - a bone-deep, crystal-clear calm, vast as an ocean. He could feel it seeping to fill every part of him. It was spreading in his heart, his shoulders, his arms, his feet - everywhere. It left him reeling.


He shook his head.

"... just wanted to be feared, I think. In everything. Still wants it."

"And shall not get it," Mycroft murmured.

Greg shuddered slowly, processing that. "No," he mumbled. "No, he… he won't. Not anymore."

He looked up at Myke, his eyes quiet.

"That was a big deal," he managed.

Mycroft nodded gently. "Yes," he said. "Yes, it was."

There was silence for a moment - not his father's forceful forbiddance of sound, but the quiet that grew between two people who didn't need words to communicate. Greg gazed into Mycroft's eyes, feeling his heart's frightened booming become a dizzy, cautious flutter.

"I don't have to talk to him again," he said - he wasn't sure if he was telling Myke or himself. Both, he realised.

Mycroft's eyes reflected the promise back to him. "Never again. Not if you don't wish to."

"I don't."

"Then that's fine. You might need to warn your sister… I imagine his phone book has two names, and two names only."

"I will," Greg said. He pushed a hand back over his forehead, still shaking a little. "Then - can we -"

"Yes," Mycroft said. "Of course we can." He tried a small smile. "And you shall have whatever stuffed animal from the Gift Shop that you like."

The bubble of laughter broke the last fragile skin of fear around Greg's heart. He covered his mouth, hiding the grin that had suddenly broken out. He didn't know what it was. He felt wonderful and wild, and full of colour. Relief like cold water suddenly gushed through his chest, let free by the laughter. He wanted to punch the air. He wanted to shout.

Mycroft could see it in him. His eyes were shining as he came closer to Greg across the bathroom.

As Greg started to laugh, Mycroft pulled him into his arms.

---

Anything today?

M.
The final few are packing up to leave. Have you seen the news? You have been ousted by a footballer's divorce. S

Yes. Thank heavens they take their marriage vows so flippantly. Should be back in the country late this evening. Thank you for monitoring the flat. Very good to know it is no longer under siege. M xxx

... you are welcome. Although I'm not certain it deserves three kisses? S

Ah. Apologies. Force of habit. M.

He gets a trio of kisses per text message? I shall hire a top hat and tails. S

You assume you were going to be invited? Oh dear. This has now become awkward. M.

No refutal. Interesting. S

Isn't it? M.

Having been reluctant to come to Berlin, Greg now found himself sorry to leave.

Their journey to the airport was a more leisurely affair than arriving had been. They were taking an evening flight, in the hope of missing the worst of the crowds. They arrived in good time and had a coffee together by a window overlooking the runway - the sun melting down below the horizon, staining the sky a deep and resplendent pink.

"This has been our first holiday together," Greg noted, stirring his coffee with a thin wooden stick.

"Fleeing the aftershocks of a blackmailer," Mycroft said, amused.

"Ah, but we sent a postcard," Greg grinned. "And we went to the zoo, and a museum - and we had a lot of sex in a gigantic bed. That means it counts as a holiday."
Mycroft's eyes gleamed in the glow of the sunset.

"Put like that," he said, lifting his coffee, "I think I'm rather looking forward to the next one..."

"Where should we go?"


Greg grinned, putting aside his coffee stirrer. "You mean the flat?"

Mycroft smirked as he realised. He stretched in his seat.

"I was thinking more along the lines of a private palm-tree-lined beach," he said, sleekly, "but your flat will fit the bill just as well for now."

Greg took a sip of coffee, smiling. He realised all at once how truly, deeply content he felt - he was just happy to be here, sitting with Myke on their way somewhere. It was exactly where he wanted to be.

"About Rachel," he said, hopefully. "And the kids…"

Mycroft laid a hand upon his knee.

"Has she come to a decision about the house?"

"Not yet, but… honestly, I don't think she'll want to stay in it. Especially with Graham headed for prison. Croydon is miles out - and it's near to my dad..."

"Mm. Distance in that regard will be only a good thing. Well… when Rachel has made a decision, we can make ours, too."

Mycroft swirled his coffee for a moment.

"To reassure you," he added, before Greg could ask, "I would lean towards renting two properties very close to each other. Ideally, the same street. I'll need a home of our own, for me to work - and for us to have time together. But I want to be within easy reaching distance of Rachel and the children. I've - never been an uncle before. You shall have to teach me."

"It's easy," Greg said, with a quiet smile. "You just love them so much you'd die to make them happy. Then the rest takes care of itself."

Mycroft's eyes shimmered. "Just like with you, then."

Greg gazed at him.

"Please," he said. "Don't ever stop being romantic at me in airports. Ever."

"I shan't." Gently Mycroft stroked his knee. "It… will be a shame to leave your flat," he confessed. "The place has felt like something of a bolthole to me. Safe, secure… peace and quiet. I've grown desperately attached to it. Perhaps it is just because you are normally there."

"We'll take the peace and quiet with us when we go," Greg reassured him. "The next tenants can get their own."

Mycroft smiled. Joy suffused his face.
"The sight of our names together on a real estate agreement will be rather marvellous," he admitted, lifting his coffee cup. "But then, I'm an old-fashioned romantic…"

Greg laughed.

A plane was coming into land; it could be theirs. They watched it, drinking the last of their coffee in comfortable quiet together. Greg laid his hand upon the table. Mycroft's hand came to rest on top of his, weaving their fingers gently.

"In all seriousness," Mycroft said, after a while, "I need to thank you... for not - running a mile. This whole situation has been a lot more than most would put up with. My world is - warped. Money. Power. I'm just… very lucky that it didn't scare you away."

Greg smiled at him sideways. To mind came the words of one much wiser.

"It's part of loving a Holmes," he said. "Only the bravest need apply."

Mycroft's mouth quirked. "Is that so?"

Their fingers entwined a little closer; Greg realised how much he loved the sight of their hands together. He could look at it all his life.

"Thanks for... showing me home to myself, Myke. For getting me there safe and sound." He shook his head a little, thinking. "Can't imagine how my life would have run if you hadn't showed up."

