Under the Rose
by Mottlemoth

Summary

It's no surprise for Greg Lestrade to discover that, when it comes to relationships, Mycroft Holmes doesn't really do things like other people. Mycroft's lack of experience and intense need for privacy will take some special care—but that's fine.

Greg's always been a patient man.
It started, as things so often did, with Sherlock.

Greg carried him from the drug den in Lambeth himself - half-dead, drugged out of his skull, as filthy as the rats that infested the place. Sherlock was lucky he'd only got one stab wound. Greg would never forget that night.

He had to pull Mycroft's number from Sherlock's phone, then rang him awkwardly from the hospital to say he'd better get here quick. Mycroft made it there so fast he must have broken several traffic laws. He spent the night in a chair at Sherlock's side, while Greg spent it at home, barely sleeping, waking every hour to read the text updates that Mycroft was good enough to send. At six AM, Greg went in to take over, so that Mycroft could go home for a shower and some food.

Over the next few days, they exchanged updates on the patient by text. It opened into short stretches of chat - enquiring after each other; gratitude for support; absolute rejection of any need whatsoever for gratitude. Greg fussed a bit that Mycroft wasn't sleeping. Mycroft fussed that Greg didn't eat.

Then after ten days, Sherlock discharged himself from hospital without either of them knowing. They arrived that night to find his room cleared, his bed made, no sign that he was ever there. He'd returned to Baker Street without a backwards glance, and nothing more was said of the matter.

Greg had felt uneasy with him for it, for a while.

But then, he supposed, Sherlock hadn't seen his brother pale and hunched as he slept in a hospital chair - tie loosened, cuffs rolled, handmade brogues slipped off and discarded without thought beneath the bed, too exhausted and worried to care what happened to them. He hadn't seen the look on Mycroft's face when Greg first brought him a decent coffee from the shop down the road. He hadn't been there to witness Mycroft asking every question that could possibly be asked, demanding the best for his brother, settling for nothing less.

Greg had tried to tell him. He felt like Sherlock needed to know - but Sherlock just didn't seem to hear it.

"Is he paying you to spy on me?" Sherlock asked with a quizzical frown, the third time Greg tried to bring the subject up.

They were standing in the entrance hall of The Natural History Museum, examining a body that the staff swore had not been there when they locked up. They'd come in to find the unknown man sprawled halfway up a staircase, and one of the stegosaurus skeletons was missing. The whole thing gone, not a bone left - vanished in the night. Sherlock was having far too much fun with this one already.
"Is he - ..." Greg said. "Are you serious? No, Sherlock... of course Mycroft's not paying me to spy on you."

"Has he offered?"

Greg stared at him in astonishment. "Does he usually offer?"

"Yes," Sherlock said, as if this were obvious. His brow twitched with confusion. "I wonder why he hasn't offered you..." Answers supplied themselves to his brain at once. "Too noble. Police officer... unlikely to accept, and I'd be inclined to conceal immoral practice from you with some diligence anyway... you're not worth his time."

His grey eyes shuttered - case closed - and he whirled off to investigate how easily an intruder could have scaled the nearby mammoth skeleton to reach the skylight.

Greg liked Sherlock. He was a bloody miracle, sometimes.

He could be pretty bloody stupid too.

Because since he'd discharged himself from hospital, his brother had continued to text Greg - every day, in fact.

Most days, several times.

And Greg was texting him back.

Nearly a month had passed, and they'd been meeting for coffee twice a week - just to talk. At first, it had been to talk about Sherlock - but now the weeks were going by, and it was rare that they mentioned him much anymore. They were too busy talking about everything else. Tomorrow, Greg was going for lunch at The Diogenes.

He was definitely worth Mycroft's time.

Although it had started in January, it was spring before they realised.

By that point, 'Mycroft Lunch' had become a frequent feature of Greg's calendar. He liked Mycroft's company. He liked his take on the world, and he liked his bone-dry sense of humour, and he liked spending time with someone who was nothing whatsoever to do with work. They talked about work, of course - they talked about everything - but Mycroft wasn't another weary Scotland Yarder, chatting just to get through until five. He was Greg's friend. He wasn't here because he was paid for it.

They now texted back and forth most of the day, at a pace that led several people to ask Greg if he'd got himself a lady. Nobody seemed to believe him when he said it was just a mate.

He spent most of his evenings lying on the sofa with the TV on in the background, texting Mycroft - films, travel destinations, food. There didn't seem to be a country in the world that Mycroft hadn't visited. Greg found it amazing.

March rolled round. One day they met for coffee, and Mycroft was startled to see Greg in jeans and a jumper - he hadn't realised it was his week off. Greg had come in specially. "Why wouldn't I?"
Greg said, "It's good to see you." They shared a piece of carrot cake along with coffee, and Greg walked him back to his office at three PM, talking all the way about the new Mercedes-Benz C-Class Coupe. Greg wondered if a four-cylinder diesel engine would be too noisy; but Mycroft informed him that the V8 engine on the C63 S model would clearly deliver the sort of breathtaking performance that would leave one deaf to all sound in the universe, and furthermore that Greg would want one as soon as he laid eyes on Mycroft's.

Soon, April had arrived. The evenings were longer; the air was cleaner. They started meeting in bars after work, just to talk. Greg discovered that Mycroft was a billiards demon, and Mycroft was appalled that Greg had never experienced live chamber music. They went one night to Wigmore Hall. As it started, all the hair rose up on the back of Greg's neck. He glanced across after a wide-eyed and enraptured half hour to find Mycroft watching him in wonder, his eyes full of something Greg couldn't quite describe.

Greg had a stack of CDs now.

They calmed him down after work; they reminded him of Mycroft.

He didn't know if other men listened to music that reminded them of their friends. In a way, he didn't care. Other people could do whatever the hell they wanted.

He liked Mycroft.

He liked him a lot. They were both busy professionals, and they worked hard, and it was fine. Greg had spent too much of his life with girlfriends and an ex-wife who never had much to talk to him about; who didn't understand or care much about the intricacies of his job, and what a pain in the arse it all was for him; who just thought Sherlock was a weirdo, and that Greg was a bit of a weirdo for putting up with him.

Mycrof didn't seem to think anything of the sort.

Greg was too busy enjoying it all to try and work out what it was. It was a good seven years since Greg's run of girlfriends had been broken by a boyfriend - but he and Mycroft never touched - let alone kissed.

He didn't know if this was a strangely romantic friendship or a sexless romance. He didn't know if Mycroft even operated within normal categories of human relationships. Sherlock certainly didn't - God knew John had suffered for it over the years - so why should his brother be any different?

He and Mycroft were happy, Greg thought. That was good enough for him.

The day it all came out was an ordinary one in early May. They'd arranged to meet for lunch near Scotland Yard - a little bistro with a good menu and a reputation for top class coffee. They got there at twelve, took a table in the window and ordered food.

Before the food had even arrived, Greg had realised something was wrong.

His usual conversation seemed to be going nowhere. Mycroft's answers were short, evasive and oddly factual. He was supplying requested information, but no more. He was shifty about something - unhappy - he was pale and he didn't look like he'd slept, even though he assured Greg
he was fine, simply busy at work.

If he'd been facing Greg across an interview room, Greg would have advised him to go call his bloody lawyer. He was hiding something, and it wasn't anything good. Greg knew that look. He'd seen it before.

He found himself gazing miserably at those clever grey eyes, usually so quick to seek out and settle in his own.

Today, he watched them flick to everything in the world rather than him. Dully they scanned the menu, even after the order had been taken. They twitched to the street outside, narrowed at other patrons and watched waiters carrying drinks.

They didn't seem to want Greg anymore.

Food, when it arrived, was a tasteless relief - an excuse to sit in silence. Greg ate quickly, provided his half of the bill and tried not to remember with miserable embarrassment the morning he'd spent looking forward to this - looking forward to Mycroft. Good lunch, good conversation, good company. Those bright grey eyes.

He didn't know what had changed, but something had.

The two of them weren't close enough for him to ask - but close enough for it to hurt.

They said a short and emotionless goodbye just outside. Greg watched Mycroft walk away along the street, his coat collar turned up, shoulders hunched.

Greg had the distinct feeling he was watching someone walk out of his life.

It hurt like hell.

But what could he do? Run after Mycroft, and beg him not to end… this? Whatever 'this' even was. Greg watched him go, his chest caving right there on the street, trying to scrap together what he could even possibly say. "Please don't end maybe starting to fancy me." But this wasn't a romantic comedy. This was real life, and sometimes people just got bored and changed their minds. Had it even been more than a friendship for Mycroft? He might not even be gay.

And Greg realised far too late, as he watched Mycroft walk away, that it had been more than a friendship for him.

A romance? Never any hard evidence for that - but a pre-romance, maybe. A quiet and patient bond. It was too formless and too fragile for him to race after Mycroft down the street. It had only nearly been - and now it was gone.

It was over, and there was nothing Greg could say. There was nothing he could do.

He could only watch as Mycroft walked away, and do his best to wish the guy some happiness in life.

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Greg sat quietly at his desk for the rest of the afternoon, trying to fill the time.
He got a lot of paperwork done.

It was the irony of the situation that when he was distressed, he usually texted Mycroft for company. Instead, his mobile sat morose and silent all day.

Suddenly it was no longer a phone, full of conversation - it was now just an uncommunicative lump of plastic with the time on the screen, whose only purpose was to remind Greg every ten minutes that he had no new messages.

At six PM, his phone buzzed quietly where he'd left it by the fridge. Greg finished chopping carrots for tonight's dinner before he checked it.

May I ask you something?
It is awkward. I wouldn't ask
if it weren't important. M.
Received 18:01

Greg stared at the message, wishing his heart hadn't lodged immediately in his throat.

He knew this shouldn't be affecting him like it was. They were just… coffee-friends, after all - friends who texted each other all the time - and met for lunch twice a week, and sometimes wandered round the park together... and reached for each other when they were distressed...

Sure... do you want me to ring?
I'm just at home
Sent 18:09

No. This will be easier for me to say in text. M.
Received 18:11

Greg held his breath, watching the typing bubble continue to bob. The message, when it came, speared him to the heart.

What do you want from me? M.
Received 18:11

What do I… WANT from you?
I don't understand. I get the feeling I've messed up somewhere.
I'm sorry, whatever I did.
Honestly. I never meant to 
piss you off

Sent 18:14

What underlies your interest in me?
I don't understand why you are kind to 
me. I need to know what drives it.

Received 18:15

I can't apologise for my bluntness. I need 
to know what you're expecting from me.

Received 18:16

Or I cannot see you any more. M.

Received 18:17

"Christ," Greg managed in a breath. He sank down into a chair at the kitchen table, trying to piece 
together a reply in his head.

Erm. Maybe not helpful but... what
do YOU want? Have I been too much?
I was just kinda enjoying things...
I like your company. I suppose
TODAY I wanted to have lunch

Sent 18:23

You wish to be my friend, then. M.

Received 18:25

Greg read the text five times.

It was simple enough - but he kept reading it, hoping with each new pass of his eyes that he'd be 
able to read the other words he thought he could maybe see behind them.

Okay you said "awkward"...
let's make this awkward...
What else is there that I could 
be? Just so I know the options

Sent 18:28

I am 45 years of age. If I was 
25 perhaps I'd have the strength 
or patience for verbal games. Not 
anymore. Tell me what you want 
from me now or I cannot cope. M.

Received 18:30
Okay… well… I'm 45 too. And you're being as evasive as I am. You started this, so how about we both cut the verbal games.

Sent 18:31

Ask what you were really asking. And I'll tell you what I'm thinking.

Sent 18:32

Greg's half-prepared food had been abandoned on the counter top. He didn't want to eat it anymore. He sat at the table and waited, staring at his phone, willing each minute to pass faster until it finally coughed up a reply.

You're interested in me. Sexually. M.

Received 18:38

It was blunt, Greg thought.

But there it was.

It was a little scary to see it voiced.

It was more astonishing to realise that Mycroft Holmes spent his life traversing the stormy waters of international politics, and handled it all with the same deft and controlled cool that he put on a pair of cufflinks - but had now been reduced to sledgehammer negotiations. Words, stuttered out by text so he didn’t have to cope with the look on Greg’s face.

That’s not a question. And there’s a difference between “sexually” and “romantically”.

Sent 18:40

What is the difference? M.

Received 18:41

It took Greg a few minutes to construct a reply. He didn't want to get this wrong.

Romance comes first I guess. It’s about company. Then when it leads to sex its not just physical. Its
emotional. It means something. And it matters much more in the end.

Sent 18:44

Are you interested in me romantically? M.
Received 18:45

Greg bit very hard into his lip as he typed. Hitting send caused him almost physical pain - but he couldn't not send it. He couldn't sit here for the rest of his days at the kitchen table, a pan of water still boiling behind him, carrots shrivelling to nothing as the mince turned into grey dust.

How much will it mess things up if I say yes?
Sent 18:46

There was another painful gap before Mycroft finally sent a reply.

What would change between us? M.
Received 18:51

Greg had a feeling he was being asked to submit a formal proposal.

He took the time to make it good, realising with each new word he typed how much he wanted it to be accepted. Christ, he thought, they'd only been meeting for lunch... now it was all coming out. This had been building since he'd first worked Sherlock's phone out of his filthy pocket, wiped the blood off it and scrolled through his contacts looking for 'M'.

Nothing at first... we'd go on texting and talking. Meet for coffee and lunch and maybe move onto dinner if you wanted. Look out for each other. Think about each other during the day. Just... share time together.
Sent 18:55

This... sounds entirely like what happens now.
Received 18:55
Greg's heart drummed in every corner of his body as he tapped in a response.

Well, there… would be touching, if you wanted that… kissing.
Spend time at each other's flats.
Watch films and hug on the sofa, cook together. And we'd put Xs at the end when we're texting.
Sent 19:00

That's about it.
Sent 19:01

Would there be sex? M.
Received 19:02

This was strange, Greg thought.
He wanted it so much it hurt.

Well… not suddenly no. In time, if you wanted me... there could be. Can I ask? Are you a virgin?
Sent 19:04

No. A number of incidents when I was at university. M.
Received 19:05

Holy shit "incidents"?
Sent 19:06

Eventualities. Occurrences. I didn't mean to suggest trauma was involved. Just a great deal of disappointment, bewilderment and unfathomable awkwardness… M.
Received 19:07

Okay. Don't use that word to a policeman again will you? my heart nearly fucking stopped.
Sent 19:07
So it's been a while for you...
Sent 19:08

Yes. It wasn't anything
worth remembering. M.
Received 19:08

Okay... well... it's never
enjoyable when you're young.
Nobody knows what they
want or how to ask for it. Or
how to give it. especially if
you're gay. That comes later
Sent 19:11

Do you expect romance
always to lead to sex? M.
Received 19:12

It was a loaded question, Greg thought. Nobody wanted to sign up to a life of celibacy by text
message - but all the same, he didn't want to dish out demands either. He didn't want to wreck this,
whatever it was. Whatever it could be.

I guess every relationship is different.
you don't know where it'll go until you
try it. Look I don't "expect" anything
from you?... I just like spending time
with you that's all. I get the feeling
you're not sure about sex. that's fine.
Wasn't intending to have sex with
you today in the bistro... don't intend
to have sex with you the next time
we get coffee. In fact won't be
having any kind of sex with you
unless you look me in the eye
and tell me that you want that.
Sent 19:17

What if that day is
some time away? M.
Received 19:18

It's fine... its not a problem.
Honestly I just like being with
you. that's enough right now.
Sent 19:19

What if that day is soon? M.
Received 19:20
Greg's eyebrow quirked. Unexpected. He typed his response with unease.

_Erm. How soon? I don't want to rush things... been a while for me too. I'd rather take our time._
_Okay so I'm being a soft bastard. But I like you like you are._
_Sent 19:23

_No, that's... fine._
_Reassuring. M._
_Received 19:24

_are you okay?_
_Sent 19:24

_I think so. Strangely calm. M._
_Received 19:25

_Is this why you were weird today at lunch? :( Worried you're getting bored of me_
_Sent 19:25

_I'm sorry. Perhaps I don't handle these things like other people do. I am not at all bored of you. M._
_Received 19:26

_that's fine... we're all different._
_So long as you're okay_
_Sent 19:27

_Are YOU okay? M._
_Received 19:27

_Yeah I'm fine. Honestly I'm glad you said something. I kinda spent the day worrying... I feel a bit excited maybe. Is it alright that I feel that?_
_Sent 19:28

_Yes. That is alright. M x_
_Received 19:28

_Okay. good. x_
_Sent 19:28

_What happens now? M x_
_Received 19:29_
we'll just keep things quiet… just you and me. See where it goes? do you want to try lunch again tomorrow? x
Sent 19:30

I would like that. Both of those things. Where shall we meet? M x
Received 19:31

Cellarium maybe? You liked the tuna steak there. how does 12 sound? x
Sent 19:31

Can we call it one PM? I can stay for longer then. M x
Received 19:32

Cool. 1pm. Meet you at the abbey doors :) x
Sent 19:33

What are you doing now? M x
Received 19:33

just ordering chinese food… starving. Hey how did the thing go this aft? With the steel company finance guy? Did you win? x
Sent 19:34

Oh. God, it was hellish. I did win, but barely. M x
Received 19:34

Tell me. Been looking forward to this… x
Sent 19:35

Very well. I must first ask you to imagine that someone put an ambitious hairpiece on a walrus, dressed it up like David Mellor, gave it halitosis and a binder full of doctored figures, and sent it on its way towards my office... M x
Received 19:36
Hold

Love will enter cloaked in friendship's name.
- Ovid, 'The Art of Love'

For the first few weeks, nothing changed at all. A single reassuring 'x' at the end of every text was Greg's only proof that their talk had even happened.

They did coffee, and they did lunch. They had dinner several times, which turned out to be like a longer, more luxurious lunch - more food, more wine, more conversation. Greg wasn't complaining. One Tuesday after work, they took a walk through Hyde Park and ended up sitting on a bench in the rose garden, snarking about the howling errors committed in TV police dramas, as the late May sun settled in dusky gold across the roses all around them.

And surely, Greg thought - surely - if they were ever going to kiss, it was going to happen here.

He kept catching Mycroft's eye, smiling at him along the back of the bench, and trying to make himself look calm and open and approachable. Mycroft wasn't taking the bait. It started getting chilly, and Greg wondered if he should just go for it - just slide closer, cup Mycroft's face and bloody kiss him here amongst the roses as the sun set, telling himself that somewhere on the planet a string quartet was playing something gorgeous.

But God, he didn't want to scare Mycroft.

It was like dating a shy deer - if they were even dating. Any second now he would step just a bit too close and ruin it, and Mycroft would vanish into the undergrowth with a flash of his fluffy white tail.

He didn't want to be the one to cause that. He'd rather keep it as it was.

In the end, with a quiet shiver, Mycroft remarked that it was cold without the sun. Greg smiled. He let it go, and agreed. They left the park; they parted just down the road from Greg's car.

They spent the evening watching a BBC Two documentary about interwar Russia together, three miles apart.