"I would have found you," Mycroft said. He smiled, tracing something on the back of Greg's hand with a fingertip. "Eventually."

Greg realised he was tracing his own initials - 'M', 'H'.

They were followed by a heart.

As Mycroft reached the end of the 'G', he paused a little - then idly etched in a second 'H'.

Greg smothered his grin.

"Stop teasing me," he said.

"I assure you," Mycroft said. "In this partnership, only one of us has a proclivity to tease. It certainly isn't me."

"I'll wake up one day and you'll just have done it, won't you? Changed all my bank cards. Driving licence. Passport. There I'll be... DI Gregory Holmes."

Mycroft snorted. "And miss out on all the festivities?" he said. He wrapped their fingers together. "Thank heavens I no longer have to ask for your father's permission."

Greg's laughter almost drowned out the announcement in German over the tannoy. Mycroft listened to it, smothering a smile. As it came to an end, he drained his coffee.

"That's us," he said. "The gate is open... are you ready to leave?"

"Sure," Greg said. He finished his coffee and slid their empty cups together. "Just... promise you'll bring me back some day. In better circumstances. I like it here. I like this - holiday thing."

Mycroft smiled, offering him a hand as he got to his feet.
"We have several long decades ahead of us," Mycroft said. "I intend to take you everywhere that I can. I'd be very much surprised if we aren't back before long."

That would do, Greg thought. He grinned, picking up his bag.

As they headed towards the gate, Mycroft casually moved his carry-on luggage to the opposite hand. Greg wondered for a moment what he was doing - then Mycroft's hand stole into his, knotting their fingers tight.

"Oh my God," Greg muttered to him, grinning. "Like we're twenty. Are you serious?"

"I have it on good authority that forty is the new twenty," Mycroft told him. "Now smile, don't say a word to them, and remind me to call the hotel tomorrow morning to complain."

"Why?" Greg asked, confused.

Then he spotted the photographers.

"Jesus," he said. There were four of them, waiting eagerly by the gate and looking around.

"Someone on the front desk must have alerted them," Mycroft said, keeping their fingers firmly entwined. "Don't worry... just hold onto me and walk. They can't follow us through the gate. I will get you there safely."

As the photographers spotted them, shouting, and cameras were scrabbled for, Mycroft gripped Greg's hand very tightly. Greg readied himself for the first flash.

"Pretend we're leaving the Register Office," Mycroft murmured.

The smile it caused was scattered widely across the British press the next day. Though no longer front page news, it was tucked in each edition quite comfortably towards the front.

For the British public, it was a happy ending in a picture - the fairytale modern gay couple: professionals who worked hard, jetted off to Europe at the drop of a hat, and looked cute together on television. They'd been soundly mistreated, embarrassed at no fault of their own, yet come out of it smiling - holding hands as they breezed through an airport together, trailing hand-luggage, heading home. The nation couldn't decide which of them they loved more - the police inspector, grinning from ear-to-ear in his favourite jumper and old sneakers; or the immaculate government official who held him proudly by the hand, as happy as any man had ever been.

Greg's sister kept the clipping on her mantelpiece until the frame fell apart.

For Greg, it was only the first of the photographs that appeared on his desk at work.

Before the year was even out, he had so many that they no longer fit - Athens in August, Myke in a polo-shirt and sunglasses; September, the new house; Rachel's birthday in November, her rapidly growing bump topped with a party hat; Christmas Day, all of them happy around the tree, Sarah beaming beside more presents than any little girl had ever received. Jessica Lestrade was born in the early hours of Valentine's Day. Her first photograph with her uncles was taken just an hour later, both of them proud and tearful. She was tiny in Mycroft's arms.

June came around again. A new photograph took pride of place in Greg's collection - a beach of perfect white sand, palm trees and an endless blue sea; their joined hands, fingers knotted together on a beach towel; the shine of matching white gold rings.
The years whirled by. Happy memories blew across Greg's desk like bright autumn leaves.

Before he knew it, fourteen years had passed - and once more, it was May.
Together

British Airways BA016 (Sydney). Landed.

Greg realised the paper cup of coffee was burning his hands. He hadn't noticed he was gripping it so hard, too excited to take his eyes from the exit to baggage control for barely a second. He put the cup down and blew on his palms, stretching his fingers to loosen out the excess heat.

A loving hand brushed his shoulder; he looked around.

"Anything?" Myke asked, sitting beside him and handing him a paper bag.

"Not yet," Greg said. He smiled. "Can't be long, though... not unless she's tried smuggling in a wombat."

"I think she learnt her lesson with the Kinder Eggs in San Francisco... do you remember?"

"God," Greg laughed, opening the paper bag to discover a raspberry muffin and a granola bar. "She was only ten, wasn't she? Two hours in a holding room... I've never seen you lose it like that at airport security. I thought they were going to cry."

"No-one makes unfounded accusations against my family members without repercussion," Mycroft said, taking his granola bar. "They should have known better than to threaten me. Two and a half thousand dollars per egg? Every grain of my wrath was deserved."

"I wonder what the fine for a wombat will be," Greg mused, peeling the wrapper from his muffin. "I suppose we'll find out when she gets escorted over here in cuffs..."

He offered the muffin sideways. Mycroft tssked at him.

"Heavens, Greg, no... I think I gained a pound just carrying it over here."

"You're fine," Greg said, grinning. "You're as svelte and gorgeous as you were a decade ago, you know that? Besides... five years since either of us smoked. That's done you more good than any muffin can ever cancel out."

"Hush, beast." Mycroft unwrapped his granola bar, smirking. "I'm doing well. I don't need you dissolving my iron-clad resolve."

Greg grinned, reaching for his coffee.

"I hope you're going to pause the diet for tonight," he said. "Otherwise, that's a lot of tiramisu I have to eat on my own."

"Of course I am. After all the fuss we've had with the caterers, I expect to at least enjoy myself..."

Mycroft glanced at the passage to baggage control as a fresh stream of people emerged. They watched the crowd together in silence for a moment. None of the new faces were the person they wanted to see. Myke bit off another inch of his granola bar, chewing it as he thought.

"I just hope we've ordered enough wine," he sighed, almost to himself.

Greg swallowed a mouthful of raspberry muffin. He put a reassuring hand on his husband's knee, and promised, "It'll be fine. You've been running this like a military operation for months now."
You can relax."

He picked up his coffee again.

"It's going to be perfect, love," he murmured, as he took a drink. "I'm sure you've handled every possible detail."

"... says the man who couldn't tell freesias from delphiniums."

"They were all purple," Greg protested over his coffee cup. "Pretty, purple flowers. What's to tell apart? They all looked nice. I meant it. And you didn't need to shout at me."

Mycroft smiled at him, fondly, and decided to let go of what was now known in the family as 'The Delphiniums Incident'.

"And we've ordered plenty of wine," Greg added, regarding him sideways. His deep brown eyes glittered as they smiled at his husband, as full of playful affection as they'd been fourteen years ago. "Honestly, love. S'going to be fine."

"I hope so." Mycroft smiled, glancing uninspired at the last of his granola bar. "Mm. This tastes like I'd rather be fat."

Greg leant across, took the granola bar off him, and tossed it without looking into a nearby bin. He then replaced it with the remaining half of a raspberry muffin.

"I love you," he murmured.

Mycroft fought his grin valiantly, pulling off a segment of muffin. "What would I do without you?"

"You'd be miserable," Greg told him, grinning, "and alone, and stressing about delphiniums, without half a muffin. And I would be buried under an avalanche of pizza boxes back in my bachelor pad, upside down on the floor, in my underpants, getting slowly eaten by stray dogs."

A new surge of people came streaming from baggage control. Greg glanced over, expecting a flood of yet more strangers - and there she was.

Tanned from the top of her head to the floor, wearing white denim shorts and a hundred different beaded necklaces, Sarah was dragging behind her a suitcase the size of Ayer's Rock.

Greg's heart lurched immediately into his mouth.

In the same second that he saw her, she spotted him - her entire face opened.

"UNCLE GREG!" she screamed, and dumped her suitcase with an almighty bang. The entire airport turned in alarm as she took flight towards him, sprinting the length of the passage. "Uncle Greg, Uncle Greg!"

Greg found himself on his feet. He didn't remember getting up. He didn't remember starting to run.

As his niece ploughed into his arms with the force of a bull, Greg grabbed her and swung her round, lifting her straight off her feet into the air. Sarah screamed with laughter as he twirled her like she was six - like she wasn't a grown woman with legs to her chin and far too many boyfriends - like she was still four feet tall, dressed as Princess Elsa on Christmas Day. Greg clung to her as she laughed, holding her so tight he was afraid he'd crack every one of her ribs. He couldn't let her go. People were staring at them, astonished, as they spun together.
He didn't care.

At last, almost too dizzy to stand, Greg set his niece back on her feet. He stood back to look at her, his head spinning. His heart hammered as he drank in every detail, every inch of her perfect little face, those huge blue eyes shining at him in joy. He hadn't seen them in six months.

"Christ, Sarah," he gasped. "You're brown as a nut..." He pulled her back into his arms, hugging her hard as she laughed. "Have you got a coat?" he demanded. Her shoulders were bare, the white cami top as thin as rice paper. There was more coverage in her jewellery than in her clothes. "You're going to freeze," he said. "Here. Get my jacket on this instant."

As Greg unzipped his jacket and pulled it off, Mycroft joined them with a grin. Sarah threw her arms around his shoulders, gasping.

"Uncle Mycroft..."

"Sarah..." he said into her tousled blonde curls, hugging her tightly. Happiness shone from his face. "You look absolutely radiant... every red-blooded Australian male will be grieving your loss for years to come."

She laughed, glowing, as Greg tucked his jacket decisively around her shoulders. It swamped her tiny frame, the arms hanging low around her sides.

"I didn't realise you'd be here to pick me up," she said to them both, delighted. "I thought you'd be busy getting ready for tonight... where's Mum?"

"Cajoling your sister into her party dress," Mycroft said, his eyes flashing. "A long and arduous operation, as you can imagine. I understand she's been promised a new phone if she keeps the dress on all night."

"She'll never last," Sarah grinned.

A uniformed security guard appeared suddenly beside them. He was holding the enormous suitcase she'd abandoned halfway across the terminal.

"Oops," she said. "Yeah, probably need that..." She gave him her brightest smile and a flash of her eyelashes, gratefully taking the handle of the suitcase. "Thank you, officer... you're so kind."

The stern reprimand died on the guard's lips at once, dazzled out of him.

"You're - welcome, miss," he managed, and shuffled off.

"Right," said Greg. "Let's get going... we should have room in the boot for your case. I'll shuffle a few things round."

He took the handle of her case for her, wheeling it along as the three of them headed towards the exit.

"Your mum's only getting to the hotel this evening," Greg said. "But you've got your own room. We'll get you settled in, and you can start getting dolled-up..."

"What are you wearing?" Mycroft asked his niece, conspiratorially, as they stepped out through the main doors.

Her eyes lit up. "Turquoise," she told him, grinning. "For my tan, you know... it's a bit low-cut. I
showed Mum on Skype and she said it was maybe a bit short too, but… well, special occasion. I have your present in my case, by the way!

"A present?" Mycroft said. "Sarah... you didn't have to."

"Of course I did," she beamed. "Which reminds me..."

Greg had paused, scanning the car park with a frown as he tried to figure out exactly where they'd parked. Perhaps it was the joys of middle age, but since turning fifty, he seemed to spend half his life searching bewildered for the car. Mycroft thought it was terribly funny.

Sarah threw her arms around his shoulders from behind, hugging him tightly.

"Happy birthday, Uncle Greg."

Greg grinned as she kissed him on the cheek, leaving a bright pink impression of her lips behind. "Thank you, squirt. M'glad you could be here."

"You know I'm twenty now, don't you?" she said. "You don't get to call me 'squirt' anymore."

"Did I ever get to call you it before?" he asked.