I can't keep my eyes open much longer... you going to bed soon? x
Sent 23:14

Where do you think I've been since the documentary ended?
I'm quite exhausted. M x
Received 23:14

have you been staying awake all
this time just to text me? Go to sleep man. You run the country. We need you in good nick x
Sent 23:15

Will I see you tomorrow? M x
Received 23:15

yeah of course. Whens your lunch? x
Sent 23:16

I have a noon meeting I'm afraid…
in the middle of a rather over-subscribed
day. Perhaps the club in the evening? M x
Received 23:17

so you can ruin me again at billiards? x
Sent 23:17

I wouldn't keep ruining you if you
maintained a proper stance Greg. You
need to provide clearance for your
stroke and stay down on the shot.
I've told you this. M x
Received 23:18

Fine fine... clearly I need another
lesson. see you there at 8pm? x
Sent 23:19

Mm, see you there. Goodnight. M x
Received 23:19

g'night... sleep tight x
Sent 23:20

you still awake? x
Sent 23:32

Yes. Is everything alright? M x
Received 23:32

I wanted to kiss you today. In the
park. just needed you to know x
Sent 23:34

I had a feeling you did. M x
Received 23:36
is it okay that I wanted to? x
Sent 23:36

Yes. M x
Received 23:38

should I have? x
Sent 23:38

No. May we discuss this when I'm not half asleep? M x
Received 23:39

yeah of course. You go off to sleep now... I'll be quiet.
speak tomorrow x
Sent 23:40

Speak tomorrow... good night. M x
Received 23:41

I wanted to kiss you too. M x
Received 02:46

Mycroft ruined Greg at billiards twice without a blink, then called for scotch.

"You relax into the game, then lapse into poor habits," he said, as he slipped off his suit jacket and discarded it over the back of a nearby armchair. The fire in their private room was low and almost treacly in its light. It was nearly June, but it felt like the deepest winter's evening. "Here. Let us do this properly."

He cleared the table, set up practice shots and tossed back two fingers of the fifteen-year-old Glen Scotia. Greg watched in amusement, leaning on his cue.

"Come here," Mycroft said, when the table was ready. His eyes flashed.

Greg grinned, picked up his whiskey, and came here.

"Take up the stance," Mycroft said, "but do not make the shot."

Greg swirled his whiskey, took a drink and obeyed, settling comfortably into position.
"Your hold isn't poor," Mycroft said, adding: "Now that you're concentrating... lift this hand a little - spread your fingers more - there. Notice that it gives the very tip of the strike more support."

Greg was noticing a number of things - chiefly, that the feeling of Mycroft gently adjusting his hand beneath a billiards cue was doing more for him than most girlfriends had ever managed in his life.

The shock that wracked through him at the contact of their hands stopped his breath for a second. It was like lightning - emotional lightning - cracking through him, blowing all his circuits, setting his heart leaping and bucking at once behind his ribs. Mycroft’s fingers were cool and careful as they discreetly rearranged his grip.

It was a gentle touch - functional - entirely chaste. It made all of Greg pound and rejoice and despair. He kept the feelings and the thoughts off his face, concentrating his gaze on the ball.

"Stop glaring at it like you're going to eat it, Greg... you'll lean into the shot too much. Focus on the cue, not the ball."

Greg grinned, his seriousness shattered. He let out a laugh as Mycroft suddenly applied gentle pressure between his shoulder blades.

"What are you doing?" he asked, twisting his head to see.

"You need to be down on the ball," Mycroft said. "The cue should be directly beneath your chin."

Greg bit down on his tongue rather hard, and allowed Mycroft to lower him into position - lifting his elbow, turning his body, readjusting his grip. In any other relationship, Greg thought, this would probably have escalated into filthy sex already. Mycroft was basically bending him over a billiards table.

Matters weren't helped as Mycroft gently placed a foot against Greg's instep, and nudged him to part his feet a little more.

"Are you looking at the ball?" Mycroft enquired.

"Yes," said Greg, staring at it fixedly along the cue.

"Stop it at once," Mycroft said, amused. "Close your eyes instead."

"Christ..." Greg laughed - and closed his eyes.

"This is the strike," Mycroft said. He showed Greg: a smooth, easy motion that felt too slow, too long. "But do not think of it as a strike... this is not to be done quickly. Imagine you are moving your arm through water - a longer stroke will impart more momentum."

Greg resisted the urge to swallow. In the firelit quiet of the room, he knew any such noise would be mortifyingly loud - but Mycroft's expert hold against his back was magnificent, and the grip of his hands was intoxicating - the dexterity with which he moved - it felt sublime. It was melting Greg’s bones into nothing. He needed no prompting to keep his eyes closed.


The words were almost murmured against his shoulder, soft and somehow protective - teaching him, sharing. Greg’s heart tightened dangerously.
"If you remain as you are, you will prevent any accidental motion from deviating the shot... and, after all this trouble, that is the last thing we need..."

Greg realised suddenly that he couldn't cope a second longer.

"Mycroft," he bit out.

It sounded strange in his ears - strained and desperate. It was almost a bloody croak.

But that name felt so good in his mouth. He couldn't hide it. His shoulders shook.

In the same awful moment, Mycroft fell still.

He seemed to realise all at once what had developed here - what they were doing - and he let go of Greg with sudden awkwardness.

"Forgive me," he said. His voice tightened, flustered. "This - scotch is - absolutely lethal, I should not have - "

Greg's heart contracted. He realised his deer was turning tail. Mycroft was about to sprint away for the safety of the forest, and be gone.

"Don't," he begged. He put the cue aside at once, his chest muscles tightening. "Don't clam up. Please."

Mycroft said nothing, staring at him from beside the armchair to which he'd retreated. He looked deeply and desperately unhappy.

"Please," Greg said. "It's - it's all okay. We can talk about this, can't we? You - " He swallowed, hard. All his instincts told him to block the door. "You said you wanted to kiss me. Yesterday. In the park. I just - "

Mycroft immediately went white.

"We are in public," he managed, strangled. "Please. Stop this. We - cannot discuss this here."

Greg's heart reeled.

"We're - in a private room," he said, his eyes flashing in confusion towards the firmly shut oak door. "What - what's the - "

"A private room in public," Mycroft said, beginning to shake. He looked as if he were about to pass out. "Please. Please don't say another word. My reputation is - ...

Greg wrestled with it for a second, his heart pounding. He didn't understand. There probably wasn't a more private place in London than this - behind a closed door in a swanky club, where most of the patrons never even spoke.

But he'd never seen Mycroft look like this before. Never. Not even when Sherlock was on just a fifty-fifty chance of making it through the night. He'd never seen fear like that in Mycroft's eyes.

Maybe it was the club, Greg thought - The Diogenes - all his posh friends sitting just down the corridor.

"Okay," he said. He breathed it out, promising it, and watched Mycroft relax just a little. His heart surged with the tiny success. "Let's - go to a pub or something," he murmured. "We'll get a drink.
and talk there."

It was the wrong thing to say.

Mycroft's heart broke anew; his face opened in despair.

"A pub?" he breathed.

"... yes," Greg said - and started to panic all over again. "There's... The Fox, just down the road from - ... why? What's - "

"Do you truly wish to share this with the entirety of The Fox?" Mycroft managed, white-faced and wild with fear. "Would it be more efficient just to commission a full-page editorial in The Times?"

"God - ..." Greg didn't know where to start. "Mycroft, I - ... nobody would be listening to - "

"No," Mycroft bit out, suddenly sharp. "No. This is - ..."

He took a moment to fortify himself, shaking as he gripped at the back of the armchair. His face set in anger. He hissed the words, spat them, as rigid and unhappy as a cornered alley cat

"We will discuss this in private. Nowhere else. I am a - private person, Greg - deeply private - my personal life is - ... and if you cannot understand that, then perhaps you should - "

"No - no, Myke. No. Don't say that." Greg couldn't breathe. His heart was trying to heave itself out of his throat. "I understand. I'm sorry. I just didn't realise you thought of this as - ..." He stopped, seeing Mycroft's eyes flash with renewed distress. " - ... but it is for you. That's what matters."

He screwed up every ounce of courage he'd ever had.

"Where's private?" he asked. "Where will feel safe for you?"

"Our homes," Mycroft snarled, as if this should be perfectly obvious. "Not here. Not in a - pub."

"Okay. Well..." Greg swallowed, glancing nervously at the nineteenth century clock above the fire. "Look, it's... not even ten. And I've upset you. How about we call it a night here, and - go to my flat? Or go to your place - whatever makes you feel safe. We can have a coffee there and just... talk. Talk in private." Greg hesitated. "Just you and me."

Mycroft made no sound. His face gave nothing away, his eyes burning dark within a pale and unbearable expression.

"I want to make this alright," Greg said, weakly. It didn't seem enough. "Please."

Something cracked a little in Mycroft's gaze.

He reached numbly for his suit jacket.

"Very well." He averted his eyes from Greg as he pulled it on, cheeks now flushing from deathly white to full bloom. "My - apartment is on the way to your flat."

Greg bit his lip. He didn't dare exhale just yet. He didn't think he could - not until he knew this would be okay.

"Shall we... go to your place, then?" he suggested.
Mycroft’s nod was barely visible.

They waited outside the club’s side entrance in near total silence. Neither could bring himself to look at the other. Their shoulders remained tense, their expressions grey. After a few minutes, a thin, insipid rain began to fall, and Mycroft opened the umbrella above Greg’s head, stepping near to him to share it - but they were still a thousand miles apart. The silence only deepened. The rain made barely a sound on the umbrella. All Greg could hear were Mycroft’s rushing thoughts, analysing him, trying to work out what his game was. He wanted to intervene.

He wanted to know what conclusions they were coming to. He wanted to step in and correct them - to fight for his own honour against whatever demons were currently advising Mycroft. He didn't dare say a word, though. If a private room in a private club was not private, he couldn’t imagine what would happen if he brought this up in the street.

The drive to Kensington was no more comfortable. Greg had hoped the privacy of Mycroft’s Q7 would settle its owner somewhat, but it certainly didn’t seem so. Mycroft stayed as pale and unwell as Greg had ever seen him, one leg crossed away over the other, hands folded in his lap. His gaze remained fixed without emotion on some meaningless section of the car door.

In the space created by the throttling silence, Greg found himself thinking wild, unsettling things - firstly, what the hell Mycroft’s driver must be wondering, summoned to collect his employer and his employer’s Oddly Close Friend and drive them to the apartment in a silence that suggested they were both about to be executed; secondly, what the hell Greg was meant to say to Mycroft when they got there; and whether this was really the way he wanted to see Myke’s home for the first time. But then, he thought, how else would he ever have seen it?

Would they just have kept going with this fairytale, sexless bromance until one of them got too puddled to leave the nursing home for their dates? Christ, how the hell had this happened? It happened because Sherlock got stabbed in Lambeth by a crackhead, Greg thought. That was how it happened.

Obviously.

This was the sort of sense his life made these days.

Mycroft’s building turned out to be the grand sort of South Kensington architectural marvel that always made Greg feel rather grubby - white stucco and a columned portico, and a uniformed concierge who knew better than to greet the building’s residents. There were fresh lilies in gleaming crystal vases in the entrance hall. Everything was painfully clean. As they stepped into the lift, Mycroft uncomfortably removed his gloves and pressed the button for the fifth floor, his cheeks grey, his shoulders stiff.

"Is it... okay for me to speak yet?" Greg asked him, as the lift ascended.

Mycroft’s gaze flickered with discomfort, watching the buttons light up as they passed each floor. "I... never forbade you to speak," he said.

"I mean, does this count as private yet?"

Mycroft’s brow contracted. Greg took it as a no. He pushed his hands into his pockets, kept his head down and his mouth shut until Mycroft had keyed them into Apartment Five via the alarm panel set beside the door.
He stood back to allow Greg to enter first, his gaze carefully averted.

Greg held his breath and stepped inside.

It was a stupidly beautiful flat - lovingly, lavishly beautiful - whites, creams and the softest grey-blues, suede leather sofas, patterned dove-grey wallpaper and dark walnut wood fittings, with dinky chandeliers trying their very hardest not to look like chandeliers. The place had a delicacy and an Englishness about it - French touches, too - and like most of the capital's rich and famous, Mycroft had been born with an innate talent for lighting. Somehow he'd turned it into an artform. An elegant array of lamps cast their soft glow around the flat, warming it with the kind of supremely classy peace that only wealthy homes ever had.

As Greg ran his uneasy gaze around the magnificent lounge, noting an ornate mirror, a toy piano and a vase of decorative white feather plumes, he heard Mycroft quietly lock the door behind him.

_Alone_, he thought.

It softened his nerves. Properly alone, for the first time.

It was a strangely intimate gesture.

He knew he could unlock that door and leave at any moment, if he wanted - but something about the tiny, gentle sound made his heart go quiet.

Mycroft wanted him to stay for a while.

More importantly, Mycroft wanted the world to stay out there - away from them both.

Greg turned to face his friend, steeling himself with a breath. He pushed his hands nervously into the pockets of his jacket.

"Look," he said. "I - didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I… um, this… is becoming kinda big for me - and - I don't want you to pull away. I'd hate it if I made you feel like -"

Mycroft took a few quiet steps towards him. Greg's voice faltered, watching him come closer.

"- um - if you felt like your reputation was - being endangered because - "

Mycroft wasn't looking him in the eye.

"- because… by me - by whatever it is that we - um -"

Mycroft reached him. With an intake of breath, Greg bumbled into silence.

Mycroft's arms went around him, quietly - under his arms, around his middle - and gathered him into a hug.

And for the longest time, that was all it was. Mycroft nuzzled into the shoulder of his jacket and held him, and Greg found himself so shocked that for a little while he didn't move at all. He simply froze, wondering if this was really happening.

As the seconds crept by, he realised that it _was_ happening - that Mycroft was hugging him like they were kids, and they'd been playing out on the street all day and didn't want to go home - and he wondered with an awful, desperate pang how long it had been since Mycroft had hugged anyone, that he now hugged like _this_. His heart thundered in his chest as he wrapped his arms slowly around Mycroft's torso, barely breathing.
Mycroft squeezed him, softly - like he was too precious to hug tight.

"Myke," Greg managed, faintly.

Mycroft didn't let go of him.

"I…"

It was a secret, whispered - for Greg alone in the world to hear.

"I had - given up," Mycroft said. "Before you."

Greg's breath caught in the back of his throat. Mycroft's fingers shook on his shoulders.

"I - thought - " Mycroft shuddered, holding him a little tighter. "Not for me," he said. "Not for someone like me. Not in this lifetime."

"Christ - Myke…” Greg realised he was starting to cry. He buried his face into Mycroft's neck, overcome. "I - I don't wanna embarrass you - I know you like your privacy."

"You don't understand how - strange this is for me. How long it's been. You could - …" Mycroft tremored as he breathed in, frightened, and his voice cracked in Greg's ear. Greg felt his heart rip itself in two. " - could have anyone - anyone in the world - someone who isn't - … oh, God - so damn inexperienced and - and terrified - … what in hell's name are you doing here, Greg? What are you doing here with me? I don't understand."

"I'm - trying to fall in love with you," Greg gasped out. "Idiot. Just - shut up, will you? Stop saying things like that…"

He dug his hands into Mycroft's back, shaking.

"I don't care how long it's been," he said. "And I don't want 'experienced'… alright? I don't want any of the shit you think I should want. I just want you. I want to text you and play billiards with you and sit in Hyde Park with you. The rest we can take slow. I mean it, Myke. It's fine."

"I need privacy," Mycroft managed against his shoulder. He sounded close to tears. "I can't - be like that in London with you, Greg. With anyone. I don't wish to share myself with the whole damn city."

"Jesus…” Greg wasn't going to survive this. He was going to burst or melt or just turn into light in one brilliant, blinding flash, and that would be it. He couldn't cope with this amount of feeling. He held onto Mycroft, lost. "Not in public, then. I promise. We'll just - just as we are. Just friends in public. Then - behind closed doors - … then. But not where you're scared."

Mycroft's breath hitched. Greg heard him swallow a little, and Mycroft lifted his head - bewildered, nervous - he brushed his cheek quietly against Greg's.

"Please be patient with me," he managed in Greg's ear. "I - want you. I do. I just…"

Greg drew back a little to look up at him. He caught Mycroft's eyes and held them, matching all of their fear with love.

"You don't have to worry," he said. "I meant it - what I said. I don't expect a single thing from you. I'm just…” He hesitated, feeling his heart heave. "... just having a good time with you. That's all. That's enough for me. Is it enough for you?"
Mycroft stared into his eyes, his face fraught with terror, desperation and wonder all at once. Greg had never seen so many things sitting within a single expression. It was amazing.

"You okay?" he murmured.

Mycroft's gaze flickered briefly to his mouth - then back to his eyes, pupils swelling a little. "Yes," he said, his voice thick. "Yes, I… I believe I'm fine."

Greg paused, wondering if this was the moment to push - or the moment to back respectfully away. He realised it was the moment to talk like grown-ups.

"Last night, you... said you wanted to kiss me." He held Mycroft's gaze; his breath shallowed. "Do you still want to?"

Mycroft didn't move for a second, regarding Greg very closely.

"I've - thought about it..." he confessed at last. Colour flared in his cheeks. "I've - thought about it quite often."

"Yeah?" Christ, Greg thought. It's happening. "If you want that… I'm here. Literally right here now. And it's just us." They still had their arms around each other; they were still toe-to-toe, standing by Mycroft's door. "It's just you and me. We're safe. Nobody knows."

Mycroft flushed a little; embarrassment crept across his face.

"I - haven't taken your coat," he mumbled. "I haven't even offered you a drink..."

Greg waited, his breath held.

Mycroft's expression tightened.

Then he slowly leant nearer, closing his eyes.

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Hey... good morning...
Last night was okay for you... wasn't it? x
Sent 09:13

You refer to the blissful two hours we spent kissing on my sofa like oversexed teenagers? Yes...
Yes, it was "okay" for me... M xx
Received 09:15

Christ... never been so relieved in my whole life. maybe we’re just making up for lost time xx
Sent 09:17
Perhaps we are. I’m now attempting to review the impact of recent environmental legislation on our economic growth. I can’t concentrate for the thought of you kissing my neck. M xx

Received 09:19

God. Myke. Be careful or this is going to take an interesting turn for a Thursday morning… xx

Sent 09:20

I think things might have taken an interesting turn already… M xx

Received 09:20

can I see you today?
are you busy? xx

Sent 09:21

Strange whim. Say no if you wish. Would you like to cook together? I have a Château Leoville Barton that has aged to its best now. I believe it would only benefit from your company… M xx

Received 09:24

When should I expect you and Leoville Barton at my flat?
and does he like lasagne? xx

Sent 09:25

He does, very much. He and I can be round at eight, if that suits.
How spacious is your sofa? M xx

Received 09:26

Mycroffffffit xx

Sent 09:26

Ah, I’ve been re-awarded my full name, have I? Don’t think I haven’t noticed “Myke”. M xx

Received 09:27

is ‘myke’ alright? couch is very spacious. Definitely room for two. I’ll show you xx

Sent 09:28

To you. Yes. ‘Myke’ is alright.
Though please don’t say it in front of Sherlock. Leoville and I look forward to the demonstration of your sofa with great interest. M xx

Received 09:29
A trendy tapas bar in Soho, just opened - Greg's choice. Mycroft was at first bewildered by the concept, then bemused as more and more tiny plates of food kept appearing on their table. After a glass or two of Larios Dry Gin, he relaxed gorgeously and the whole thing became rather funny. They shared a tasting board of desserts, then a taxi to Greg's flat in Hammersmith. It was only ten o'clock; they didn't want to say goodnight yet.