"I hope you've been spoiled," she said, looping her arms through his as they set off in what he hoped was the direction of the car. "Lots of presents..."

"Norway in June," he told her with a smile. "Joint birthday present to each other. I'll bring you back a nice thick jumper."

"How long are you going?" she asked. "Two weeks?"

"Three," Mycroft said beside them, pleased. "Out in the fjords... a few weeks of mountain air always works wonders for someone's blood pressure."

"A few weeks anywhere except my desk works wonders for my blood pressure," Greg corrected him, smiling. "Five years to go until retirement. Then no more desk, no more blood pressure, no more being Chief Superintendent..."

"Are you not worried you'll be bored?" Sarah asked, pulling her phone from the pocket of her shorts and beginning to answer her many texts.

Greg felt the weight of eyes on the side of his head. He glanced up to find Myke eyeing him with amusement. The flicker of mischief in the blue-grey eyes made him feel twenty years younger in the space of a heartbeat.

"I'm sure I'll keep myself occupied," he told Sarah, smiling.

Mycroft's eyes glittered into his.

"You should go to Australia," Sarah told him, as she texted, with the casual assurance of someone whose gap year had taught them all they needed to know about the world. "It's just so sunny there, and so laid back… and the people are so great..."

Greg pulled opened the boot of the car. He set about shifting the cases to make room for Sarah's, easing his and Myke's luggage to the back.

"You'll still be able to get me onto the Graduate Scheme though, right Uncle Greg?" Sarah said,
hopefully. "Even though you're retiring."

"How long's your degree going to take?"

"Three years… starting in October. Can't believe it."

"You can't believe it?" he said. "It's only been five minutes since I was feeding you pureed carrot off a tiny spoon, making airplane noises at you. Now you're off to university." He glanced at her, smiling. "You know your mum's going to cry, don't you?"

"Yeah, she's said that… she already cried when I went off to Australia…"

"She'll cry the day you leave the police academy, too. That's what mums are for." Greg hefted her case up into the trunk, sliding it carefully into place. "Don't worry, squirt. I'll sort your Graduate Scheme out. You just get the grades you need. And if you screw it up, your Uncle Mycroft can always send you off to MI5 to become a spy."

"You know Mum's said I'm not allowed to become a spy."

"Well, if you get good at it, she won't ever find out… will she?"

Sarah grinned as he closed the trunk, fiddling with one of her many earrings. "Could you actually make me a spy, Uncle Mycroft?" she asked.

"Of course I could," Mycroft said, as they got into the car. Greg stopped to frown at a non-existent scratch on the bonnet, rubbing it with a licked thumb. "Let's try for the police first, shall we? International espionage should always be a last resort. Your co-workers will be sketchy at best and you almost never get a proper lunch break. Greg - darling. It's not a scratch. You worried about this yesterday."

"Hang on… it's starting to come off."

"Could we fix it at the hotel? It's an hour to Berkshire… and I need to make sure the caterers aren't serving that ridiculous first menu they sent us."

Greg got into the car, adjusted the wing mirrors and turned on the radio. Sarah had made herself comfortable in the back, texting at a breath-taking speed with one tanned leg elegantly tossed across the other. Her necklaces jingled as she typed.

As a Nicki Minaj song started up on the radio, she sighed with delight. "Oh man," she mumbled. "I love old music…"

Her uncles shared a brief look of despair. Mycroft patted his husband sympathetically on the knee, saying nothing. Greg smiled, turned the key in the ignition, and reversed them out of the car park. They headed for the A40.

Myke had picked the hotel nearly six months ago now. They'd visited in the run-up to Christmas, and liked it so much that planning for spring had begun almost at once. Now, with everything coming into bloom, the day was finally here.

"This is swish," Sarah remarked, breathlessly, as the car passed along the long drive towards the house.

"The spa is very nice," Mycroft told her, smiling. "Your mother has booked in for a massage
tomorrow… you should join her. I'm sure she'd enjoy the time with you."

"Wow, I just might..." Sarah shivered a little, gazing at the Italianate manor approaching through the windscreen. "Are there going to be famous people there tonight?"

"Sadly not," said Mycroft. "Close friends and family only... unless my brother counts, of course."

"Oh, Sherlock's going to be there? That's cool! And John too?"

"Inseparable as ever."

"Awww. They're so cute." Sarah flicked her hair back over her shoulder, in a way that reminded Greg enormously of her mother. "They're nearly as cute as you two."

"You hear that, dear?" Greg said, regarding Myke with a flash of his eyes in the rear view mirror. Myke looked back at him, deeply amused. "We're cute... I think this means we're 'cool' as well."

"Let's not go that far..." Sarah said, leaning forwards to photograph the hotel on her phone through the windscreen. She bit her lip in concentration.

At the front desk, a porter graciously took charge of their cases as the receptionist handed over their keys.

"We're holding an event tonight in the Davenport Suite," Mycroft said. "Might I speak to Danielle, please? She's been kindly helping us to organise... I just need to check that the flowers have arrived before I can relax..."

Greg placed a hand on his lower back.

"D'you need me for this bit?" he asked. "Or shall I head up and get changed?"

Mycroft smiled, casting him a fond look. "I should manage," he said. "You go and relax... get Sarah settled in, too. I'll be up as soon as I can."

"Alright." Greg kissed his shoulder, eyes bright. "Remember... it's all just perfect as it is."


Greg picked up the last of the cases, still gazing at his partner as he and Sarah headed after the porters.

Sarah shook her head with a sigh, texting and talking and navigating the grand staircase all at once, still draped in her uncle's jacket. She was a marvel, Greg thought - just like her mother.

"So cute," she remarked to herself.

"Would you like to know the secret to happiness, young whipper-snapper?" Greg asked her, as they headed up the stairs together.

Sarah smiled sideways at him, eyes bright. "What is it?"

Her uncle smiled back at her. "Marry someone wonderful," he said.

The suite was the same one they'd had at Christmas. Greg made himself at home straightaway, unpacking within about twenty minutes and then pouring himself a small glass of scotch from the
mini-bar. It was his birthday, after all.