They slumped side-by-side on Greg's sofa, more than a little drunk, and talked about nonsense for nearly two hours.

They played with each other's fingers as they talked, holding hands. As the night deepened, they lapsed into kissing - soft, stroking each other's faces - gin and stubble and the gentle darkness.

This was how they made love.

Greg put as much care and attentiveness into every kiss as he'd have put into sex.

They only ever kissed slowly, and only when there was time. Mycroft didn't do airy pecks on the cheek. It always began softly, like this, and it unfolded in stages - cupping Mycroft's face, gazing into his eyes - drawing close together - a few breaths of anticipation shared between them - knowing, gently wanting each other. The first shy, fragile contact; the first press of lips. It was sacred. It was special. Greg loved to caress his thumbs along Mycroft's jaw as, over long moments, those first gentle presses deepened into more lingering strokes, then sealing together - the first tender touches of tongue - Mycroft's languid shivers of enjoyment.

Sometimes that was all, and they parted to gaze at each other - to enjoy their post-kiss closeness. Sometimes the foreplay of their lips softened into more.

Nothing compared to the feeling of slowly coaxing his tongue into Myke's mouth - feeling Mycroft tremble and quietly open for him, take the tender ingress of his tongue. There was nothing like those wild flickers of joy, or the shy moans that Mycroft couldn't hold, the sharp intakes of breath through his nose. Steady, gentle strokes of tongue - just inside each other for a while. It was all Greg ever wanted. He loved to explore Myke's mouth, fucking it softly with his tongue over and over until Mycroft whimpered under his care, holding tightly to his back. Then, he loved easing Mycroft back to calm - cooling him - softer kisses, gentling him. Shhh, love. S'okay... let me bring you down again. Let me guide you back to Earth. He loved holding Mycroft in what he thought of as their afterglow, stroking his cheek. He loved the eye contact, after - decadent, unhurried eye contact - the quiet smile they shared.

They'd not taken a single piece of clothing off each other yet.
Greg hadn't even asked. Kissing Mycroft on the sofa was the most intimate contact he'd ever experienced with another person. He already knew that if this somehow vanished into nothing tomorrow, and it was gone in the morning like a dream, he'd spend the rest of his life thinking about Mycroft Holmes.

As midnight arrived, the month flicked from June to July.

"When's your birthday?" Greg asked, quietly, gazing at Mycroft with his head resting back on the sofa.

Mycroft smiled down into his eyes. He'd been coaxed into smart-casual for the evening - no tie, no suit jacket, open collar. The sight of his collarbones had been giving Greg thrills all night. "Why do you ask?" he murmured.

"I want to know," said Greg, fond. He reached up to stroke his cheek. "S'important."

Mycroft seemed to find this an odd thing to ask. "The eighth," he said, quietly bemused.

"The - eighth of what?"

"Of... July."

Greg's eyes widened. "What - this month?" he said. "As in... a week tomorrow? Jesus, Myke... it's a good job I asked."

Mycroft's brow creased. "Why?" he said. Greg almost laughed. "So I won't miss it," he said. "So I can do something special for you..." He laid a hand on Mycroft's chest, smiling all over his face. "Only got a week to find you a present. What d'you want? Shall I get us concert tickets for Wigmore?"

And to his great surprise, Mycroft scoffed - surveying him as if he were being flippant. "Greg, don't... be ridiculous..."

"What?" said Greg. "I'm serious. Tell me what you'd like... I wanna spoil you."

"Spoil me?" Mycroft pulled a face, clearly unsure whether Greg were joking. "Birthdays are for children."

Greg's heart quietened. It wasn't the first time he hoped he never met Mycroft's parents.

He wondered how young this particular fact had been installed in the Holmes brothers. From the few glimpses he'd so far received into Mycroft's childhood, it can't have been that far into double figures.

"Birthdays are for everybody," he said, gently. He reached up for Mycroft, cupped his face, and looked him in the eye. "You... must have seen the stuff in shops. Birthday cards. Wrapping paper."

Mycroft wasn't convinced. "It - seems childish," he muttered. "Unnecessary."

"It's not," said Greg. "You can do adult birthdays, as well. Everybody does." His chest ached, hating that he had to explain this. "It's... a chance to remind someone how much they mean to you. You go out for dinner, you spend time together, you buy them something they'd like... maybe go away for the weekend. Things like that. You show them that you care."
Mycroft hesitated, glancing gently at his lips.

"You - already go out of your way to assure me that you care," he said. "There's no need, Greg. Sincerely."

Greg's heart thumped. "It's the day you entered existence. Seriously, I... I have to do something. I can't - ..."

Mycroft raised an eyebrow.

"Being born is hardly an achievement. It - took minimal effort on my part, I assure you."

*They only celebrated his achievements.* Greg swallowed the acidic taste that rose up in the back of his mouth.

He shifted on the sofa, nudged Mycroft's shoulder to make him sit back, then climbed carefully into his lap. Mycroft gazed up at him, startled. As Greg took his face into his hands, something vulnerable flittered across Mycroft's expression.

There was a moment's pause. The darkness hugged quietly around them, and within an instant, there was only this room in the world. Nothing existed outside of the walls.

"You... don't have to earn happiness," Greg said, his throat thick. "You don't - have to achieve something special, to deserve to hear that you're loved."

Mycroft said nothing, watching his eyes with quiet fear.

"M'sorry," Greg said. "I know this is new. It's just - ... I'll feel like the worst kind of shit if I spend some ordinary day like it's nothing, while knowing it's meant to be *your* day. I - can't handle that. I'm meant to do this for you. It's... why the universe pushed me in your path."

Mycroft's expression softened.

"I - wouldn't wish you to feel - ... not on my account." He swallowed a little. "I - have no idea what to expect, but... if you wanted to mark my birthday, I wouldn't stop you."

Greg's heart ached, realising it wasn't his own right to a birthday that had swung this for Mycroft - but the thought of distressing Greg.

He stroked his thumbs over Mycroft's lower lip - brushing them slowly from the centre to the edges.

"I'll teach you," Greg promised. "I'll... teach you how to birthday. It'll be fun."

Mycroft smiled a little, unsure. "I suppose you've already taught me 'how to tapas'."

"You aced it, beautiful," Greg said. He watched Mycroft's eyes fill with something he couldn't describe - something too big for him to wrestle down. "You rocked the hell out of tapas. You'll rock your birthday too... I know it. All you have to do is let me care about you all day."

"That - shan't be a hardship," Mycroft said, his cheeks colouring slightly.

*Fuck your parents, beautiful. They didn't deserve you.* Greg reached up, planting a quiet kiss between his eyebrows - leant down, kissing the bridge of his nose - placed another kiss on its pointed tip - he rested their foreheads together in the dark.
Their eyes closed.

"How about we go away?" Greg said, quietly. It was almost a whisper. "You and me? We could get out of London for a few days. Cornwall or something... maybe Scotland... sneak off for the weekend, and I can spoil you in peace... what do you think?"

Mycroft smiled slightly. "I would - need to rearrange my schedule."

"You can steal a few nights away, can't you? Three, maybe?"

"I could... in theory, shuffle around some appointments... my assistant should be able to cope in my absence."

Greg's brain was already start to plan; his heart pattered happily to itself in his chest. "Your birthday's... next Saturday - right? That's perfect. So - we'll go on the Friday, stay over somewhere, then I'll give you back to the nation on Tuesday morning."

Mycroft regarded him across the small gap with amusement.

"You seem to have this half-organised already..." he remarked.

Greg smiled, his eyes bright. "Just tell me where you want to go," he said, "and I'll organise the other half as well."

"Where I - want to - ...?"

"Or - I'll pick somewhere, if you like? Somewhere nice... all you have to do is get off work on Friday and Monday, come round here in the morning with your bag, and we'll set off. What d'you think?"

Mycroft seemed almost amazed by his excitement. He touched Greg's face; he glanced gently at his mouth.

"If you're... certain this isn't an inconvenience," he said.

Greg's stomach tugged. He looked Mycroft in the eye. "It's not," he said. "It's... frankly an honour. I enjoy making you happy, you know that? It feels good for me. I like doing it."

Mycroft's eyes flickered, processing this. They strayed for a moment to his mouth again.

Greg smiled, slowly.

"Will you be able to handle four days of me all to yourself?" he asked.

Mycroft's arms tightened around his waist. It seemed quite involuntary. "I... imagine that will be pleasant," he said. "For both of us."

Greg watched his pupils swell gently.

He leant down for Mycroft's lips, and kissed him until he trembled.
Hey. hope your morning's going okay :)  
I have an awkward question to ask.  
hit me up when you're ready xx  
Sent 11:24

you okay? Thinking about you xx  
Sent 13:37

Apologies. Something of a nightmarish day... what is this question? Should I be concerned about it? M xx  
Received 15:01

jesus, wondered where you were!  
I was just about to come racing to your office with the dogs and the guns... you ok beautiful? xx  
Sent 15:02

Yes, merely weary. Suffice to say, Sherlock. M xx  
Received 15:03

Disappointed to have been denied heroics. Not sure if you'd have been handling dog or gun. For the record, both rather appealing. M xx  
Received 15:04

What is this question? M xx  
Received 15:04

"Sherlock"? is he alright? xx  
Sent 15:04

I've been forced to intervene in a hellish new scheme of his.  
Received 15:05

Excuse me. A "case".  
Received 15:05

This time involving a person of influence who is rather angry to have had his private life upturned
and rooted through by a wayward private investigator. Especially my brother. I've spent the afternoon attempting to smooth things over.

Received 15:09

And now this question?
I am intrigued. M xx

Received 15:10

Thought S was a 'consulting detective'? he gets upset if I call him a private investigator.
Whats he done, falsely accused someone of something? xx
Sent 15:12

Oh… no. He has of course gotten straight to the truth of the matter. A truth that the man in question wasn't quite ready to share with the media. Ever the champion of honesty, my brother. I imagine that John encouraged him. M xx
Received 15:13

I'm never going to hear this question, am I? M xx
Received 15:14

Nuts to the question myke!
what the bloody hell has
Sherlock done now? xx
Sent 15:15

Sherlock has uncovered the private homosexual proclivities of a prominent businessman. The individual in question has previously made unwise anti-gay remarks to the press, which were widely circulated. He has also spoken out against gay rights on a number of noted occasions.

Received 15:16

My brother's services have been engaged by an LGBTQ campaign group, who had heard rumours. The group are quite determined to have this man answer publicly for his hypocrisy. Sherlock has
holy SHIT... which paper
is this gonna be in? xx
Sent 15:19

It is not. Hence why I've been
occupied all day... threatening
various newspaper editors. M xx
Received 15:20

wait... you're covering it up?
Sent 15:20

When the guy's spoken out
AGAINST gay rights? Why
are you stopping this?
Sent 15:21

The man has a right to privacy.
Even if he uses that right to
then behave unwisely. M xx
Received 15:24

"unwisely"? Eating cheese after
10pm is "unwise" Myke. This guy is
a prick... he deserves all he gets.
Sent 15:25

What question did you
wish to ask me? M x
Received 15:34

Its okay. I'm handling it.
Sent 15:36

I see...
Received 15:41

I've upset you.
Received 18:09

Not upset. just confused.
Sherlock says this guy has spent his
whole life making things harder
for men like you. men like me.
Why are you guarding his secrets?
You've spoken to Sherlock? Was my version not acceptable? M.
Received 18:16

I'm dealing with this because I support privacy to its fullest. Even when it is then used to be morally objectionable. M.
Received 18:18

Must I point out to you that some people would dearly enjoy seeing MY personal proclivities spattered across a headline? M.
Received 18:21

A "proclivity" huh? that what I am?
Sent 18:22

And you haven't ever said publicly that gay men shouldn't be allowed to teach in primary schools. Like the charming Nick Pritchard has...
Sent 18:24

God preserve my sanity...
Received 18:25

My brother should NOT have divulged to you the name Nick Pritchard. Please forget it at once.
Received 18:27

You are aware that I think this man is an arsehole of the highest order, aren't you? He is hateful. I am not questioning that at all.
Received 18:29

But I'm not going to sanction the setting of some hideous precedent for all dirty laundry to be hung out immediately for public inspection.
Received 18:30

Plenty of people get fucked by the
papers every day... and you're intervening for THIS? Hope Mr Pritchard appreciates your help...
Sent 18:34

My brother's involvement compels me to diffuse this situation. NOTHING more.
Received 18:36

If my brother hadn't meddled, I'd be over joyed to watch the dreadful man implode in a mushroom cloud of his own creation. I assure you Greg.
Received 18:37

Did you believe that my job involved easy decisions? Because it truly does not.
Received 18:46

I happen to have had a very stressful unhappy day because of this. If it helps you to stop picturing me as some manner of cackling pantomime villain.
Received 18:59

Greg, this is... unnecessary.
Received 19:28

Sherlock's part in this would have become known. He'd have been targeted by inevitable backlash. That is the very last thing I need to be dealing with at this time.
Received 20:11

Nor is Pritchard a wise man to antagonise. Believe me.
Received 20:18
For heaven's sake, Greg...
Received 21:36

You are not a proclivity... xx
Received 23:09

How absent-minded of me to forget to speak to the editor of The Guardian yesterday. They will of course run the story this coming Saturday with some fervency. Then I imagine that once it hits the internet, Twitter will finish off whatever remains of Mr. Pritchard.
Received 07:43

yeah... that was absent minded of you x
Sent 07:49

Am I forgiven?
Received 07:50

why did you change your mind? x
Sent 07:52

I am not my brother's keeper. Nor am I the keeper of bullish businessmen whose lax attitude towards their own secrets has landed them in hot water. M x
Received 07:56

I'm sorry... know I shouldn't intrude. just got under my skin. i get that privacy is a thing for you but... jesus going THAT far to look after someone who had it coming?
Pritchards got a right to his privacy, sure... doesn't have a right to snap his fingers and demand YOU lock down the world to keep his dirty secrets quiet for him... x
Sent 08:01

Quite... M x
Received 08:01
Issues of privacy and law aside. I couldn't stand that you thought ill of me. M x

Received 08:03

I didn’t... "think ill" of you... just hated it a bit that you were helping some douche cover up his guilty secret. Like I'm your guilty secret x
Sent 08:07

What we have is private.
Not secret. M xx
Received 08:09

whats the difference? xx
Sent 08:12

Privacy borne of protectiveness.
Secrecy is borne of guilt.
What was it that you tried to ask of me yesterday? M xx
Received 08:14

Oh... god. Don't know if this is the time now xx
Sent 08:16

Please. I have hardly slept. M xx
Received 08:17

Oh christ, I'm sorry :( you should have just come round or something, we could have talked it over... I didn't mean for you to lie awake all night beautiful xx
Sent 08:17

Gregory David Lestrade... ask me this damn question before I have you collected in a limousine. M xx
Received 08:18

Okay okay...
Sent 08:20

And look just... be honest with me. I don't know where you're at right now.
Sent 08:22
What sort of room am I booking? A double? A twin? Two singles? You choose and I'll book it. I don't want you to feel uncomfortable. Last thing I want in the world xx

Sent 08:29

Excellent. I now have the honour of officially declaring the progress of our relationship, do I? After an argument as well. How splendid. This shan't be disastrous at all. May I at least have a hint as to where your preference lies? xx

Received 08:31

you hint to me first. Then I will hint back at you xx

Sent 08:34

Dear God. It will be my 50th by the time we've hinted our way to a decision. Just choose what you think would be best. M xx

Received 08:39

Oh hell no holmes, you're not passing all this to me. tell me which you want and I'll book it. I don't mind xx

Sent 08:44

Damnable man. I'm going to take by the assertion "I don't mind" that, in theory, I could state any of the three options, and it would be suitable? M xx

Received 08:51

yup xx

Sent 08:52

Up to and including sharing a bed? M xx

Received 08:52

Yup xx

Sent 08:53

With an added clause that, if we do share a bed, I will be bringing my pyjamas - and negotiating any removal of them on a strictly button by
just sprayed coffee across my desk, thanks for that. And yes.
No buttons at all if you don’t want.
Kinda might be nice to hug at night, that’s all. Fall asleep together. hope that’s okay xx
Sent 09:02

Yes. That’s okay. M xx
Received 09:07

You are very patient. M xxx
Received 09:09

you say that like I’m stalking you slowly... like a wolf or something, waiting for you to let your guard down. I’m just happy. Mean it xxx
Sent 09:11

Would a relationship normally have progressed to sex for you by this point? M xxx
Received 09:13

No such thing as "a relationship". Don’t exist on their own. Takes two people and they’re all different xxx
Sent 09:14

Had your previous relationships progressed by this point? M xxx
Received 09:15

No such thing as previous relationships. Gone now. Only you now xxx
Sent 09:16

You are... both infuriating and wonderful. M xxx
Received 09:16

yup. That’s why I’m going out to buy pyjamas at lunch time xxx
Sent 09:17

Heaven help me, you don’t already own some? M xxx
Received 09:18
surprise. xxx
Sent 09:18

This casts our late night text conversations in something of a brand new light. M xxx
Received 09:19

Doesn't it? ;) I just booked our hotel...!! Can't wait for friday... so excited!! xxx
Sent 09:20
On Friday morning, Greg woke to the feeling that something special was about to begin.

He was showered, dressed and ready before eight AM, then texting Myke by quarter past. He answered the door at nine with a grin the width of his face.

"Hey!" He reached up on his toes to put his arms around Mycroft's neck. Mycroft had opted for a mossy green jumper over a shirt, his top button undone - travelling wear. He smelt freshly-showered. Greg beamed, hugging him tightly. "You had some breakfast? Ready to hit the road?"

He felt Mycroft smile against his cheek, as his arms encircled Greg's waist. "Mm... I am fully prepared for my mysterious 'long car journey' of unspecified duration."

"It'll be worth it," Greg promised, grinning. "We'll have a couple stops along the way, stretch our legs… we'll get there sometime this afternoon. That alright?"

"And where is 'there'?"

"You'll see," said Greg. He checked the carrier bag he'd prepared with food for the journey - coffee flask, sandwiches, fresh fruit and sweets. "CDs in the car already… I went for a mix of everything, is that alright? And the room's got a DVD player, so I've brought along essential viewing. We'll start filling some of those gaps in your film knowledge. Can't believe you've never seen The Godfather. It'll give you all kinds of ideas. Whitehall won't know what hit it."

Mycroft watched, smiling, as Greg checked the plug sockets and made sure all the lights were off. He seemed to find something funny.

"Have you remembered to pack your pyjamas?" Mycroft enquired.

"Yup," he said, scooping up his car keys. "Safe in my case. Can't wait for you to see them. Brushed cotton... M&S brushed cotton, no less."

"Heavens. I am a lucky boy."

"It's your birthday." Greg grinned. A flicker of mischief rose up in his chest. "Thought I'd push the boat out."

Mycroft smirked, saying nothing.

"Have The Guardian run the Nick Pritchard thing today?" Greg asked, kneeling down to check his case one last time - walking boots, spare jeans, washbag. "Is it all kicking off yet?"
"Oh - no. Tomorrow."

"Does he know these are his final hours?"

"No. He does not." Mycroft smiled slightly, studying a photograph pinned to Greg's fridge - Greg, his brothers and their kids, all getting drenched on the log flume at Alton Towers. Uncle Greg had been decisively located at the front with the children. "In some ways, this trip is rather excellent timing… I will at least be out of Mr. Pritchard's reach when the tweets start arriving..."