As he drank it, out of curiosity he unzipped the suit bags that were laid out ready on the bed. Myke, still vastly better at these things even after fourteen years, had selected their outfits. They'd been colour-matched, for the special occasion.

As he unzipped the bags, Greg was unsurprised to see that midnight blue satin featured heavily in his outfit. He smiled into his scotch glass.

Some things never changed.

Mycroft joined him after a little over an hour.

"All okay?" he asked, as Mycroft sank into a chair and rubbed two fingers between his eyes.

"Mm… they've ordered in the wrong chairs. They were meant to be banquet dining chairs. The damn things are executive conference chairs. We can now only fit eight round a table. My seating plan has gone to hell."

Greg idled over to the mini-bar, pouring out another glass of scotch.

"It's not a problem," Mycroft said, vaguely. "They can fit another table in, and with some swapping around, it should be fine… I've moved Detective Inspector Donovan to sit with Yuri and Sophie. I'm sure Sally won't mind. And we've shifted Angela and Kelly to sit near your family - I just hope that dashing young gentleman of theirs doesn't start making advances on Jessica, or we really will have a problem..."

Greg approached his husband's chair, knelt beside him, and transferred the glass of scotch into his hand without comment.

Mycroft gave a reluctant smile.

"I'm better than I was for the wedding," he remarked.

Greg simply smiled, rubbed Mycroft's arm, and said,

"You've worked so hard on this. And I'm so proud of you. What can I do to help make it a wonderful evening?"

Mycroft's eyes glittered as they regarded him, every bit as fond as they were fourteen years ago.

"Just... keep reminding me of what matters."

"Fine," Greg said. He nudged the scotch glass, gently. "I'm good at that. Would a back rub help?"

Mycroft smiled into the glass as he drank, then licked a little of the scotch off his lips. "Perhaps tonight," he said. "Let's see how much of a disaster this party is first."

"It won't be a disaster," Greg said, gently. "It's going to be magical. Nobody's coming to admire the seating plan and the executive dining chairs. They're coming to see us and celebrate with us. They'll have some food, drink a little too much, dance a little too much, then you and me come back up here, and it's your birthday in the morning..."

He watched his husband's face for a moment, smiling as the laughter lines deepened a little.

"Would you like your present now?" he asked.
Mycroft gave him a look of fond reproof. "We decided on Norway for gifts," he said. "And, in fact, I do believe you made me swear not to get you anything else... if you've bought me something - "

"Norway was for our birthday," Greg said, dismissively. "This is for our anniversary. If I'm not allowed to spoil you after ten years of marriage, when am I?"

"But I haven't got you anything..."

"That's fine. You just sit there, and drink your scotch. I'll be back in a minute."

Mycroft watched him, fond and disapproving, as he headed through to the bedroom. He'd planned on presenting Mycroft with his gift in the morning over breakfast, as they nursed the inevitable hangover in bed and lamented their age together. But he wanted to give him it now - it felt right.

He retrieved the box from its hiding place amongst his socks, returned to the sitting room with it behind his back, and knelt beside Mycroft's chair.

"Oh, lord..." Mycroft murmured, as Greg produced the small black box. The colour rose in his cheeks at once. "What in heaven's name have you bought me, Greg?"

Greg smiled, holding up the box to him.

"I went to William & Sons," he said. "In Mayfair. I asked them to make me something special... only simple. Nothing flashy."

Mycroft regarded him with tender concern, fighting a smile as he waited for the box to be opened.

As Greg eased back the lid, his husband's face opened with delight. A rush of warm joy flooded Greg's chest.

"Oh - Greg..." Mycroft breathed.

"I had them engraved," Greg said, grinning. He took the slimmer of the two rings carefully from its velvet pad, holding it out to his husband. "Have a look... this one's yours."

Mycroft took it with shaking fingers, holding it up to the window. As the light travelled smoothly along the inner band, it illuminated in a delicate flash three tiny engraved words.

*Omnia Vincit Amor*

Mycroft's eyes shone, brightening with a few tears. "Love conquers all," he murmured.

Greg lifted his eyebrows, pleased with himself. "Virgil," he remarked.

Mycroft laughed, his tears welling over. Greg gently caught his hand.

"Here," he said. "Let me..."

Carefully he eased the ring into place. It fit perfectly atop Myke's wedding band. He'd had it made to the exact measurements, nearly six months ago.

"I love you," he said, softly. His thumb stroked the two rings now nested together on Myke's finger. "I love you to pieces. You know that? Best ten years of my life."

"God alive, Greg..." Mycroft sighed, dabbing the corner of his eyes with his cuff. "Here. You need yours."
As Myke eased the ring gently onto his finger, Greg felt all the joy of a long and happy decade sealed safely into place.

He'd have another set made for their twentieth anniversary, he thought.

He was tempted to put the order in now.

"I treasure you," Mycroft murmured, his voice breaking a little. "More today than I ever have. Thank you."

Greg gathered their hands together slowly. Their fingers twined together as one - happy.

"If there's anything I can do to help tonight go okay, I want you to tell me," he gazed into Mycroft's eyes, smiling. "No matter what it is. If you want a cup of tea while you get dressed, that's fine. If you want me to go buy a hundred conference banqueting chairs - "

"... banquet dining chairs..."

"... banquet dining chairs, then I will. If you want me to move the hotel a couple inches to the left, that's fine... you just tell me, and I'll go ahead and do it." He lifted their joined hands to his mouth, laying a soft kiss upon Mycroft's two rings. "I want tonight to be perfect for you. I know how much it means."

Mycrof gazed at him, his eyes shining with desperate joy.

"Just - be with me," he whispered. "Always."

"Alright," Greg said. "Good news is, I've had plenty of practice at that. So we'll be fine."

He leant up, kissed his lover gently, and stroked a hand across his cheek.

"How about we get dressed?" he said. "I'll put the satin shirt on and just walk around for a while, hey? That'll make you feel better."

Mycrof laughed, brushing away the last of his tears.