"D'you reckon he's going to lose it?"

"Oh, yes. Entirely."

"Well," said Greg. "Good news. For the next four days, the hypocritical bell-end won't have a clue where you are - and if he does figure it out, he'll have to go through me."


"C'mon," Greg said, with a grin, and reached for his hand. "One last hug, then we'll get going... not been this excited about a mini break in my life."

"Clearly," Mycroft said, as Greg gathered him happily into his arms. He softened into Greg's embrace. As time went on, Greg found himself more and more incapable of being alone with Mycroft without touching him - he just liked the contact of their fingers, their hands, their arms, chests pressed close around clothing. It made the world feel quiet and safe around them - like everything fit properly, like everything had a place.

"Rather a milestone, isn't it?" Mycroft murmured, as they hugged. He stroked Greg's back. "The first 'mini break'?"

Greg nuzzled into his shoulder. "Does it feel like a milestone?"

Mycroft squeezed him a little. "It does," he said. "A welcome one." He paused, smoothing the soft green leather of Greg's jacket. "I… feel very close to you, Greg. More and more as time passes."

Greg smiled. He hid a kiss against the side of Mycroft's neck.

"Cool," he murmured. "Me too. It's… really good. This thing we have."

"It is." Mycroft wasn't letting him go. "Very good."

Greg took a moment just to marvel over it - the quiet of it all. The peace. Mycroft was as easy as his favourite shirt. Even their disagreements were conducted quietly by text, and concluded within a day. Greg's ex-wife had been the plate-hurling type. Mycroft Holmes, power of the British government, turned out to be like falling in love with a blanket.

Everything settled into soft focus as soon as they were together; the hours passed with ease. Maybe Mycroft's childhood had left him craving this, Greg thought - security. Calm. Someone reliable, who didn't want the world from him, and didn't want him to fix the world.

Just wanted to hold him. Know him. Make plans with him, and keep them.

"I like passing milestones with you," Greg decided, softly. "Hope that's okay."

Mycroft breathed in his scent. "It's very enjoyable."
Greg's heart bubbled quietly behind his ribs. It was going to be a hell of a weekend, he thought. "D'you want to go make some memories, beautiful?"

"God, yes," Mycroft sighed.

After ten minutes of discreetly observing Greg's road choices, Mycroft raised his eyebrows.

"North?" he said, glancing sideways from the passenger seat.

Greg masked his smile. "North."

"Intriguing."

"Used to go as a kid." Greg turned the stereo up a little - Elgar's Cello Concerto. They'd played it that first night at Wigmore Hall. It was the sound of falling in love with your new best mate. "First stop in a couple of hours, alright? Birmingham-ish."

He watched in the mirror as Mycroft made a number of geographical calculations - estimating distances, considering likely places.

"This is killing you, isn't it?" Greg said, with a grin. "You can't stand not knowing something."

"I'm a political servant," said Mycroft, eyes glinting. "It's my trade to know things."

"You'll figure it out sooner or later... coffee in the flask, if you want some. Did you see the Autocar review of the Alpina B4 S I sent you? They're saying it's a solid rival to the BMW M4."

Hilton Park Services on the M6 was never going to be one of Mycroft's favourite travel destinations. He left it looking rather pale and unwell, and they were a good five minutes along the motorway before he regained the power of speech.

"Where next are we stopping?" he asked, weakly.

"Manchester," said Greg, turning on the radio and channel-skipping for something upbeat. "Couple more hours... it's a long way, but we'll get there."

Mycroft processed this a moment. Greg could almost see the mental map of the country being studied before them in the air, flipped and turned and distances compared. It reminded him irresistibly of Sherlock. The two brothers were far more alike than they knew.

"And... after that?" Mycroft asked.

Greg mimicked the cut-glass tones of his sat nav. "You have reached your destination."

Mycroft processed this for a little longer.
"I love the sound of you concluding something," Greg said, pressing his teeth into his lower lip.

"Sheep?" Mycroft checked, with a sideways glance.

"Sheep. Not the main attraction of the weekend, though. I'm thinking more along the lines of mountain air and lakes."

Mycroft gave a soft groan of joy. "You exquisite man. Perfect."

Greg's grin could have lit the road at night. "Wait 'til you see the hotel."

"Mm?"

"'Brimstone at Langdale'. Looks like an Alpine ski lodge… all lakeland stone and open fires. Spa bathrooms, private balconies, breakfast in bed. Reading room. And their restaurant has its own smokehouse on site."

"Dear God, Greg…"

"You enjoying your birthday weekend yet?"

"Immensely. But..." Mycroft looked across at him, pained. "Dare I ask how much this is costing you?"

"Hush," said Greg, smiling. "Put it out of your head." He reached down to turn up the stereo - Cher's version of Walking in Memphis. He'd not heard it in years. "S'good to have someone to spend my wages on at last - and I'll enjoy it too. Been way too long since I had some green air in my lungs."

"If you're certain," Mycroft said, his mouth curving.

"I am," said Greg.

Mycroft paused a moment - then gently he reached across, and laid a hand on Greg's knee.

"I - appreciate this," he murmured. "Greatly."

Greg's heart bucked happily in his chest. "Not even halfway there yet," he said.

He reached to turn the radio up a little more.

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Signs for motorway services just past Manchester were a welcome sight. Four hours on the road, and it hadn't been easy - even with the promise of the weekend ahead. They had two hours left to drive, and Greg's neck was starting to lock itself in place.

Aching, weary and hot, they took themselves to the quietest possible corner of the services, sat down and had coffee. It was busy; everywhere was heaving with noise. There were way too many people around, and every single one of them seemed to be shouting. The walls and ceiling rang with the constant river of voices.

As a nearby child commenced a screaming meltdown over not going to Burger King, Mycroft
suppressed a wince. He hid his expression in his coffee.

Greg gave him a quiet, sympathetic look across the table.

"Sorry," he murmured. "I know this is making you twitch."

"Hardly your fault..." Mycroft reached up to rub the bridge of his nose gently, steeling himself. "Always feel rather out of place amidst the general public."

Greg smiled a little. "Don't worry. They're more afraid of you than you are of them."

Mycroft found a small smile for him in return. "I doubt that," he said.

He inhaled, glancing around. His quiet grey eyes lingered on the unhappy couples sitting in stony silence over their coffee cups; truculent children, bored after long hours strapped up in seatbelts and now seizing their chance to be noisy and rambunctious; the grey-faced serving staff behind every counter, visibly lamenting their choices in life.

"It seems we are not in Kansas anymore, Toto," Mycroft murmured, sadly.

Greg smiled slightly, swirling his coffee.

"We'll be in the Lakes soon," he promised. He downed the last of the cup's contents, sighing as he swallowed. "Three nights of blissful peace and quiet. And at least you're not in a three-piece suit, Myke... think of the looks we'd be getting."

"Heavens." Mycroft contemplated that for a moment, dull-eyed. "I'd have been strung up."

Greg grinned.

"Full-on casual holiday mode," he said. "Top button undone and everything... and you're still the poshest person here."

Mycroft gave him a fond frown.

And beneath the table, he gently brushed his ankle against Greg's.

"At least I have police protection," he mused. A touch of humour brightened his eyes.

Greg resisted the urge to grab his hands and knot their fingers together. It wasn't easy. He grinned, brimming with happiness, as the foot continued to rest against his own.

"I'll keep you safe from the baying mob, beautiful," he promised, his voice low. "Just stick near me."

Mycroft's gaze glittered wildly.

"Further chivalry," he noted. "Rather suits you."

"You - know we’re in public?" Greg checked, smiling. Mycroft’s foot had not left his own. They were sitting in Costa Coffee, happy together, just like any couple on a long journey. The world was walking by, barely paying them a glance.

It felt ridiculously good.

"We are two hundred miles from London," Mycroft said. "I… doubt there's anyone here to
recognise us." He paused. "And I feel - fond of you. Perhaps with some distance, I'm letting my guard down a little."

Greg's heart expanded. "Romantic mini breaks suit you."

"So it seems." Mycroft glanced with bemusement into his eyes. Even tired from the road, Greg thought, he was gorgeous. Composed, travel-worn and smiling. "Besides..." Mycroft said, sliding together their empty cups. "Of all the fascinating characters currently inhabiting this place, Greg, I doubt that you and I are the greatest spectacle. Shall we?"

"Let's," Greg said. He heaved himself to his feet. "Two hours from now, posh hotel. Promise. Champagne on the balcony."

He held the door for Mycroft as they left. He placed a quiet hand between Myke's shoulders.

"Thank you," Mycroft murmured, discreetly.

Greg hid his smile. "Pleasure."

Six hours staring over a wheel; every muscle across the back of Greg's neck had solidified into rock. His forearms ached. His arse had lost all sensation about an hour ago, and it was now promising him that he would never feel anything in that region ever again.

As they stepped from the car, and gazed up at the magnificent slate-and-glass property nestled within Langdale pines, Mycroft let out a sigh.

It made every minute worth it.

"What d'you think?" Greg asked him, grinning, as he shut the driver's side door.

He already knew what Mycroft thought - he could see it in his face. He wanted to hear it, too.

In response, Mycroft walked around the car.

Greg wondered for a second what he was doing - then Mycroft's hands lifted to his chest, planted in the centre and with a firm but gentle push, pressed him back against the car. Greg had half a second to give him a startled look before Mycroft stepped into his body, cupped his face in both hands, and tilted his jaw gently upwards.

As their mouths met, the boom of Greg's heart echoed out across the forest.

For a few seconds, he was too shocked to move.

They'd never kissed outside - never in the open air. Never. It was their first ever kiss in the sunshine. With a little shudder, and an irrepressible moan of joy, Greg leant up into Mycroft's mouth and slid his arms around his lover's waist, pulling Mycroft closer. He felt like the sunlight was streaming through him. For the longest time, Mycroft simply held him and kissed him, and the forest breathed around them in the breeze, birds singing overhead in the canopy. Greg felt weak. He felt alive.

When their lips finally parted, they stayed just as they were - forehead-to-forehead, eyes closed -
lost in each other.

"Is this how it feels?" Mycroft asked, after a moment. His voice was barely a whisper.

Greg swallowed, overcome. "How what feels?" he asked.

Mycroft's arms tightened quietly around Greg.

"Falling in love," he said.

Greg's breath caught.

For a second, there was no language - no thought - just a feeling like he was expanding, like he suddenly belonged inside the world. He wanted to stay here forever, he realised - right here, pressed against his car, feeling the mossy green wool under his hands and Mycroft's breath against the side of his nose, with the clear open sky above them, the earth solid and safe beneath their feet.

After what felt like an eternity, Greg managed to find the words.

"I - think so," he whispered.

Mycroft took a moment to process this.

"I feel safe with you," he murmured, at last. "Truly safe. That - is not something I say lightly, Greg."

"You are safe with me," Greg breathed. "Always, always safe."

Mycroft made a little sound. "Greg…"

"God, I'm… so glad we did this. We've not even walked through the door yet. Myke, I - I feel - …" Greg shuddered, and pushed his lips urgently against Mycroft's.

They kissed again, carding their fingers up into each other's hair. Greg felt his heart thump in desperation as Mycroft's tongue pushed slowly into his mouth, tasting him, adoring him.

"Are you - okay with...?" Greg whispered, as their lips parted. Mycroft's eyes were fogged with something he'd never seen in them before - something intense, deep, and a little wild. It made Greg's stomach curl. "We're in public… aren't we?"

Mycroft flushed slightly. "I - I'm sorry...

"No - no, I don't mean - … I just - … is it - because we're not in London? D'you feel safer up here?"

Mycroft hesitated, gazing into Greg's eyes. He looked almost bewildered by the moment - by his own emotions. "Perhaps," he managed, after a breath. "I - wanted to kiss you. Here. Now. I… couldn't keep myself from…"

Greg's heart skipped a beat. "Don't," he begged. "Don't stop yourself." His eyes flickered to Mycroft's mouth - lips parted, a little swollen. Greg just wanted to lie down somewhere and kiss him. He wanted to stroke his tongue between those softened lips for hours, until they were both shaking and their skin was alight. "We've escaped," he said. "Nobody knows us here. We can just relax… just be together."

A soft, sudden flush rose up in his heart.
"It's your birthday tomorrow," he said. He couldn't fight a grin. "I'm going to make it the best of your life."

Mycroft's face opened.

"Greg..." He swallowed, lost. "Greg, what is happening to me? I - I can barely..."

Greg reached up to cradle his face.

"Let it happen," he said. "Share it with me. It's alright..." He pushed their foreheads together; their eyes closed once more. "I feel it, too."

For a long time, they didn't speak. They didn't move. They simply stood by the car, and breathed, and felt the forest breathe around them.

"Should probably check in at some point," Greg murmured at last.

Mycroft smiled against his lips. "Mm. We probably should."

Their suite had a mezzanine loft - downstairs, a comfortable little den with a large TV, cosy corner couches and a dining area set up for two, just beside the fold-out doors to the balcony; then above, like a hidden nest, their bedroom - a log fire, a black-and-white landscape of Derwentwater, and a bed so thickly piled with snowy white covers and cushions that, on Greg's inquisitive first testing, he melted six inches into the thing and could not retrieve himself.

"Mycroft," he groaned, as footsteps ascended the short flight of stairs.

Mycroft let out a laugh as he found Greg spread-eagled and sunken into the duvet.

"Ah... I did wonder where you'd gone."

"I can't move. I'm not kidding."

"Why would you want to? It looks divine."

"I promised you champagne on the balcony..." Greg mumbled. "Now I can't even sit up."

As Mycroft eased languidly on top of him, pinning him to the softness of the bed, Greg raised his eyebrows.

"Hello..." he said.

Mycroft smirked, settling comfortably astride his thighs. "Mm. This is rather nice."

Greg took a moment to think of something innocent to say. "Only the best for you."

"I think we'll be rather happy here for three days," Mycroft mused, leaning low, and Greg's heart-rate immediately doubled as the gentle mouth ghosted across his own. He stifled a moan, reaching up into the kiss. Mycroft teased him, drawing back a little, forcing him to crane his head to catch the mouth he'd longed to kiss all day. He felt like he could evaporate with happiness.
"Myke," he moaned, softly. The lips eased just out of reach, again.

"Mm?"

"Myke. Don't tease me."

"Why do I despise that name from everyone but you?" Mycroft murmured, and granted him a single kiss - too fleeting, too soft. Greg slid his hands longingly up Mycroft's thighs.

"Please," he whispered. "Kiss me. Please."

Mycroft shivered a little. "No-one has ever begged me for that."

"I will beg you on my knees," Greg breathed, "all day, and all night, if I have to."

The catch of Mycroft's throat was the most perfect thing he'd ever heard. "That... seems perhaps a waste of our time here." He pressed his mouth softly to Greg's - kissed him, slowly, barely stroking - let him lower back down to the softness of the bed.

"What d'you want to do with the day?" Greg asked, between kisses.

"The reading room had... maps - nearby walks. Trails through the forest." Mycroft raised an eyebrow. "I imagine after a six-hour drive you'd like to stretch your legs... take in the fresh air."

Greg smiled slowly, gazing into his eyes. He liked the feeling of Mycroft on top of him, he realised - this easy, playful intimacy.

"Perfect," he said. He stole a gentle kiss. "Shall we eat here tonight?"

"Mm... no more driving today. You've earned a drink."

"Boozy dinner?" Greg slid his hands slowly up Mycroft's thighs. "Nice long walk, then get a little drunk? Steak, maybe?" He grinned. "Curl up downstairs and watch The Godfather?"

Mycroft's eyes glittered as he gazed into Greg's.

"Perhaps I could call Anthea," he murmured, almost to himself, as he studied Greg's face. "Pretend that I've been taken hostage by political militants... turn three days into three weeks."

Greg's heart heaved. "Fine by me, beautiful... we'll tell Scotland Yard I got captured trying to help. White knight that I am."

Mycroft paused, softening. "Why do you call me that?" he asked.

Greg's heart thumped.

"There's... one obvious answer," he said.

Mycroft pulled a slight face. "I'm - hardly in the first flush of youth, Greg."

Greg drew in a quiet breath. He wished he could show Mycroft, just for a moment, what he looked like right now - kneeling astride Greg in a secluded Lake District hotel, gazing down with eyes full of fragility - peaceful and vulnerable in his soft green jumper.

"You're perfect," Greg said. "Everything about you is perfect." He swallowed. "You mean the world to me. Right now. Just as you are. I wouldn't change a thing about you. And you are..."
beautiful."

Mycroft's eyes tightened; he wanted to understand. He wanted to believe it. He was almost there, almost ready to let Greg's eyes be his mirror. *Just a little more*, Greg thought - just a little more patience. A little more love.

"You are - kind," Mycroft said to him, quietly.

Greg smiled. "I'm not," he said. "I'm falling in love with you. There's a difference."

Mycroft's eyes lingered on his lips.

"I have the keenest feeling," he murmured, "that we shan't return to London as quite the same people we were…"

Greg had a feeling he was right.

Monday seemed a thousand years away, and London a thousand miles. *Three long days*, he thought - three days alone together, and not a soul around who knew them - not a soul to disturb them. He'd wanted this perfect aloneness with Mycroft since they first started texting, he realised. He'd been waiting for it all this time.

He ran his hands up Mycroft's thighs, smiled, and said,

"We're going to remember this weekend."

Mycroft's eyes glittered. "Are we?"

"Mmhmm. For quite a long time."
Comfortable

Joy rul'd the day, and Love the night.
- John Dryden, 'The Secular Masque'

"Day one," Mycroft tutted, "and you have gotten us lost in woodland. I hope you have some ideas for fashioning us a rudimentary shelter. Bushcraft is not my forte."

"We're not lost," Greg said, with a grin. "I know exactly where we are."

"How splendid. We'll have something to tell mountain rescue."

"Worst comes to the worst, we'll retrace our steps back to the hotel. Besides, it's the Lake District - not Borneo. How lost can we possibly get?"

"I'm not going to dignify that with an answer, Gregory..."

"Gregory?" Greg laughed, watching with delight as Mycroft picked his way carefully down a leafy embankment. "I've not had Gregory since I was fifteen. I'm in trouble now, aren't I?"

Mycroft flashed him a look of fond reproach, flattening his palms towards the ground for balance.

"If I spend our first night away," he said, "crouching in a dug-out full of earthworms, while you attempt to chase down a squirrel for my supper, you shall be."

Greg grinned. He pushed his hands into the pockets of his jacket.

"What an anecdote to have though, eh?" he said. "We'd be telling that one at dinner parties for decades."

Mycroft's eyes glittered. He stepped free of the embankment at last, tussling leaves around his walking boots as he headed towards Greg on the path.

"You assume you'd be accompanying me to dinner parties after such an incident?" he said. "How optimistic of you."

"You'd forgive me eventually," Greg said. His heart leapt, eyes soft and dark as Mycroft strode towards him through the trees. It was a hell of a sight. "You'd see the funny side some day."

"In a century or two, perhaps..."

Greg’s eyes glinted. "I'd catch you a good squirrel," he promised. "A really nutritious one."

"Indeed? If you laid hands on a few of them, you could even make a blanket to stop me freezing in the night."

As Mycroft stepped contentedly into his arms, Greg grinned from ear-to-ear.
"I'd keep you warm," he murmured, wrapping Mycroft close. He looked good in outdoor gear - padded gilet, walking boots. It suited him. He seemed comfortable and at ease.