"Let's not go, Greg," he said, with a shiver. "We'll stay up here and watch television, while our loved ones get drunk on our behalf."

"No, love..." Greg soothed. "You've worked so hard on the party. You deserve to enjoy it. I mean, after all your trouble with the freesias - "

"... delphiniums..."

"Delphiniums," Greg murmured, stroking his hair. "I knew that. Besides... 'love conquers all'. That includes having the wrong kind of chair."

Mycrof sighed a little, relaxing into his arms.

"Alright," he said, softly. "Let's - get dressed... people could be arriving from six. One or the other of us should be down there to greet them."

"We'll both be there," Greg said. "Side-by-side, with drinks in our hands, and my arm around you. I've not been your lawful wedded husband for ten years to let you go now."

He smiled, helping Mycroft gently to his feet.
"Now come get your clothes off," he said. "It's our wedding anniversary, and I've not seen you naked in at least four hours."

Mycroft laughed, covering his face, as Greg gathered him with a grin into his arms.

"Uncle Greg?" Sarah leant through the grand entrance of the Davenport Room, already halfway through her second glass of Prosecco. Greg had to remind himself that she was twenty, not twelve, and therefore allowed. "Clan Lestrade is here. I just saw Mum's car pull up outside."

Greg put down the party favours he was arranging in a basket. "Excellent... Myke?" he called along the enormous room.

Mycroft, currently in deep discussion with the catering staff, looked around at his call.

"Rachel's arrived," Greg said. "I'm going to go say hi."

Mycroft smiled, his eyes bright. "Alright," he said. "I'll finish those favours."

As Greg and Sarah headed through to the lobby, he was aware of heads turning to watch her pass. His niece's idea of a short dress turned out to correspond exactly with her uncle's idea of a long t-shirt. With an extra five inches of height thanks to her sparkly turquoise high heels, she was as pretty as a butterfly, and attracting just as much delighted attention from passers-by.

"Oh my God!" she squeaked, waving desperately through the lobby's wide front window. "There they are!"

Her mother was first through the door. She ran to Sarah, desperate, and hugged her eldest daughter with joyful tears in her eyes. It was months since Sarah had been home - plane tickets to Australia being expensive, and the flight nearly twenty-two hours. Her mother had taken it much harder than she knew. Rachel was furiously dabbing her mascara by the time she even got to Greg, who grinned and wrapped her up tight in his arms.

"Hey…" he said, swaying her from side-to-side. "There you are."

His sister glowed in his hug, her whole face shining. "Happy birthday, G..."

"Fifty- eight! Can you believe it?"

"Oh my God, G, don't! Life is flashing before my eyes… Toby says he wants a Saturday job... he was two, ten minutes ago."

"How's Anton?" Greg asked, with a grin.

Her eyes flashed at him. "Fine," she said. discreetly. "Sorry he couldn't make it… where's Myke? He needs an anniversary hug..."

"Just getting everything ready," Greg said. "We're through in the big room at the back - there's Prosecco out, and wine… help yourself to whatever you want. Otherwise it's coming home with us, and I'll have to finish it all."

Sarah's siblings had now joined them - Toby, smartly-attired in a waistcoat and shirt, who grinned and gave his uncle a birthday fist bump; and Jessica, thirteen, a raging sea of hormones and black hair dye. She was scowling quietly in her purple party dress.

As he gathered his youngest niece into a tight hug, Greg murmured to her, "Hey, Jecca."
"Happy birthday, Uncle Greg..."

"What phone are you getting?"

She sighed a little in his ear. "A really good one," she said, bleakly. "I look dumb, Uncle Greg..."

"I know, short stuff. We'll get you back in your jeans soon. And it'll be worth it." He mussed her hair. "Be good for your mum, and I'll sneak you a glass of Prosecco."

She thought about it, smoothing her hair with a fond scowl. "Alright," she agreed at last.

As Sarah led the way from the lobby, talking delightedly with her mother about the flight, Greg spotted two more familiar faces coming in through the hotel doors. He grinned, his heart leaping.

"Jecca - tell your Uncle Myke that Sherlock and John are here, will you?"

"Okay..." she said, and sloped after her family.

Greg crossed the lobby, beaming as he made his way between the other hotel guests.

John spotted him coming. "Greg!"

They hugged, hard, John laughing in his ear.

"Wow," he said. "This place is amazing! Good birthday so far?"

"The best," Greg said. He turned to Sherlock with a broad grin, throwing his arms around the bastard. "Thanks for coming, guys... it's great to see you."

Sherlock looked faintly dazed as Greg let him go. "Many happy returns, Greg... you look well."

"And happy anniversary," John added, with a grin. He nudged Sherlock gently, who presented a bottle of scotch in a gift bag.

"Oh, guys..." Greg said. "You didn't have to do that..."

"Ten happy years is well worth celebrating," said John, eyes shining. "How's Mycroft?"

"He's great. He's put so much work in. Come on through, I'll show you." As they crossed the lobby, he said, "D'you remember Sarah, my niece? She's just back from her gap year. Flew in from Australia this afternoon. I'll reintroduce you."

Over the next hour, the Davenport Room slowly filled with friends and family, all chatting and laughing, delighted to see one another. Greg hadn't hugged so many people since their wedding day. He stayed at Myke's side near the door, desperate to catch as many people as they could. Before long, Mycroft was beaming; he grew more and more relaxed with each new arrival. Yuri and Sophie arrived not long after seven with their two little boys, beautifully attired in matching waistcoats and behaving like angels. They were shortly followed by Detective Inspector Sally Donovan of Scotland Yard, who hugged her Chief Superintendent so hard she nearly knocked Greg down.

Just before half seven, with the meal about to be served, Sarah in her turquoise heels came sneaking over to her uncles.

"Can I give you your present now?" she asked, smiling. "It's - something I made. I read it in the
book you got me for Christmas, Uncle Mycroft, and... well... it made me think of you both."

She took from behind her back a perfectly wrapped square.

"I finished it on the plane," she said, as she handed it to Greg. "I hope you like it."

Mycroft smiled at Greg, his eyes soft. Greg gave his niece a look of quiet love.