"More of that delicious chivalry," Mycroft noted, soft and low, as Greg nuzzled into his neck.

Greg breathed, slowly, bathing in this moment. Mycroft smelt of forest. He smelt green and free and wonderful.

"You seem so happy out here," Greg said. "Away from it all… don’t think I’ve ever seen you like this."

Mycroft slowly rumpled his fingers into Greg's hair, and remarked,

"Perhaps our adventure into the wild is evoking something rather primal in me."

Greg’s eyes closed; pleasurable shivers tumbled down his spine.

"I can barely keep my hands off you," Mycroft murmured in his ear.

Greg’s heart heaved.

"Don't," he said. He drew back to gaze into Mycroft’s eyes. "Don't keep them off me. Not for a second."

Mycroft smiled, and reached up towards Greg’s mouth. "I rather must, I fear… if we're ever going to find our way back to civilisation."

He kissed Greg - a quiet, unhurried press of lips. The forest seemed to shiver around them.

As they set off down the path once more, Mycroft’s hand stole into Greg's. Their fingers wove together. The leaves crunched beneath their feet, and they headed deeper into the forest.

It was the first time they'd ever walked and held hands.

Greg didn't let go until the hotel was back in sight.

Getting ready for dinner took Greg about ten minutes. He sprawled out on the sofa and watched the last half of Deadpool as he waited for Mycroft, working his way contentedly through a glass of wine.

"Greg?"

Greg inclined his head towards the stairs, twisting on the sofa. "Mm?"

"I've unforgivably forgotten my deodorant… might I borrow yours?"

Greg discreetly put it out of his head that, a short flight of stairs away, Mycroft was partially undressed.

"Of course," he said. "Just in my washbag... bedside drawer, my side. Help yourself."

"Which is 'your' side? I hadn't realised the bed came pre-assigned..."
Greg grinned. "Nearest the door," he said. "Obviously."

"In case wolves come for us in the night, is it?" He heard Mycroft opening his bedside drawer. "How romantically paleolithic of you, darling."

*Darling.* Greg decided at once he could get used to that. He stretched to his toes, and reached for the last of his wine on the coffee table. He'd missed a good minute of *Deadpool,* but it didn't matter.

"You found it okay, beautiful?" he called.

There was a slight pause before Mycroft answered. "Yes," he said. "I have it. Thank you."

Greg frowned a little, wondering.

"You alright, Myke?"

"Mm," Mycroft said. "I'm fine. I shan't be much longer."

"S'okay," Greg said. "Take your time." Mycroft sounded alright - but that pause, he thought - that slight skip of thought.

He decided not to push it.

He poured himself some more wine.

Mycroft appeared on the stairs not long after the credits began to roll.

"Hey…" Greg looked up from the sofa, smiling. He pushed himself into a sitting position. "God, Myke - you look amazing… is that a new suit?"

Mycroft's small smile eased some of his worry. The suit was pale grey, the waistcoat backed in lavender silk. He looked magnificent. "You noticed," Mycroft said, the colour rising a little in his face.

Greg grinned. "Of course I did…" he said. "How could I not?"

As Mycroft came over to the sofa, Greg reached fondly for his hands.

Their fingers wrapped together.

Greg gave him a soft smile, proud. He watched the pink deepen in Mycroft's cheeks.

"You alright?" he asked.

Mycroft's eyes shone down at him.

"Take me to dinner," he said. "Please."

Greg wanted nothing more in the world.

As they passed through the reception area, one of the hotel's hosts looked up from the desk with a
"Evening, Mr. Lestrade." It was the kind of place they learned your name before you'd even undone your coat. Greg loved it - Cumbrian hospitality. All the hosts wore tweed waistcoats, and they couldn't be more helpful. "Will you and your partner want breakfast in the room, sir? Is there a time that's good for you?"

Greg was rather proud that he managed to muffle his grin. *You and your partner.* Another first, he thought - and damn, he could get used to that too. Maybe it'd be a while before he heard it in London - in the real world back home, where privacy came at a premium and Mycroft had a reputation to protect. But just hearing it for now set Greg's heart jumping like otters at the zoo.

"Breakfast in the room'd be great." He glanced at Mycroft, trying to gauge a time. Mycroft was fighting a smile, too. "Ten, maybe...? Is that too late for you?"

"Ten is fine," Mycroft murmured. "It might be nice to sleep late for once."

"Ten," Greg confirmed to the host, with a grin. "Thanks. Just off to try the restaurant. Any tips?"

"Well," the young man said, smiling, "the signature's a slow-roast shoulder of lamb, shared between two... not to be missed. And there's a blackberry cheesecake at the minute that's to die for."

Greg caught Mycroft's slight intake of breath, and almost laughed aloud. Mycroft liked blackberries. He liked cheesecake, too. The coupling of those two words in one sentence was nothing short of a birthday gift from the universe.

"Fantastic," Greg told the host, beaming. "Don't think we'll even need to ask for a menu. Thanks."

"Enjoy, sir. Good night."

Just outside the front door, Greg came to a halt.

"Shit," he murmured. "Hang on. I meant to ask the guy... they've got a Landrover, and they'll give you lifts out to popular walks... wanted some details for tomorrow. I'll be two minutes. You don't mind?"

Mycroft smiled, discreetly removing a packet of cigarettes from inside his jacket.

"Not at all," he murmured.

Back inside, Greg headed over to the desk.

"It's his birthday tomorrow," he said, bright-eyed. "Can I involve you in a bit of subterfuge?"

The host smiled: ready, willing and able.

"Champagne, chocolates or flowers?" he asked.

Greg could have hugged him. "Champagne. You're a star."

"Is Laurent Perrier alright?"

"Yep. Charge it to my card. Listen - not my area of expertise - but if I said 'manly flowers' at you...?"
The host smiled. "Green roses, maybe? Symbol of abundance? Or gardenia are very classic and clean. They're the white ones. They're not a 'fussy' flower."

"What do gardenia symbolise?" Greg checked. "It's - not infidelity or anything, is it?" His dad had accidentally given his mum yellow roses for their anniversary once. She'd nearly thrashed him with them.

"Romance in general," said the host. "Popular for weddings. And 'secret love', too - if you're into that sort of thing."

Greg grinned.

"Perfect," he said. "With breakfast, right? Thanks."

"Don't think I've ever seen anyone look at a slice of cheesecake like that before… almost wondered if I should leave the two of you alone."

"Hush," Mycroft said, smirking, as they came up the stairs to their room. "You brought me here. It is entirely your fault." He was, like Greg, a little drunk; they'd not scrimped on the wine. There'd been a couple of cocktails, too, and candlelight - a private table for two - Mycroft's foot rubbing gently at Greg's ankle where no-one could see, and the wide open view across the fells as the sun went down.

It had been a perfect day.

Greg could hardly believe they'd started it in London - nearly three hundred miles away now. It felt like they'd been here forever.

As he fitted the key in the door to their room, Mycroft leant against him with a small sigh.

"Greg?" he murmured, after a moment.

"Mm, love?"

Mycroft breathed in slowly against the collar of his shirt. "Mmhm. Nothing."

Greg grinned. "Must have been something," he said.

"I've - quite forgotten." Mycroft kissed his jaw. "Stubble."

"Sorry, beautiful... I get prickly fast. You're dating a badger. D'you want me to shave before bed?"

Mycroft kissed a little closer to his ear. "No," he said - then added, "Nor in the morning."

Greg laughed, pushing open the door to let Myke to go through.

"Wild man of the woods, huh?" he said. "Didn't think you'd go in for that."

"Nor did I," Mycroft said, stepping into their suite. "It seems you've put me on quite the voyage of discovery."
Greg suppressed the flicker of warmth that glowed in his stomach. Behave, Lestrade. He locked the door behind them - that safe, cosy click - and immediately loosened his tie.

"D'you want to put a film on?" he said. "Not sure I'm in the mood for The Godfather, but they've got plenty of others…"

"As it happens," Mycroft said, "I'm rather tired... I might get ready for bed. Is that dreadful of me?"

Greg smiled. He supposed it had been a long day. "No," he said. "Not at all. We've earned some shut-eye. Ten isn't too late for breakfast, is it?"

"Ten is perfect," Mycroft said, as he headed for the stairs. "I understand it's tradition that I have a 'birthday lie-in', after all..."

Greg grinned. "Gives you time to open your present."

Mycroft stopped on the stairs, looking down at him with a mixture of delight and rebuke. "Gregory," he said.

"God, twice in one day? That's serious trouble now. What have I done?"

"I was under the impression that a luxurious three days in the Lake District was my gift. I'm starting to fear for your bank balance."

"I happen to be paid pretty well for Scotland Yard, you know?" said Greg. "Not all of us non-millionaires are peasants and potato farmers."

Mycroft's bemused frown was rather arresting. "When is your birthday?" he said.

Greg smiled. "October 31st."

Mycroft's eyebrows lifted. "All Hallow's Eve?"

"Known to us lesser mortals as Halloween? Yeah. My mum went into surprise labour at a fancy dress party. I was born before the ambulance got there - all over in minutes. She was still dressed as Wonder Woman."

"Heaven help us," said Mycroft. "And what was she dressed as for your brothers?"

"Probably just put Wonder Woman back on, to be honest. You know how it is with silly costumes. Buy one and recycle it." Greg smiled, biting the side of his tongue. "Why d'you ask about my birthday?"

As Mycroft proceeded up the stairs, idly undoing his tie, he said,

"The bar has been set, Greg."

Oh, God.

Greg wondered for a moment what life had been like before Mycroft Holmes came along. He couldn't seem to remember any more.

He heard the bathroom door shut, smiled to himself, and switched on the kettle.

Getting undressed took even less time than getting ready for dinner. Greg hung up his shirt in the
wardrobe, pulled on clean black boxers then sought around in his suitcase for the fabled pyjamas. Their moment had finally come. He hadn't worn pyjamas since he was eighteen - putting them on felt strangely like getting dressed for the shower.

It would make Myke feel at ease though, and that was what mattered.

He'd gone for casual nightwear: loose navy bottoms, a lightweight white t-shirt. He wasn't sure if the simple power of a white t-shirt would work on someone who dressed as elegantly as Mycroft did. Greg supposed they were about to find out.

Switching on the lamp, turning out the light, he tugged back the covers and settled into bed.

It was pristinely comfortable - achingly, desperately comfortable. Just being inside it made him groan a little and stretch. This was the kind of hotel bed you eagerly told people about when you got back home.

Not that he could tell people this time, he thought.

The division all thought he was helping a friend move. He supposed he'd not specified move house. He'd helped Mycroft move a lot of wine from a bottle into a glass - and tomorrow they'd be moving themselves across the hills. There wasn't a lot of furniture being shifted, though.

For a while, Greg ran back through his mind those wonderful words he'd heard earlier - you and your partner. He found himself remembering dinner. The food had been out of this world; the company, even better. For the first time, they'd felt like a couple eating out in public - not just friends, not just associates, but a couple - close - their eyes only on each other. Greg couldn't put his finger on what it was. It wasn't the first time they'd had candlelight. It wasn't the first time they'd been somewhere quiet.

Perhaps it was just knowing they were alone, he thought. Alone out here, and safe.

He looked up at the black-and-white landscape of the lake for a while, thinking.

He had a feeling he'd miss this when they got home. The openness. Holding hands in the sunlight.

But then, home didn't feel like this.

London wasn't a quietly abundant forest, full of fresh air and bird-song, sun filtering down through the leaves as they walked together with nowhere to be. London was a battlefield - and Mycroft was a high-ranking general.

Gently, with a breath, Greg dispelled those uneasy thoughts. He drew himself back to the present - to this moment right now, comfortable in bed with three long days ahead of them - and gave himself a smile, and let it go. This wouldn't be their one and only trip.

Maybe the romantic mini break would become a vital part of their relationship, he thought. They'd escape to quiet corners of the world to be together, to hold hands and play footsie over dinner, and privacy back home would keep them safe like concrete walls. Maybe one day, he'd quietly arrive at work on Monday morning with a wedding ring back on - put a discreet form into HR, and say no more about it.

He could handle that.

As he closed his eyes, relaxing back into the pillows, Greg ran his tongue around his mouth. Red wine, lamb and blackberries. He'd better brush his teeth before he slept. Red wine breath wasn't
something Mycroft deserved to wake up to on his birthday. Greg rolled onto his side, tugged open the bedside drawer and reached in for his washbag, fishing it out.

As he unzipped the bag, glancing in at the contents, the sight of his deodorant jogged a memory from earlier. Mycroft's odd pause; that quiet skip in their day.

He still hadn't gotten to the bottom of that.

Then Greg spotted the other contents of his washbag - and with a cold rush of horror, he realised.
Ohh... shit.

For a few seconds Greg could only panic, staring into his washbag. He then realised the time for panic was long gone. It had been long gone hours ago.

Shit, shit, shit... oh, shit...

He pushed back the covers, got straight out of bed, and proceeded to the bathroom door. He leant against it and knocked, gently, feeling his heart try to batter its way out of his ribs.

"Myke?" he said, pale.

"Mm?" Mycroft's voice echoed a little. "I'm almost finished. Is everything alright?"

Greg didn't want to do this through a door - but he couldn't go back to bed. He felt a little sick. "Okay, just… don't be long."

"Greg, are you... quite alright?"

"Oh! God, no - I'm - I just - …" Greg curled his hands together, his heart thudding harder than ever. Fuck, fuck. Why didn't I hide them? Why did I just throw them in with my bloody toothbrush? He steeled himself with a breath. "Myke - in my washbag - they're - it's not - …"

There was a long pause.

Greg nervously stepped back.

The door then opened with a quiet click.

Mycroft appeared in the gap - dressed in soft navy pyjamas, holding toothpaste, his expression unreadable.

Greg's heart nearly broke.

"I'm not expecting anything," he said, in a rush. "I just - … God, I was packing and it just crossed my mind that - if - … not that I want, but if you wanted... and I - … I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Mycroft gave him a small, rather guarded smile.

"I assumed as much," he said. "It's... fine."

"It's not though," Greg said, despairing. "It's really not. Jesus, I just thought - and you wouldn't
even have to know. I'd just quietly take them home again. Christ, that must look like such a presumption...

Mycroft put the toothpaste aside, not quite meeting Greg's eyes.

"You're - sweet to have precautions to hand, in the eventuality. I'm touched by your regard for my safety."

"I didn't think we'd need them," Greg said, his throat tight. "I promise. I just thought - if, if by some chance - "

Mycroft's expression softened.

"Greg," he murmured. He came towards the bathroom door. "Greg, please stop tormenting yourself."

He eased his arms around Greg's waist, drawing him close. They held each other as Greg shook, trying to release his grip on his fear.

"I'm not taking condoms in your washbag as some kind of threat," Mycroft murmured. "It's... reassuring that you care."

Mycroft's fingers soothed over the back of his neck, carding gently into his hair. His eyes shone a little as they looked at Greg - searching his face, and taking in his distress with a softness Greg had never seen in him.

"I'll remind you we've just had a wonderful evening," he said, "with both of us well aware that you have them. There's - no reason to feel awkward. I'm not upset, Greg."

Greg let out a shaking breath.

"I'm still sorry," he said, pulling Mycroft close once more. He hugged him, mumbling into his shoulder. "I wouldn't want you to think I'm pushing. Couldn't bear it if you thought that."

Mycroft paused, still gently stroking his hair.

"Will you answer me something honestly?" he asked.

Greg squeezed him, pulling in a slow lungful of air. "Sure."

Mycroft's voice came gently in his ear.

"If - it were down to you..." he said. "If it were your decision..."

Greg felt his heart contract. "It's not," he said. "It's about both of us."

"But - if it were your decision..."

"It's not." Greg buried his face in Mycroft's neck, holding him more tightly than ever - cradling him, thinking of the skin hidden safe and sound under his navy pyjamas - the perfect evening they'd just shared, talking over candles and cheesecake. He couldn't cope with how that discovery must have looked. Condoms and lube thrown in with his razor. The assumptiveness of it. The expectation. It made him feel queasy. He wasn't that guy. "Myke, you're my best friend. I mean it - Christ, how could I ever - "

"No - God, no, I'm not assuming a thing - I just - "

"Not the assumptions you suppose." Mycroft sighed, his arms tightening around Greg. "For heaven's sake… you gentle, wonderful man. Come and lie down with me. This is - an exhausting conversation to have upright in a doorway."

He took Greg's hands, wove their fingers, and guided him quietly to bed.

As Greg sat back into the pillows, Mycroft's weight eased down beside him. Greg found his heart thumping with joy and distress. He reached for Mycroft at once, desperately relieved as his lover settled into his arms - his partner, he thought - his best friend.

Mycroft rested against his chest, reached up for his lips, and took his face in careful hands.

"Come here," Mycroft sighed. As their mouths joined, Greg felt the whole world around them go quiet.

For a long time, Mycroft didn't let him go. Each time Greg made to draw back, to start explaining again, Mycroft gently coaxed him into another kiss - deeper, softer, slower. He kissed Greg like their tongues weren't finished speaking. As the minutes drew on and his heart-rate slowly settled, Greg realised they were talking - they were explaining - just not with words. Mycroft’s gentle weight on his chest made his soul feel safe. He started to relax, laying his hands on Mycroft's back - stroking him slowly up and down - comforting himself with the feel of the smooth navy cotton, the warmth of Mycroft's skin beneath.

At last - when Greg had finally unwound, and their kisses were slow and easy - Mycroft gently released him.

Greg gazed up into his gorgeous grey eyes, wordless.

The corner of Mycroft's mouth upturned. He pressed two fingertips to Greg's lips.


Greg drew in a breath.

"Hush," Mycroft said, softly. "It… isn't a question, Greg. It's a statement of truth."

Greg stayed quiet. There was nothing more true in the world - he tried to tell Mycroft that with just his eyes.

"Allow me to confide something in you," Mycroft said, looking down into his face. The grey eyes quietened. "Something that I… perhaps wish I didn't have to confide. Something that might help you to understand."

Greg waited, his heart thundering in his ears all over again.

"I - had a boyfriend," Mycroft said. "In my first year. University." He paused; Greg had the feeling it was some time since this fact had even been acknowledged. "He - wasn't like you. In truth, I'd bleach every word he ever said from my memory, if I could… everything he ever did."

He drew in a short breath, returning himself to the present.

"I ended the association in my second year," he said, "on the advice of my personal tutor. Professor Douglas said he was ruining me. Shattering my faith in myself. She was quite correct. I took
comfort in my studies, and they took care of me in return. Eventually they became my career, which has made me who I am. Of all the things I expected to return later in my life… love was - never, never one of them."

Greg's heart tensed. Gently Mycroft brushed a hand over his cheek - stroking his stubble - grazing a thumb along his jaw, just watching him for a moment in quiet.

"I thought that possibility was gone from me," he murmured. "Now I find myself - desperately attached to you, Greg. In every possible regard. It's… dizzying. Intoxicating. Deeply, profoundly reassuring. I need you to know this. In no uncertain terms."

It was torture not to speak.

As Mycroft's thumb skated across his lips, Greg caught it gently - kissed it - gazing into Mycroft's eyes.

His lover coloured slightly, watching him through lowered eyelashes. He took a moment, and then went on.

"Physical intimacy - was something I rather gladly walked away from. My other relationship was not a comfortable one, Greg. I found it... baffling - why anyone would want - … and for twenty years, I've kept that opinion. I've spent my life wondering why others are willing to commit murder, to start wars, to shipwreck carefully-constructed political careers - all in pursuit of another person's bare skin."

Mycroft inhaled, grappling with something he could barely form into words.

"And now I open a door," he said, "and find you just standing there - in a white t-shirt - stubbled - our bed for the night waiting behind you - and you're in despair at the very thought that you might have distressed me, and I… I feel..."

Greg reached up for Mycroft's hands, shaking. He gripped them hard. Mycroft wound their fingers tightly together, and seemed to draw strength from it. It fortified him enough to carry on.

"Greg, if I was… feeling close to you..." He swallowed. "Feeling safe with you... if I was wondering, very seriously, about letting our relationship become more intimate..."

Greg's heart stuttered to a halt.

Mycroft leant near to him, shaking a little, and pushed their foreheads together.

"Here, where our privacy is assured... and knowing that I haven't shared that kind of intimacy with someone for many, many years..."

He leant down, and nuzzled anxiously against Greg's cheek. Their hearts pressed together. Greg felt his own restart with a lurch.

"Answer me honestly," Mycroft whispered in his ear. "Please."

For several seconds, Greg simply couldn't.

He couldn't think. He couldn't breathe. He closed his eyes, nestling his nose into the crook of Mycroft's neck, and felt his throat thicken as he swallowed. The whole world echoed around him.

"You're - everything to me," he breathed at last. "Everything."
Mycroft's fingers splayed nervously on his chest. "I - know, Greg."

"Do you?" Greg said. His stomach tightened. "Do you really know?"

Mycroft said nothing, his breath shallow.

"I - couldn't cope if you were gone," Greg said. "If we didn't have this any more." He shut his eyes, fighting the tightness of his throat. "I mean it Mycroft. I'm not kidding. I wouldn't handle it well."

"Darling," Mycroft whispered - and Greg's heart ruptured at once, flooding his chest with a feeling that took the breath from his lungs. "Greg, I'll - require a lot of patience. A lot of... re-training."

"You're not a dog," Greg bit out. His chest heaved. "We're not doing a thing until you're ready."

Mycroft shook slightly. "And if I am ready?"

_God. God, please._ Greg swallowed deeply.

"Promise this isn't just to please me," he breathed. "Not just because you think I expect it."

Mycroft made a small, soft sound.

"I… am about to turn forty-six," he said, drawing back to look into Greg's eyes. "In a matter of hours, in fact. If you think I've reached my age and my position through pleasing people when they expect it…"

He hesitated, glancing down at Greg's white t-shirt - stroking his hands over the cotton gently.

"I've - long realised that you'd wait without end for me, Greg. I've felt no pressure to be ready. None at all."

His gaze quietened.

"You're very attentive," he said, softly. "Very patient. You make passion seem easy, and… safe. I would like to explore that. Perhaps recover what I lost. With you."

Greg ran his hands along the curve of Mycroft's back, lost in the words. It took him a few seconds to speak.

"Tonight?" he said, gently.

Mycroft flushed. He glanced down, his gaze lingering on Greg's white t-shirt. "If you - wanted me."

_Holy fuck._

Greg laid his hands flat against Mycroft's back, reminding himself silently to breathe.

"Of course I want you," he whispered. "You're… Jesus, Myke… just look at you. You've - felt me when we kiss. You know what you do to me."

Mycroft's colour deepened. "Do you - feel comfortable here?"

A bed as warm and deep as a pool, Greg thought - three hundred miles from the battlefield. Their mezzanine nest, hidden away within a forest, quiet and safe. Sheets almost as soft as Mycroft's hands. The gentle shade of the lamps. Each other.
"I feel perfect here," he murmured. "Do you?"

Mycroft nodded, a little shy.

Greg gave him a quiet smile. He was aware that something had just been agreed - something huge.

"I'm... sorry, by the way..." he said. "For - your boyfriend at uni. I'm sorry it didn't go well."

"I was young," Mycroft said. He placed a quiet kiss on the bridge of Greg's nose. "Riddled with self-doubt... rather unprepared by my parents for normal human relationships." He paused. "It's - probably no wonder that I fell at once into a one-sided, exploitative mess."

Greg hesitated. "Exploitative?" he said.

Mycroft nodded, gently nuzzling his forehead.

"What do you mean 'exploitative'...?"

Mycroft selected his words. "He... took perhaps more than he gave. It was an advantageous arrangement for him."

Greg had a feeling he wasn't just meaning in general. "Did he - not look after you properly?"

"Not at all, most of the time." Mycroft flushed, uncomfortable. "I was - rather a means to an end."

Greg felt his heart drum in pained sympathy. He stroked his hands down Mycroft's back.

"You deserved better," he said, as Mycroft reached idly for his lips.

Mycroft paused; the near-kiss turned into a smile against his mouth.

"And here you are," he murmured. "Late, but nonetheless appreciated. May I brush my teeth now?"


Mycroft's eyes flashed, softly.

"You are very sweet," he said. He glanced at Greg's lips. "I shan't be long."

As he eased away, Greg's chest ached gently with the loss of contact. He found himself suddenly adrift and alone in a bed far too big, missing that brief and wonderful warmth that he'd felt.

"Myke?" he said, as his lover padded back towards the bathroom.

Mycroft paused in the door. "Yes?"

"I meant it." Greg hesitated. "You're my best friend."

Mycroft smiled, his eyes sparking. The colour rose back up in his face.

"I don't believe I've ever been a 'best friend'..." He raised an eyebrow. "Nor a 'partner'."

Greg felt the edges of his mouth lift.

"First time for everything," he said.
Mycroft's colour deepened. He smiled as he shut the bathroom door.

Greg brushed his hands over his face, settling himself for a moment.

_Six months_, he thought. Six months of gently growing near to each other. It had brought them right here, and now the night would take them further.

He got out of bed, turned off all the lamps but one, and retrieved his phone from where it was charging downstairs. He checked the door was locked; he opened YouTube as he came back upstairs.

_Relaxing music._

_Relaxing music long loop._

He skimmed and rejected the first few - too uplifting, too New Age, too many bird calls. He discarded a fairly nice one when he spotted that it only ran for an hour, deciding he couldn't take the risk. Calling an intermission to hunt through YouTube was not how he wanted this night to be remembered.

At last, he found something that worked - six hours, slow, with the background noise of waves. They sounded like deep breaths. Greg skipped briefly all the way through, checking for adverts. Another anecdote he didn't want Mycroft to have. There were none.

Video loaded, he placed the phone quietly on the bedside. He watched his own hand lay it flat, safely out of reach, the 'do not disturb' icon fixed into place on the lock-screen.

He had a feeling he'd remember this sight.

It seemed like a significant moment.

As Mycroft emerged from the bathroom, he gazed at the softly-lit scene now before him - their bed, secret and safe from the world; the covers pulled back to offer the softness of the mattress underneath; in the middle of it all, waiting for him with a quiet smile, the man who loved him.

Something monumental passed over Mycroft's face. It seemed to take his breath for a moment.

He approached the bed, footsteps quiet on the carpet.

As he settled into Greg's arms, they gathered slowly around him - pulling him gently into his lover's lap.

"Greg," he whispered, breathless. His eyes slid shut.

Greg nuzzled into his neck, holding him close. "I adore you," he murmured. He soothed his hands up Mycroft's back - ruffling the fabric of his pyjamas, cherishing every inch of him. "I want to promise you something."

Mycroft's breath stuttered. "Promise...?"

Greg's mouth stroked slowly across his neck; he gave a little shiver. It deepened fitfully as Greg's fingertips soothed for the first time beneath the hem of his shirt, coaxing tenderly up his sides - the lightest, gentlest of touches, barely skimming across his skin. Mycroft dragged in a breath, overcome.

"Whatever we do," Greg murmured against his neck, his voice a quiet rumble, "we take it slow."
Mycroft's hands curled anxiously at his shoulders. "I - I would - appreciate that..."

"You can tell me to stop anytime," Greg whispered. "No matter what's happening. No matter if I'm into it."

"O-Okay..."

"If something feels good, tell me. If something would feel good maybe slower... faster... tell me." Greg stroked his tongue up the column of Mycroft's throat, following the delicate line to his earlobe. "If it'd feel good somewhere else on your body... tell me. Take my hands and move them. Show me."

Mycroft sounded like he was about to faint. "Greg - ..."

"Is there anything you don't like, beautiful? Anything would make you uneasy?"

"I..." Mycroft stiffened a little, swallowing with sudden fear. "Please not - from behind. It - it makes me feel - ... I want to see your face. Is that - possible?"

Realisation dawned.

Something cold and strange flickered over the back of his neck.

"Beautiful, we... probably won't get that far," he said. "Not tonight. Not the first night."

He drew back from Mycroft's neck, looking up at him.

"And of course it's - possible, why would you - ...?"

Greg's stomach sank like a stone.

"Myke," he breathed. "Mycroft, did he only ever...?"

"I love you," Mycroft whispered. His expression cracked; so did Greg's heart. "You're - so kind to me. You're never anything but kind."

Greg forced down the rush of desperate anger that rose up in his mouth. He couldn't bear it - but the last thing he wanted was to show it.

He wrapped his arms around Mycroft, his heart pounding.

"I love you too, beautiful... I love you to pieces." He held Mycroft close against his chest, cradling him, stroking his back slowly as Mycroft curled around him, making no sound whatsoever. "If you want me to take you, someday - if you'd want that between us... it won't be like that. Not at all. Not ever."

Mycroft was silence for a moment.

"What - are we going to do?" he asked, uncertain.

Greg closed his eyes. "Just play," he murmured in Mycroft's ear. He trailed his hands down Mycroft's back once more. "Just... touch. Explore. Hold each other and kiss. Is that alright?"

Mycroft shivered. He drew back to look at Greg, slightly pale. "'Play'...?"
Greg's heart contracted with despair. "Myke, did... did the guy never just pull you into his lap, and help you come?"

Mycroft's pupils filled, big and dark in an instant. He said not a word. The fragility in his expression was almost too much to handle.

"Fuck this idiot," Greg breathed. " Whoever the fuck he was. That's - ... Christ, he - ... did you never just - just hands or mouths for each other? Just be with each other?"

Mycroft's eyes left his own - a nervous, unhappy flicker to somewhere in the middle of his chest.

"I - tried 'mouths' for him a few times," he admitted, quietly. "It transpires I'm not particularly good at it." He bit the side of his cheek. "I only succeeded in frustrating him."

"And he - 'attempted mouths' for you too, right?" Greg said, raising both eyebrows.

Mycroft said nothing, paling a little further.

"Jesus," Greg whispered, losing his faith in humanity.

"You don't understand," Mycroft said. "He was - the first person who'd paid me so much as a scrap of - that kind of affection. The first who'd wanted me. In any way. You - you can't imagine how that feels."

Greg swallowed a number of things he wanted to say. Instead, he wrapped his arms more tightly around Mycroft than ever, and eased his fingers into Mycroft's hair - holding him, gathering him up like love would squeeze all the sad memories away - all the pain, all the disrespect, all the fucking things he should never have had to hear.

"Beautiful," Greg whispered, softening his voice. "You - got treated badly... okay? You... probably don't need me to tell you that - but it's never going to happen to you again. Ever."

He soothed his hands up Mycroft's back once more, and reached up to place kisses around his mouth as he spoke. Mycroft's eyes fluttered shut.

"You're going to be treated right from now on," he promised. "Cause you've got me now... as long as you want me. As long as you'll have me. And I'm going to make it all alright."

Mycroft's mouth opened, shivering a little as Greg palmed up and down his back. His arms tightened around Greg's shoulders.

"Nice?" Greg murmured. "Just the stroking?"

"Mmhm - ..." Mycroft's head dropped forwards onto his shoulder. "Your - your hands are warm..."

Greg smiled quietly into his hair. "If this is all you want all night, love... this is what I'll do."

Mycroft shuddered slowly. "This - isn't sex," he said, his voice uncertain.

"Yes, it is." Greg softly kissed his temple. "My hands, talking to your skin. That's all it needs to be."

"Oh, God..." Mycroft's fingers twitched on his shoulders. "I - want more than this. Please." He swallowed, pushing closer. "Please show me. I want to know. I - I want sex, Greg - I - ... I want it to be you..."
Greg felt his soul silently take flame.

"Okay, beautiful…" he whispered. He reached up for Mycroft's mouth. "Let's - get a little closer."
Bare

When I look on you a moment,
then I can speak no more,
but my tongue falls silent,
and at once a delicate flame
courses beneath my skin;

and with my eyes I see nothing,
and my ears hum,
and a wet sweat bathes me,
and a trembling seizes me all over.
- Sappho, Fragment 31V

Greg's t-shirt was the first thing to go. It hit the dresser not long after he'd laid Mycroft on his back amongst the pillows, settled on top of him and descended on his perfect white neck. Mycroft's hands roamed his back with longing - searching, gripping, clinging. By the time Greg leant up for his lips, his hands had begun to shake.

"God help me," Mycroft gasped, pupils huge. "You're - magnificent."

Greg grinned, butting their foreheads together. "Steady," he soothed. "Won't get my ego out the door in the morning."

"Greg..." Mycroft's hands moved over his shoulders, trembling down onto his biceps. "You're glorious... I can't - ... I can barely..." He let his hands stray to Greg's chest - hovering there, flat-palmed, over his pectoral muscles.

His eyes flashed into Greg's, checking that this was allowed.

Greg smiled, heart squeezing.

"You can touch, beautiful. S'okay."

Emboldened, Mycroft laid his hands upon Greg's chest. He stroked the soft scattering of dark hair; his palms slid up onto the more muscular pad of his shoulders. His pupils grew as he gazed. His breath visibly shallowed.

Greg couldn't remember the last time someone had gazed at him like that. Mycroft's eyes were shining; his fingertips were cool, careful and shy. They touched his bare skin like they loved him.

A shiver flickered over Mycroft's face.

"You're warm," he whispered. "You're - so warm."

He looked up into Greg's eyes.
"I - … from the beginning, Greg. Since first I saw you." Deep, dark pink rose in his cheeks. "You're breathtaking. The most handsome man I've ever..."


As their mouths brushed, Mycroft's eyes fluttered shut. They kissed, sharing the softness of their lips; Mycroft's hands trembled against his chest.

With care, Greg eased his fingertips back beneath Mycroft's pyjama top - skimming over his stomach, stroking.

Mycroft let out a little moan into the kiss. It was quickly stifled, sucked in with a gasp.

Greg's heart twisted.

"No, beautiful..." He skimmed his fingers higher - petting, brushing, murmuring with tenderness against Mycroft's mouth. "Let me hear, love. Don't keep quiet."

Mycroft quivered, blushing and fighting to stay still.

"Feels good?" Greg rumbled. He stole a gentle kiss. "Nice, just here?"

Mycroft bit into his lip. His chest heaved nervously into Greg's touch. "I - ... s-sensitive..."

Greg's heart tightened. He nuzzled against his lover's cheek - inhaling Mycroft's scent, listening to his restless breaths.

"How about I stroke you here for a little while?" he said, softly. Mycroft's breath caught. "And you just relax, and feel... we can start finding out what you enjoy."

Mycroft swallowed, hard. "That - ... y-yes, that seems... fine."

Greg stroked a kiss across his cheek. "Is it okay if I undo your shirt?"

Mycroft gave a faint shudder in response, eyes flashing with desire and nerves. "P-Please do."

With every parted button, his shivering only increased. As the last one came apart, and Greg stroked the fabric back from his white-pale chest, Mycroft's pupils became the size of coins.

"You okay?" Greg murmured, as Mycroft's chest rose and fell in gentle panic into his hands.

"Yes," Mycroft managed, his voice tight.

"You sure?" Greg said, and began to stroke him slowly - the same tender, steady sweeps he'd enjoyed on his back.

Mycroft's eyes fogged. His breathing thickened.

"Yes," he said again - more convincingly this time. He stirred as Greg stroked him, then swallowed as the touches glided down across his stomach. "I - ... the diet - lapsed - though, partly your fault..."

Greg smiled.

"If you gain a stone this weekend," he said, "I won't care. You'll still be beautiful."

"Greg..."
"And I'll still want to run my hands over this gorgeous tummy of yours."


As Greg leant down, Mycroft's breathing hitched.

Neck, at first - this familiar pleasure - long hours on each other's sofas, a loosened top button and no more, kissing and nuzzling in the quiet like teenagers. Greg had never had such luxuriously unhindered access. He made the most of it: tiny, tender kisses; sinuous strokes of his tongue, then gently blowing across the wet shine that he'd left, feeling Mycroft's body twitch beneath his; little nips now and then with his teeth, coaxing forth fretful moans that, over time, as he murmured his soft reassurances to them, became a little deeper, a little less fragile.

For the first time as he did this, he could stroke Mycroft's skin. He trailed his hands over his sides, his stomach, his chest - open-palmed, softening strokes that never sped, never faltered. After long minutes, when Mycroft was trembling and the gentle jerks of his hips grew harder to hide, Greg eased his way down the bed and replaced the stroke of his hands with his mouth.

Mycroft's chest was snowy-pale and butter-soft; his scattering of tiny toffee freckles was barely visible in the lamplight. Greg kissed them as he came across them, greeting them with his mouth - the first to find them in twenty years - the first, he suspected, ever to love them.

He couldn't believe it.

Walking around the world somewhere, right now, was a man who'd had this chance - and discarded it. A man who'd looked at Mycroft, and seen only an opportunity to get his rocks off. Hadn't the idiot ever looked? Hadn't he listened to these noises? How could he never have laid Mycroft down and just kissed him like this, slowly and tenderly tasted him like this, listened to these noises and just wanted to burn apart with pride?

Mycroft in pleasure sounded like he was on the brink of breaking into sobs.

He sounded shy and lost and overwhelmed and aroused, as if all thought had evaporated - as if there was only feeling now - the sensation of Greg's mouth. In this moment, one hundred percent of Mycroft's capacities were focused on what it felt like to have Greg nuzzle and kiss and gently lick his bare chest, and how good it was. Greg's soul flamed with adoration at every sound. He could feel Myke's urgent erection pushing against his own stomach as he worked. He longed, with every fibre of his being, to dip just a little lower - to nuzzle at the hardness now straining for his attention. M'here, gorgeous... here to take care of you now... let me get my hands and my mouth all over you, make it all alright for you... make it perfect for you... but he wasn't finished with the rest of Mycroft yet.

Some idiot, long ago, had had this chance - some Cambridge cunt. Some twat who hadn't even wanted to look Myke in the face.

Greg didn't think he could undo nearly thirty years of hurt celibacy in a single night.

In three nights, though...

He pushed the thoughts from his mind - the ghosts of old lovers kicked firmly from the bed - and he concentrated on making this good.

Little rasps of his stubble now; long, wet strokes of his mouth. He was finding that Mycroft liked light, barely-there touches - they made him tighten and gasp - but then the smoother, firmer strokes made him breathe out and groan, and Greg couldn't decide which he loved more. He settled for
playing between the two, listening to the gasps increase in pitch, the groans begin to deepen into full-body shudders, until Mycroft was almost panting with enjoyment. At last, Greg let his mouth idle over to the nipples he'd only brushed for now - tightly peaked and pebbled, rose-pink.

Just lips at first - just a stroke. Barely a breath.

Mycroft twisted beneath Greg, and let out a stuttered stream of words.