"You're too sweet, you know that?" he told her. He unwrapped the gift carefully, pulling back the brightly-coloured paper.

It was a silver frame - inside it was a cross-stitched panel, beautifully decorated with green vines and flowers.

In the centre, she had sewn:

"We were together.
I forget the rest."
- Walt Whitman

"Sarah..." Mycroft breathed, gazing down at the frame in Greg's hands.

Greg could not speak. The lump in his throat was too much. He beckoned her nearer, his heart breaking quietly, and folded her into a hug without words. Mycroft's arms came around them both. She nestled into their gentle hold, smiling from ear-to-ear.

"I love you both," she mumbled. "You're the best uncles in the world. I mean it."

Greg was determined not to cry. He'd done well so far.

"This is a wonderful party, Uncle Mycroft," she whispered. "Thanks for inviting me. I'm having a brilliant time."

Mycroft placed a single kiss upon the crown of her head, swallowing. "We're so glad you could be here, Sarah. You've been desperately missed."

A bell sounded gently through in the room.

"We'd better take our seats," Mycroft said, composing himself. "They're about to serve the meal... I'd hate for your Uncle Greg to miss out on his tiramisu..."

"God forbid," Sarah said, grinning. They headed inside.

As the plates were cleared, Greg found himself wondering why he ever let Mycroft worry about anything.

He leant across to his husband, laying a kiss upon his shoulder.

"This is an amazing night you've put together... you know that?" he said. "And nobody's even drunk-dancing yet. This is perfect. And you are wonderful."

Mycroft grinned at him, swirling the glass of red wine in his hand.

"It's... actually going rather well, isn't it?"
"It's going brilliantly. All thanks to you." Greg wrapped his fingers around Mycroft's, settling their anniversary rings together. "Tell me something... before I get very drunk, and you think it's the wine asking..."

Mycroft's eyes shimmered, watching him with curiosity.

Greg gazed into his face.

"Are you glad you married me?" he asked.

Mycroft's entire expression opened. "Greg..." he whispered. "Of course I am..."

"If I asked you again... today, right now... would you still say yes?"

Mycroft reached out; he took Greg's face into his hands. "Yes," he breathed. "Yes. A hundred times, yes."

As Mycroft kissed him, Greg's heart reeled with joy. He felt dizzy and perfect, and as bright as the chandelier. All around them, the whole room rang with happy voices - friends and family, laughing and chatting about good times they'd shared, good times to come. Greg felt it lighting him up as they kissed. It was the sound of the wonderful life that they'd built around themselves. Ten happy years, he thought - only their first ten.

As their lips came apart, his husband had gone pink-cheeked. Mycroft smiled at him from the very depths of his eyes.

Greg gazed back, overwhelmed. "I adore you," he said. He felt a grin breaking out. "Thank you, Myke. Thank you for marrying me."

Mycroft's eyes filled with stars. He smiled, thinking of something.

"One minute," he murmured. "This seems an excellent moment to embarrass you..."

"Embarrass me?" Greg said. "Dare I ask?"

Mycroft reached for his empty wine glass and a teaspoon.

"It is a special occasion, after all," he remarked, his eyes bright.

As he got to his feet, the other members of their table turned to look up at him - Rachel, and the children; Sherlock and John.

The gentle tapping of the spoon against the wineglass filtered its way slowly through the hall. Greg waited with a grin, shaking his head, as everyone gradually turned around in their chairs. Smiles broke out at the sight of Mycroft on his feet. Silence settled across the room. Greg found himself looking into the faces of every friend they'd ever made.

Mycroft refilled his glass, took a quiet drink to fortify himself, then said:

"If I might delay you all for a few moments... celebration and debauchery to follow, as promised, but first a handful of words..."

There was gentle laughter. Looking up, Greg realised his partner was wearing the silver cufflinks Greg had given him fourteen years ago - their very first birthday together. The sight of them made his heart glow softly in his chest.
"I'd like to pay tribute, if I may," Mycroft said, "to the man who is sitting beside me… surrounded by family and friends, and currently enjoying his both fifty-eighth birthday… as well as our tenth wedding anniversary."

There was an outbreak of cheers. Greg grinned, abashed, and filled up his wine glass as he listened.

"As you're all aware," Mycroft went on, his voice carrying clear across the room, "Greg is, and always has been, a man who is tremendously easy to know… a man who wears his heart on his sleeve at all times. Honest... and loyal... and as brave as a lion. He is also tremendously easy to love, as every single person here can attest from experience."

Greg smiled down into his wine, feeling his cheeks flush. As he did, his sister's hand rested in the middle of his back; she rested her head happily on his shoulder. On his other side, John patted him on the arm.

"I find myself surrounded by people who, at the earliest sign of trouble," Mycroft said, "would call my husband first... and would know beyond all doubt that he would cross oceans to help them. The word 'hero' is never lightly used in this world, but… I'm sure you would all join me in using it to describe the man at my side."

A few gentle "Here, here" called out; the lump in Greg's throat thickened. He swallowed around it, gazing up at his husband as he spoke.

"So I would like to say thank you," Mycroft said, glancing down into Greg's eyes, "to the man who took words that I had spent my life reading and then filled them with meaning. The man who taught me that 'there is no remedy for love but to love more'; that 'love is the only gold'… and that 'love conquers all'."

Greg felt his throat gently contract. He reached up for Mycroft's hand; Myke caught his fingers, gently. Greg hadn't realised his husband was shaking.

The entire room was silent, their faces soft with adoration.

Mycroft went on, perfectly composed - his fingers trembling, wrapped in Greg's.

"We have gathered to celebrate a loving uncle, brother, and friend," he said. "And the most loving husband I could ever have wished for. On this day, ten years ago, it was confirmed to me that I am, quite simply, the luckiest man who lives."

Myke looked down into his eyes.

"Every day, I'm given a reason to realise that anew," he said.

Tears came. Greg could not stop them; he did not want to. He gripped Myke's hand and let them fall, aware of his sister beside him crying into her napkin; Sherlock's arm, gathered close around John's shoulders; the faces of everyone who loved them, rapt with quiet affection as Mycroft reached for his glass.