"I like that... that - that feels good - "

Greg's soul groaned. "Thank you for telling me, beautiful... that's perfect... that's just what I want." He laved his tongue over Mycroft's left nipple, bathing it with a flat glistening stroke. "You're doing so well for me, Myke... so well."

Mycroft made a noise like he was about to come. "O-Oh, my God..."

"Mm? More here?" Greg lapped softly between words, coaxing the small pink nub of flesh to harden for him. "More praise?"

Mycroft's response was an incoherent rush of air, stuttered with fragmented words and whimpers of Greg's name. Greg understood. As Mycroft's hips bucked up against his stomach, he pressed gently back against them and kept licking, kept stroking. His free hand coaxed up to toy with Mycroft's other nipple.

Mycroft screwed his head back into the pillow, panting hard.

"G-Greg..." he bit out, sinking his teeth into his lower lip. His chest arched into Greg's mouth. "Oh - oh, please..."

Greg shivered as he inhaled. "That's perfect, beautiful. Just perfect. Showing me." Gently he pinched a little - no immediate flicker of interest - he stroked instead with his thumb in a slow circle, steady round and round, and Mycroft let out a hitched cry. "Mmhm... like that?"

Mycroft heaved - he liked the talking, Greg thought. He liked words. Glancing up the bed, he found Mycroft had blushed to his hairline.

"Like that..." Mycroft whimpered.

"Like that..." Greg soothed back to him. "Just like that..." Gently he sealed his mouth over Mycroft's nipple and sucked - softening with his tongue - slow, idle movements of his mouth, swapping after a minute to the other and assuring it they were equally adored. Through an accidental brush, he discovered that Mycroft liked his sides petted while he did this - long, tender strokes - it helped him to breathe. Separated only by thin cotton, Greg could feel Mycroft's cock jutting hard against his own - pushing together, nuzzling. Mycroft's sounds were doing everything for him.

He wondered if he could make them both come like this - a few firm, slow thrusts - ruin their pyjamas like teenagers. From the fast puffs of Mycroft's panting, it was a tantalisingly real possibility.

But there was more he wanted Mycroft to feel.

A whole lot more.

Gently he drew back from Mycroft's nipples, breathing last kisses over them both - tender promises
that he would be back - and reached up for his lover's neck. He let Mycroft cool for a few minutes, relax into this familiar pleasure - let him breathe - stroked his sides, slowly, and let their hearts begin to settle.

Finally, he brushed his fingertips over Mycroft's waistband.

"Beautiful?" he whispered. He nosed at the corner of Mycroft's jaw. "How would you feel if we took these off?"

Mycroft blushed. With an intake of breath, he gave a quick, nervous nod - then bit down into his lip as Greg deftly, without teasing, slid his fingers beneath the waistband.

He eased the fabric straight down and off; he didn't pause as he crawled down the bed. Freeing Mycroft's ankles from the tangle of bottoms and briefs, he pushed the clothing away into the depths of the bed. Mycroft's cheeks flared ever pinker as Greg came back to him. He parted his bare legs, shy, letting Greg settle between them and lean over him, like they had been.

Mycroft glanced downwards - his own naked body. Worry tugged at his features. Greg pushed their foreheads together, taking hold of his nervous gaze.

"You okay?" he murmured.

Mycroft shivered. "I - I think so."

Gently Greg stroked Mycroft's mouth with his own. "Can I put my hands on you?" he asked. "There? Help you come?"

Mycroft's pupils filled once more. "Do you - not want me to - "

"I want you to lie back and feel, for now… let me concentrate on you for a while. I want to find out how to do this for you."

He nosed at Mycroft's cheek, kissed his blush, and asked a gentle question.

"D'you masturbate, beautiful?"

Mycroft immediately turned the colour of a travel brochure sunset.

"It's okay," Greg said, soft. "I do, too. S'good for you. Helps you off to sleep." He smiled, his eyes sparkling. "Helped me off to sleep rather a lot lately."

From the glowing depths of his embarrassment, Mycroft let out a nervous bubble of laughter.

Greg's heart flipped at the sound. He'd never loved someone more.

"Help me figure out what you like?" he murmured, running his fingertips gently down Mycroft's chest. The laughter evaporated in an instant; Mycroft's thighs tightened. "If you can't say it in words, love… show me with your hands. That's alright to do."

"Oh my God," Mycroft whispered, almost to himself. As Greg's fingers wrapped around his cock, his hands dug at once into the mattress. "Oh my God - "

Greg stroked him with one hand, gently and loosely, as he reached for the wash-bag on the bedside table. He retrieved the lube from inside, snapped the lid open with his thumb, and found Mycroft watching this development with eyes the size of saucers.
"Why - …?"

"Lube," said Greg, showing him. Mycroft was shuddering even at this gentlest of stimulation. "It's - … please tell me - "

"I'm - familiar with the substance," Mycroft said, stiffly.

Greg couldn't hold in a smile. "D'you use it by yourself?"

The sunset blush returned. "I - I don't usually - ..."

Greg's heart stirred. "You've been missing out," he said. His eyes warmed. "Let's fix that."

Mycroft watched, wide-eyed and quivering, as Greg squeezed the thick gel onto his cock - let it roll glistening over the head. Mycroft bit hard into his lip at the sensation. Greg took hold of him and spread up and down, wetting him, coating him, and Mycroft let out a sound that neither of them would ever forget. Pleasure skittered across his face. He pushed himself into Greg's hands, mortified but wanting - enjoying it - liking the feeling too much to be afraid.

Greg kissed him, soothing him, as he worked Mycroft gently with his hands.

"More is more," he whispered. He gave Mycroft a grin. "I like lube... probably too much. Don't care. I like how it feels."

Mycroft's mouth opened; his cheeks blazed. "I - I-like it too..."

"Yeah?" Greg kissed his open lips, adoring him - the look on his face, the tightness of his breath, the thickness of Myke's cock sliding between his palms. The slick, rhythmic sounds were unbearably arousing. "We match, then... we can have fun with that, when we're ready. Lots of lube, hands. Just stroke each other. Make a mess."

He tightened his grip, squeezing, watching with delight as Mycroft's expression coursed with enjoyment.

"If you want to make a mess for me," he whispered, "don't wait. Don't hold it. This is just for you."

Mycroft gasped, shaking.

"O-Oh God…” He reached down, curling his shaking hands over Greg's. It seemed to comfort him, and he swallowed. He didn't change Greg's grip - simply held it, feeling - feeling the hands he was instinctively pushing in and out of, trembling with every rock of his hips. "G-Greg..."

"Good, beautiful?" Greg licked Mycroft's lower lip. "Tight enough for you?"

"Oh - mmh - ..." Mycroft's head dropped into the pillows, panting. "Good..."

Greg nuzzled beneath his chin, squeezing and stroking in time with the motion of Mycroft's hips. He found himself relaxing into the rhythm - the rhythm that was in Mycroft's blood.

First time, he thought.

First time he'd seen Myke like this - vulnerable, shaking with enjoyment. Mycroft was following that restless instinct that would bring him to come. He was safe beneath Greg, naked, pushing into his hands and holding them where he needed them. He was doing beautifully. He was perfect.

And he was so tactile, Greg thought - so eager for pleasure. So desperate for touch.
How the fuck could anyone have gotten this wrong?

Mycroft whimpered even having his back stroked. He was going to come any second, just from this - from a few gentle minutes of foreplay, slick hands around him, and a lover's voice murmuring praise and softness. That was all it took. How could anyone have failed at this?

You won't be failed again, beautiful. Not now I'm here... you won't ever go without.

Mycroft gave a sudden shudder, tightening. Greg thought for a second this was it - the first time - he prepared to slow his strokes, to coax Mycroft through.

But then Myke gripped his hands, jarring their motion with a sharp intake of breath. "Greg -"


Mycroft gazed up at him, eyes fogged and heavy-lidded. All his colour had settled high in his cheeks and in his lips. "I... I want - ..." He struggled with it, trying to say it - no sound came forth.

Greg lowered his head to Mycroft's ear; he nuzzled his cheek.

"Just us," he whispered, still stroking Myke with his hand - steady, gentle as falling snow. "You can tell me. It's all okay."


"Me?" Greg bit his lip, closing his eyes. His pulse surged. "Now?"


Greg swallowed.

"Okay," he whispered. He took a second to steady himself, breathing into Mycroft's neck. "Let me just - take these off, alright? And we'll explore... you and me."

He reached down, hooked his thumbs in his boxers and pyjama bottoms, and pushed both down. Mycroft stirred beneath him, panting. With some rearrangement of legs, Greg managed to get the twisted fabric off and kicked it away into the bed.

Thick-throated, he crawled back to Mycroft - naked, for the first time.

All these months, he thought. All the waiting.

He pressed their bodies together at last, skin-on-skin. Mycroft was so warm and so soft that he couldn't bite back a moan; the trembling sigh that answered him caused his soul to erupt. Eagerly Mycroft tangled their bare legs, reaching around Greg with shy arms to pull him closer, tighter - clinging to his back - more skin, more contact - their mouths met and they kissed, slow and gentle at first but soon becoming deeper, more desperate, panting together, overcome by this feeling of the first touch of skin.

Mycroft's gentle squirms were affecting Greg in ways he didn't even understand.

He found his cock straining in seconds, aching for stimulation. The slow rub of it against Myke's made him jerk and then moan, pressing Myke gently into the pillows, sliding his tongue inside his lover's mouth. Mycroft's fingers raked through his hair.
As they rocked against each other, breathing hard, it started to feel like sex - and Greg realised in a surge this was happening, finally happening. Mycroft was beneath him, whimpering and aroused, moving against him in rhythm. Before the night was out, he would watch and hear Myke come. No thought had ever turned him on so much in his life.

Mycroft's arms tightened, suddenly. Greg felt him brace his heels against the bed.

With surprising strength Mycroft pushed upwards, and tipped Greg over onto his back with a flump. Mycroft pushed atop him; his desperate mouth found Greg's. Greg arched into the kiss, moaning, shaking as Mycroft fed him his tongue. Myke shuddered, drinking his sounds. He shifted with care to sit astride Greg's thighs.

As he raked his fingers down Greg's chest - rasping over his skin, adoring him - Greg's pulse sped at once out of control. He ran his hands over Myke's thighs in return, up his sides, over his stomach.

The kiss broke with a gasp. Wide-eyed, wild, they panted to each other.

Mycroft blushed, drew a quick intake of breath - and reached for the bedside cabinet.

As Myke squeezed lube onto his cock, Greg's head dropped back into the pillows. He dragged his focus to his breathing, begging himself not to come right now - not to finish this before it had even started. The sensation of cool gel oozing over the hot tip of his cock was glorious - but it was the look on Mycroft's face that dragged him to the edge. He gazed at Greg in dark-eyed wonder, like he'd never seen him so clearly before.

As Myke wrapped his hands, spread the gel and began to stroke, Greg's every muscle contracted. He groaned, aching; his eyes melted shut.

They opened just in time to see the first flicker of nerves crossed Mycroft's face.

"I - haven't any idea what I'm - ..."

Greg swallowed, heart pounding. "It's okay," he whispered. He reached for Myke's hands, curling his own protectively around them - showing.

Slow, root to tip - achingly slow - so slow it should be frustrating, but wasn't. Mycroft's fingers, he thought; Mycroft's touch. Mycroft, naked and sitting across his thighs. A shudder convulsed through his body. His heart thumped as Mycroft caught his shudder too, sharing it with him, breathing hard.

"Beautiful, you - you won't get this wrong, I promise," he whispered. His breath cracked. "Just… fuck - ... just go slow - really slow - and..."

He was losing track of his thoughts. He dragged in a lungful of air, forcing himself to concentrate.

"If I tell you to stop," he breathed, "stop, okay? P-Promise me."


Greg grinned.

"M'fine," he huffed, breathless. "You're coming first. That's why."

Mycroft's face opened. He laughed a little, flushing; he resumed the languid sliding of his hands.

"Fuck," Greg whispered, shivering. He let his eyes close. "Mhm… fuck..."
Mycroft made a small sound. "You're - wonderful when you swear."

Greg bit into his lip. "Good. M'gonna swear quite a bit soon..." He took Myke's hand as it eased to the tip of his cock, and showed him the swipe of a thumb over his frenulum that made his balls tighten and his cock twitch. Mycroft repeated the motion for him, slow, watching his face.

Greg's thighs clenched at the shock of pleasure.

"Fuck - " he moaned. "Yes - like that..."

He sighed, shuddering, as Mycroft's hands glided back down his cock.

"Not every stroke," he managed, letting go with his hands - letting Myke rub him. He stretched, his chest aching, taking a grip on the sheet beneath him. "Just - n-now and then... tease me with it. Don't let me have it every time."

"Greg..." Mycroft whispered, his voice tight. His hands slowly squeezed as they reached the root.

"Mmh..." It was too good - too perfect. Greg let his head fall back, let his eyes shut, let the pleasure wrack its way up into his throat and come pouring out of his mouth. He listened helplessly to himself moan and heave. "God, your hands... oh, God...fuck, beautiful - those fingers - sometimes I watch you turning a pen or your phone between those fingers and I just - just want to - ... you're so gorgeous, and now you're - ... oh God, Mycroft - just - ...

Mycroft seemed to have stopped breathing. His gaze was locked on Greg, his eyes dark and burning as he watched Greg writhe and gasp nonsense. Greg drove his hands up into his own hair in desperation, raking it on end, his pulse hammering.

"Oh fuck, sweetheart..." he whimpered. Everything was tightening, pounding; he wanted it. He'd wanted it for weeks. Months. "Keep going, just - just for a while, just let me - ... f-fuck, please - "

Mycroft shifted suddenly. He pushed forwards, panting, and slid his own cock against Greg's. He tightened his hands around both and let out a great rush of air as he stroked, shaking, blushing to his hairline. Sinking his teeth into his lips, his hips began to rock.

Greg nearly came on the spot.

"Oh fuck, beautiful, fuck... that's - ... oh, holy shit..." Half-delirious, Greg lunged for the lube. Mycroft let out a whimper. Between them, they managed to get it open.

Greg wrapped his lubed hands with Mycroft's, curling their fingers around their cocks, and watched Myke's face tighten with the feeling. The gel slicked messily between their hands; Mycroft's cock slid slow and firm against his own. It was magnificent. Greg hauled himself back from the brink, gritting his teeth and forcing himself to count backwards from ten. He wasn't coming until he knew Myke was. He needed to see it.

He tried not to think about what he was feeling right now - the squeeze of Mycroft's thighs around his own; the restless rocking of his hips; the shaft of Myke's cock, nuzzling, rubbing, slick and hot against his own and the tightly joined grip of their hands, the wet glide of lube, the softness of the bed beneath his back. He concentrated on Mycroft's face, breathing hard, watching him start to lose control - watching him fall apart.

That's it, gorgeous. Chase your pleasure. Follow it for me. Let it rise, let it break, let it come. Only as Myke's eyes flew wide did Greg realise he'd said the words aloud. He didn't care. He let the praise and love stream from his mouth, comforting and promising, breathing adoration.
As they rocked together, Myke drank in every word. He bit down at his lip, shaking hard, incapable of response but listening. Seconds and minutes blurred into one, melting into this rhythm they'd found - the bundled pleasure of their hands - rocking together, building, tightening.

A sudden shudder then coursed through Mycroft. Greg watched it roll up his back, between his shoulders, and arch his neck. Mycroft let out a cry. His knees gripped either side of Greg's hips.

As new warmth burst between their hands, Greg realised he was watching Mycroft come - his heart ripped itself open at once. Ecstasy wracked Mycroft's features; every scrap of control fled from him in a rush. It left him stretching and blushing and shaking to the core, whimpering scraps of Greg's name as he came into their hands, flooding, pulsing, pouring, and Greg watched every moment of it - drank it in - gazing, burning up with it.

He'd never seen anything so beautiful in his life.

As Mycroft gasped out the last of it, shaking, Greg spotted the second he began to slump.

He eased up beneath Myke, and caught him in his arms. He gathered his lover safely down beneath the covers. The two of them were coated in lube and sweat and come - it was everywhere. Greg didn't care. Mycroft burrowed into his arms, weak as a newborn lamb - and for what felt like an age they simply hid together, panting. Mycroft trembled in his after-glow.

"You... you haven't come..." he whispered at last, his voice breaking. His hands shook on Greg's back. "You - need to come."

Greg threaded his fingers through Mycroft's hair.

"Hush, love..." he whispered. "M'fine... just let me watch you..." He stroked his mouth across Mycroft's forehead - salt and sweat. "Let me just fucking watch you."

Mycroft quivered, nuzzling into his neck. Greg drew a long breath; it filled far deeper than his lungs.

"That all okay...? You feel alright?"

For a moment, Mycroft couldn't speak. His fingers tightened on Greg's back.


Greg smiled into his hair.

"S'just love, beautiful... I like seeing you happy. Like seeing things feel nice for you."

Mycroft's tremors deepened. "Greg, you - you can't begin to imagine..."

Greg trailed a gentle hand along his back.

"I think I can," he whispered. He pressed his lips to Mycroft's forehead, letting them linger. "How about I run us a bath?" he murmured. "We can lie together in the hot water... get clean..."

Mycroft's breath caught. His hand stroked over Greg's hip.

"May I...?" he whispered. "In the bath."

Greg's stomach curled with want. As Mycroft's lips feathered across his earlobe, the curling
became a low and softened growl.

"I want to know," Mycroft breathed. "I - want to help you come, Greg."

Greg's mouth curved. "After watching that, I might not need a lot of help."

Mycroft laughed against his jaw, shivering. He let out a noise of faint embarrassment. "Was I loud?" he begged. "I - couldn't keep myself from..."

"You were perfect," Greg hushed, wrapping him up. "You were totally, completely perfect."

He brushed his nose through Mycroft's hair.

"I'd watch that every morning and night of my life, if you let me."

"God on high..." Mycroft whispered. "Greg... I..."

"C'mon, beautiful... let's get you cleaned up."

They laid in the warm water for over an hour - candles, bubbles, the soft stroke of a wash-cloth. Greg couldn't stop gazing at the pink that had risen in his lover's cheeks. Myke's eyes were molten silver, his gaze languid and sleepy and soft; he laid against Greg's chest as if he'd never been so comfortable in his life.

He looked like he'd just made love, Greg thought.

He looked like the whole world around him was new.

When Mycroft washed him, his touch was gentle and his fingertips were shy - they were losing all their nervousness. They wandered his body with soft curiosity, guiding soap suds across his chest, his arms, the dark hair on his stomach. Beneath the water Mycroft washed his thighs, lingering a little over the muscle that by some miracle had lingered into Greg's forties. Throughout, he gazed at Greg's body in the candlelight, skin gilded by water and flame.

Greg watched in quiet fascination as he explored.

He wondered if Mycroft had ever felt safe enough just to study someone like this. He had a feeling his body was the first.

"You okay?" he murmured, placing a kiss to his lover's temple. Wet, warmed by candlelight, the auburn in Mycroft's hair gleamed like red wine.

"Yes, I... was just admiring you." Mycroft's eyes flickered into his. "Is that alright?"

Greg smiled. "Of course it is." He stroked his fingertips between Mycroft's shoulder blades, drawing patterns there - a heart, a spiral, a wave. "Nice to have someone to touch?"

Mycroft let out a little rush of air. "You are - amazing," he breathed. He flushed, his voice tightening. "I have never felt like this."