"I would invite you all to raise your glasses with me."

There was a scraping of chairs from all around, as every single guest rose to their feet. Greg's heart soared at the sight. The whole room held their glasses high, brightly gleaming in the light of the chandeliers.

"To the man who is my husband," Mycroft said, "and my best friend… to my strength, and my joy.
To my hero.

He looked into Greg's eyes. Tears shone in his own, unashamed.

"You are the best of me," he murmured.

Rachel sobbed into her napkin. Greg felt his heart expanding to fill every inch of his being, every scrap of who he was. He was shining with it. He was whole.

He'd been whole for fourteen years.

Mycroft raised his glass.

"To Gregory Holmes," he proposed.

Every voice in the room rang with the words.

"To Gregory Holmes!"

They drank. Greg could barely get the wine down his throat. He gave up, put the glass aside and got to his feet. As he drew Mycroft into his arms, the room around them roared with cheers. Applause, cries and whistles echoed in his ears as he held Myke so tightly he thought they would simply melt together - one soul, one body, one desperately beating heart. They kissed, brimming over with love.

As the room thundered around them, Mycroft whispered in his ear. "I love you..."

Greg closed his eyes; his heart was at peace. "I love you too," he breathed.

Their first ten married years, he thought.

He couldn't wait to see what the next ten had in store.

THE END

Author's Final Notes

Let me just light a cigarette, everyone...

Was it good for you? Because it was definitely good for me.

These are by far the most intense Author's Notes I've ever had to write. I've both longed to put them together and dreaded it.

A year ago, I had all but given up on writing. I was within a breath of abandoning the one thing that has driven me all my life. I'm not going to bore you with the story of how I got there - just thank you, wholeheartedly, for reading the story that got me out.
In fact, I need to thank a large number of people - people without whom we would not have reached this happy ending.

Foremost, my deepest and most heartfelt thanks go to my beta reader Avid and to my good friend Angel, who between them previewed the final six chapters. They put a staggering amount of work into making sure the end of the story was at its very best. After 190,000 words of emotional turmoil, I had no intention of letting you all down - and because of their care and dedication, this story has the ending it deserves.

I am deeply, desperately grateful to them both.

I also need to say a serious thank you to a dedicated bunch of readers, some of whom have been with this story right from the start.

I know it's no easy thing to put your faith in an unfinished story - we've all had our hearts broken. And so, by name, I would like to say thank you for putting your faith in East End Boy to:

- Lemondropped, Megsnotutopia, Elaine27, Mice, Lizlemler and Undun
- Egmon73, Dr_Pendulum, TodayIsWhereYourBookBegins, BourbonNeat, Dianna, Addie, Bobsyouruncle and Shadowmink
- Reader_reader, Jalizar, OhHelloThere, Delightfully_demented, Obssadie, warminsanity, Rector, Midnightsscream, Topicabo, tocotronica, Kaapp and Pandamonium_express

To all of you - throughout this whole process, the sight of your names popping up in my inbox has never failed to bring a grin to my face. Thank you so much for your many comments, your kudos and your engagement. Every word you've ever sent me has lit up my heart. I am endlessly, infinitely grateful to you all.

If you enjoyed East End Boy, you might be happy to know there's more from this Myke and Greg. A Man of Honour is set in the same universe - it's a story-within-a-story, combining a weekend at a wedding in North Yorkshire with romantic medieval shenanigans.

You might also like Under The Rose, which is Mycroft-centric - a slow-build romance with lots of love and trust... or, if you enjoy longer fiction, Excultus is my longest - 300k - and has a bad-ass Greg and Mycroft working together as detectives in twenty-third-century London.

Greg & Sally / Mycroft & Anthea friendships are a big part of The Boss (15k) - or, near Christmas, you might like For Services Rendered - 11k of Mycroft's wildest dreams coming true. Things happen on a fur blanket. It's all terribly festive.

Until next time, let me know your thoughts - give me a shout if you have any requests - and come join us on Tumblr for the after-party! You'll find me there as Mottlemoth. I love to chat. <3

Thank you for reading all this way.

Thank you for investing in the story.

Thank you for being part of my reason again.
With all of my love and best wishes -

*Moth.* x
BONUS: Glad

Chapter Summary

A bonus ficlet to the main story, written with endless love for TheRedheadinQuestion.

Chapter Notes

Many wonderful people have been kind enough to love this story - among them, my beautiful Redsie. I couldn't ask for a more caring and supportive patron. This ficlet is but a tiny token of my appreciation. I'll make you proud, Redsie. I promise. x

It was nearly nine when Greg got home. The Stevenson case had gone south; it was a mess. He'd hardly seen Mycroft, Rachel or the kids all week. At times like this, he had to wonder why on earth he still did it.

As he let himself into the kitchen, exhausted, the sound of quiet murmuring caught his ear.

Curious, still in his coat, he leant around the door of the lounge.

He found his husband sitting on the couch, his reading glasses settled at the end of his nose, with a small dark head cushioned on his shoulder. Greg couldn't quite see what he was reading to Jess; one of her books from school. A stuffed lion in her arms peeked just over the edge of her blanket. She looked as if she was on the verge of sleep, nestled as close to Mycroft as she could.

For a moment or two, Greg couldn't move. The sight left him paralysed into place, aching with love for them both, suddenly glad to the soul he'd worked late—just so he could walk in to this.

This is my life, he realised. This is my world.

As he gazed from the doorway, overwhelmed, his husband glanced up over his glasses. Mycroft eyed him with amusement, barely skipping in his flow, and idly turned the page.

He read Jess the end of her story—by which point, she'd fallen to sleep.

The lump in Greg's throat almost hurt.

"I love you," he whispered, lifting Jess into his arms. She lolled against him, unconscious; her lion tumbled to the floor. "I love you so much. Both of you. I mean it."

Mycroft's eyes shone in the soft half-light.

He leant down, retrieved the stuffed lion, and handed it gently to Greg. "Don't forget Roary, darling."
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!