Greg smiled. His whole being felt at peace, he thought. This wasn't the ordinary feeling.
"M'glad we took our time," he said.

Mycroft's eyes shone. "As am I."

As Mycroft's fingertips idled past his navel, following the slender trail of hair beneath the water, Greg stirred. He let his head rest back against the side.

"Myke," he said, softly.

Mycroft gazed at him, watching his expression as he trailed his fingertips along Greg's cock. Greg shivered, drawing breath. It was hard to tell what was water and what was Mycroft - one single, fluttering swirl of touch.

"Myke," he moaned - half-warning, half-plea.

Mycroft trembled. "May I...?"

_Holy fuck, yes._ Greg swallowed, catching Mycroft's hand beneath the water. He wrapped it gently into place.

Mycroft exhaled against the wet skin of his neck, gripping. At the first slow pulls, like he'd shown Mycroft in bed, Greg felt a groan ripple through his body. He stretched, closing his eyes.

"Christ..." he whispered.

"I-Is that - ?"

"S'perfect, love..." Greg turned his head, brushing his mouth over Mycroft's forehead. "Kiss me?"

Mycroft's lips trembled as they kissed; he was nervous. Greg could feel it in the motions of his hand - instinctively speeding up, aiming to achieve something. Performing this act, Greg thought. Doing what was to be done.

He shivered, took Mycroft's grip and showed him - slowed him right down, right back to the start, to the simple brushing of inquisitive fingers over skin. Mycroft breathed out against his lips - letting go of some fear. Greg breathed with him. As Mycroft stroked, shyly, pleasure coiled through Greg's body.

"M'not like he was," Greg whispered into the kiss. He felt Mycroft's expression tighten. "I - don't want you to make me come. Just... help me. Just lie here with me."

Mycroft shivered, softening. The distinction seemed to ease his fear. He relaxed against Greg's side - cuddling into him, Greg thought - lying close to him. Resting.

"You're doing everything right, beautiful..." Greg kissed him, shivering as Mycroft swiped the sensitive spot beneath the head. "F-Fuck - ... everything right..."

"I'm - sorry I'm - so sorely lacking in confidence."

"Don't want confidence," Greg whispered. "Want you. Just as you are." He stroked his mouth over Mycroft's - kissing him, coaxing him to kiss back - and as they laid together in the water, kissing, stroking, he felt Mycroft begin to settle.

It took a little time. Their tongues were melding by the time Mycroft's wrist began to loosen - relaxing into this motion - forgetting almost that he was doing it. Greg felt the exact moment when it stopped being an action and drifted into instinct. The lapping of the water was gorgeous - the
warm, steady swirls - the candlelight and the quiet - Mycroft's soft, trusting kisses. The pleasure began to deepen, heating. Greg felt it curl deliciously at the root of his cock. He moaned with it, weak, and let himself start to pant.

Mycroft seemed to enjoy his sounds. He liked to know this was all okay - that everything was going just fine. As Greg stiffened, breath catching with a groan, Mycroft whispered against his lips.

"Good...?"

Greg's pulse spiked. "God, Myke - you - ..." He forced himself to swallow, shaking. He couldn't cope much longer. He'd been longing to come since he first felt Mycroft's erection nuzzle against his own. Now they were lying here, naked and warm, and it was Mycroft's careful hand sliding up and down his cock - stroking him, doing this for him, just how he liked - slow, long strokes. His muscles trembled. "Don't change," he begged, gasping it out. "Don't change a thing."

"I won't." Mycroft's pupils were swollen - gazing at him in wonder, watching him shake with enjoyment. "I love you."

Greg's heart quietly imploded. "I love you, beautiful - f-fuck... oh, fuck... I love you so much..." It was coming; it was starting. He was almost there. "Loved touching you. Undressing you. Watching you come - coming all in my hands for me. Oh, fuck..."

Mycroft started to shake. "Greg..."

"Kiss me, sweetheart," Greg gasped - and as Mycroft's mouth pushed against his own, lips parting, tongue seeking his, and the gentle hand squeezed at his cock and began to rub him hard, Greg jerked. He felt the pressure break. It shattered, rippling through him, and for long and desperate moments there was only the searing, sizzling white rush of fuckyesfuckfuckyes, the feel of Mycroft whimpering into his mouth. He found his hands clamped around Mycroft's on his cock - holding him there - just - and Mycroft was making the tiniest motions, the tiniest little tugs to bring him through, and it was everything Greg had never known he wanted. He felt himself coming without end, shining and full of pleasure - lost in that moment, held there as he poured himself free.

And then it was over - and he was gasping, sinking into the hot water with a shudder. Mycroft shivered with joy against his chest.

"Greg..." He sounded almost dazed. "Oh... Greg..."

"Holy fuck," Greg breathed, overwhelmed. He could barely think.

As he panted, he felt Mycroft reach for the washcloth.

Mycroft cleaned him with care - the lightest of strokes, washing him. It was so good Greg feared he might pass out.

"Sweetheart..." he whispered. He stiffened, twitching. "S-Sweetheart, gentle - ..."

Mycroft laid the washcloth aside, eased closer and kissed him, pushing his fingers up into Greg's hair - kissing him as if they'd never kissed before. Greg wrapped his arms around Mycroft's wet body. He held him tight.

Their hearts pounded together in the quiet.

As the bath drained, Greg dried Mycroft by candlelight. Mycroft shivered as he did, but not through cold. They lapsed into kissing, wrapped in towels together, until the sleepy motions of
Mycroft's mouth became too adorable to bear. Greg guided him to bed, turned out the light, and settled naked with him beneath the covers.

"You alright?" Greg whispered, as Mycroft cuddled into his arms.

"Yes," Mycroft said, softly. "I-I'm fine."

"D'you want me to find your pyjamas for you?"

Mycroft kissed his jaw. "No... no, I - ... happy like this."

Greg smiled, closing his eyes. Mycroft wanted the skin contact. He wanted the closeness.

"Tell me all that was okay," he murmured, as their bare legs entwined and Mycroft's arm eased around his waist.

"Greg, it was... more than 'okay'. Far, far more." Mycroft paused. "I hope you think so, too."

"Of course I do. That was incredible."

Mycroft shivered as he yawned, stirring against Greg's bare chest. "Day one of romantic mini-break," he murmured. "And my pyjamas have fallen at the first hurdle..."

Greg smiled into his hair. "Kinda proud mine lasted as long as they did."

"I hope you kept the receipt...?"

"Mmh. Not going to need them again, am I?"

Mycroft nestled closer, settling into his warmth. "Perhaps the - white t-shirt can stay. For purposes of evocative removal."

Greg grinned, biting at his lip.

"Whatever makes you happy, baby."

Mycroft snorted with sleepy amusement. "'Baby'...?"

"I'm post-coital," Greg protested. "And in love. Can't think straight..."

"I should have known 'Myke' was a slippery slope..." Mycroft stifled a yawn against his neck. "I've - got the strangest feeling that there's something I've neglected to do. I've just realised what it is."

"Mm?"

Mycroft rested his chin on Greg's shoulder. "I haven't texted you goodnight."

Soft quiet settled over Greg's heart. He hugged Mycroft closer, wondering why that moved him so much.

"What would you say?" he asked. "If you did."

Mycroft took a few moments to decide. "That today was perfect - in every way."

Greg felt a lump lodge itself in his throat.

"Not even your birthday yet," he managed, after a moment. Mycroft smiled against his neck.
"Good night, Greg..." Mycroft paused. "Thank you."

Greg kissed his bare shoulder - the scatter of pretty freckles there. "Good night, beautiful... sleep tight."
On the morning of his forty-sixth birthday, Mycroft Holmes awoke to the quiet closing of a door.

His thoughts drifted for a while within the warm nest of covers, sleepy and suffused with peace. The cotton felt good against his bare skin. It felt clean. It all felt rather new.

As he dozed, he listened to the exchange of voices just audible downstairs - catching no words, but following their gentle back and forth. At one point he heard Greg's easy laugh; his heart stirred in happiness in response. Thanks were finally given, and then the door closed once more.

A minute later, steady footsteps made their way up the stairs.

Mycroft sleepily opened his eyes.

His first sight of the day was Greg in pyjama bottoms and a loose dressing gown. He was smiling, and carrying a breakfast tray - set with a glass of champagne and a gardenia bouquet.

Mycroft's heart momentarily ceased to beat.

"Greg," he breathed.

Greg's smile lit the room.

"Morning..." He laid the tray gently at Mycroft's side. The flowers were magnificent - pristine white petals, glossy green leaves, their fragrance fresh and cool. Mycroft couldn't believe his eyes.

He glanced at the bedside clock in sudden realisation, flushing as he spotted the time.

"Dear lord, I... I never sleep this late..." he said, brushing a hand back through his dishevelled hair.

Greg settled on the mattress edge beside him. "It's alright," he murmured. "We've got nowhere to be..."

Mycroft supposed it was true. Tentatively he picked up the gardenias - he'd never been been given flowers before.

They smelt divine.

It seemed so... decadent. So charmingly unnecessary. Previously, he'd rather sneered at the idea of the gift of severed plant life. Now that he'd just been handed some, by a man whose eyes shone with pride just watching him smell them, he was rather amending his opinion on the matter.
Gardenias, he thought. *Secret love,* as he recalled.

"Greg, you're... very kind," he said, overwhelmed.

Greg's whole face warmed.

"Happy birthday, beautiful," he murmured. Mycroft's heart tugged; Greg leant closer.

As his lips pressed to Mycroft's, the world and everything in it went still. Happiness streamed in waves from that simple, gentle connection. Mycroft felt it shine in every part of his being, right out to his fingertips - perfect, peaceful joy. It still didn't seem possible. For part of him, it never would.

But it was happening. It was real. Greg was neither a phantom, nor a dream - and last night, they'd made love.

As Greg drew back, smiling, Mycroft could only gaze into his eyes.

"How're you feeling?" his lover asked.

Mycroft took a moment to put it into words. "Sublime," he said.

Greg's eyes crinkled at the edges, soft and dark. "Good," he murmured. "You certainly slept well, anyway...""The man had no idea, Mycroft thought. He had no concept of his own appeal.

He was nothing short of divine, and here he was - sitting in his dressing gown on Mycroft's bedside, with champagne and a gardenia bouquet, having spent the night coaxing pleasure from Mycroft's skin unlike anything he'd ever known. Mycroft was keenly aware of the cotton sheets - the nakedness of his own torso in the morning light. After their bath, Greg's body had simply felt too good against his own to contemplate the redonning of nightwear. They'd fallen asleep tangled up in each other. It had been wonderful.

Greg couldn't begin to imagine the comfort he'd brought.

"Was everything alright for you last night?" he said.

Mycroft hoped his expression in response was not quite as shy as it felt. "Yes, of course it was... you were - very loving, Greg. You were very reassuring."

It was impossible to say this without blushing. Swept up in the joy of the flowers, the man at his side and the memories of last night, Mycroft decided to say it regardless.

"Thank you for... taking exquisite care of me, Greg."

Greg's dark eyes shone. "You too," he murmured. "M'very lucky... it was amazing for me, beautiful."

Mycroft felt a flush spread at once through his chest - soft, sugary and enjoyable.

"Greg, I... hardly knew what I was doing," he muttered.

"Really?" The weight of Greg's delighted eyes upon his own felt like heaven. "The part where I came moaning nonsense for you...? That was all accidental, was it?"

Every inch of Mycroft's skin shivered in response.
It had been, quite simply, the most intimate and evocative experience of his life. Lying against Greg Lestrade's wet chest, in the tender safety of his arms, slowly stroking the man as he moaned… watching him pant, and plead, and come…. it had been indescribable.

As he looked down at the flowers, Mycroft felt an uncharacteristic lump thicken in his throat.

Forty-six, he thought. Forty-six, with a bouquet and a boyfriend. Of all the things he'd expected to wake up to on this day…

He looked into Greg's eyes.

*It is important to say the unsaid,* he thought. Greg had taught him that.

"I enjoyed last night very much," he said. "Quite especially - you. It meant a lot to me."

His heart pattered eagerly in his chest as Greg smiled.

"Nothing that wasn't okay?" Greg said. He moved Mycroft's flowers to the bedside.

"Nothing," Mycroft said. "Nothing whatsoever." As his lover transferred the breakfast tray to his lap, Mycroft said, "Greg, if you wished to - in future, I would... very much want that. All that it entails."

Greg leant over, kissed his cheek, and said,

"Me too. I'm glad you're alright. All that stuff about your ex was kinda horrifying, if I'm honest... but it's in the past. It's over. You've got me now - and you're stuck with me."

He grinned as Mycroft smiled, and nudged him the glass of champagne.

"And if you want me, you know where I am. Now have your birthday breakfast, beautiful. We've got a lot of spoiling to get through today. You'll need your strength."

"Dear God... I haven't been spoiled enough already?"

"Nope," said Greg. "Nowhere near." He gave Mycroft another cosy kiss to the cheek, fond as a puppy. "M'just gonna fetch my food. You stay here and sniff your geraniums."

Mycroft struggled to restrain a smile. "Gardenias."

"Gardenias, yep. Back in a sec."

As Greg headed back downstairs Mycroft started on his breakfast, flushing quietly with happiness. This felt both ridiculous and ridiculously good. He had a feeling the day would involve a lot of that. He took a pleased sip of champagne, smiling to himself - though, he thought, eyeing the extent of the breakfast, Greg's chivalrous remarks about gaining a stone in three days might come to be tested by Tuesday.

Greg returned with another tray, sat down beside him in bed, and reached into the pocket of his dressing gown.

"If I was a bad person," he said - and Mycroft paused, glancing over.

From his pocket, Greg produced one of Mycroft's two mobile phones.

"... I'd have pretended I didn't hear this thing going like crazy," he said, "and I'd have left it
downstairs. But someone wants you badly."

Mycroft looked at the phone, swallowing a mouthful of food.

He already knew who it was.

"Which is this one?" Greg asked. "Home or work? I can never tell them apart."

"Work." Mycroft lied without a beat, reaching for it. He unlocked the smartphone with his thumbprint, and watched the screen flood with notifications. He winced. It was all as expected, but still somewhat alarming.

His eyes skimmed the list of messages, emails and voicemails, snagging on scattered angry words - trying not to see the worst of them. Even as he read, a new text message arrived. Block capitals. Raging at him to answer his fucking phone, if he knew what was good for him.

Suddenly rather glad to be three hundred miles away, Mycroft quietly set the phone to silent. He put it aside, picked up his champagne and took a large mouthful.

"Nick Pritchard?" Greg asked, as he swallowed.

_Curse my brother for ever teaching you that name._

"Mm," Mycroft said, coolly. "He's rather angry about my unfortunate mistake with The Guardian."

"M'sorry," said Greg. Unease crossed his face. "It's - my fault you're getting grief."

"Hardly, Greg. The man's temper is legendary. 'Incendiary' isn't even the word."

Mycroft retrieved his knife and fork, wanting to distract himself from some of those threats that he'd spotted. 'Brother' had featured rather a lot; as had 'faggot' and 'sorry'.

"I'd had plenty of 'grief' from him before you'd even heard of the matter," he said. "And I happen to stand by my decision. Put it out of your mind."

Greg kissed his bare shoulder. The little thrill of lips on Mycroft's skin was enough to dispel some of the shadow, and he smiled.

"At least you're here," Greg decided. "You're out of reach. Pritchard’ll blow himself out... it'll all be over by the time we go back."

Mycroft rather doubted it - but Greg was quite correct that this was by far the best place to be. The number of people who knew Mycroft's location right now could be counted on one hand, and every single one of them - excepting Greg - had passed advanced level training in how to resist interrogation.

They were safe.

"How did you plan for us to spend the day?" Mycroft asked, carefully scooping up a spoonful of scrambled egg.

Greg smiled, now constructing himself a sandwich out of toast, bacon and fried mushrooms.

"Long walk, if you wanted? There's a waterfall you can get to, apparently… maybe sit there for a while, just relax. Then, I don't know. We could find a little town, get coffee. Another posh dinner. We can do anything you like, beautiful. It's your birthday."
Mycroft felt himself growing rather pink-cheeked. "This is all rather curious," he decided.

"Yeah?" Greg grinned. "You look like you're enjoying it so far."

"I said 'curious'," Mycroft murmured, with a sideways flash of his eyes. "Not in any way 'unpleasant'."

---

Alright mate? Hows tricks?
just reminding you its your brother's birthday. FYI :) 
Sent 10:36

Why would I need to know this information?
Received 10:37

so you can text him and wish him all the best :) 
Sent 10:39

I see… rather busy for now. Perhaps later. 
Received 10:39

Busy? Youre not getting up to trouble sherlock, are you? 
Sent 10:41

Trouble is getting up to me. 
Received 10:42

... oh right? 
Do I wanna know? 
Sent 10:44

Nicholas Pritchard continues to struggle with the concept of 'consequences'. Invited himself to Baker Street this morning and forcibly attempted to gain entry. Police called. I asked for you but they said you have taken annual leave to help a friend move house. Sergeant Donovan was very tardy in her attendance. Pritchard had fled the scene.
by the time she arrived.
Received 10:46

holy shit, the guy turned up at your flat?? are you and J alright??
Sent 10:48

Yes of course. Pritchard did not gain access. Now at station waiting to give statement.
When will you be here?
Received 10:52

I'm not in london, mate… it won't be me :( Just answer all their questions as best you can, okay?
Have they found pritchard?
Sent 10:55

I understand they are "on it"...
Received 10:56

Okay… good… well lie low until they find him, will you?
Go stay with Johns sister.
Dont get your head kicked in while I'm out of london.
Sent 10:59

I don't like John's sister.
But we will "lie low" nonetheless.
Received 11:01

Precisely where out of London are you? Suspect we are being delayed on purpose. Nobody seems in a hurry to speak to me.
Received 11:12

This will be faster if you come to take the statement.
Received 11:25

Lestrade, this woman is unbearable. She has just called me "antagonistic". She is misquoting me in the statement and her
Stubble against his inner thighs - a warm, dry rasp over tender skin, followed by the soft slick of Greg's mouth. Mycroft's hands had been guided into Greg's hair for this. Greg had nuzzled him onto his back, kissed him with that wicked mouth, then soothed for him to relax and feel. He'd taken ten minutes even to reach Mycroft's navel.

Mycroft had never come so close to passing out before.

He couldn't keep himself from looking down the bed - watching, wide-eyed and panting, as Greg took the time to explore every inch of his shower-damp skin - nosing through his pubis, nuzzling at his thighs, laving his hipbones with the flat of his playful tongue. Every sensation surpassed the last. It was excruciatingly good. Mycroft's hair was still wet, and it was going to dry with its curl. He didn't care. He just wanted this to continue.

As Greg finally turned his attention to the erection now growing uncomfortable, stroking his nose and closed mouth from root to tip, Mycroft expelled every cubic scrap of air in his lungs. He felt Greg smile against his cock, which produced another mortifying noise - then Greg drew a slow lick the full length of his shaft, painting Mycroft with a wet and shining stripe. The sight alone was overwhelming. Mycroft let his head fall back again, panting for a moment to compose himself, as Greg gently wrapped him with a hand and kissed the tip of his cock.

"You okay?" Greg murmured; the vibration of his voice made Mycroft twitch.

"Yes - ..." Mycroft bit into his lip, gazing back down the bed. He forced himself to speak. "Yes, I - I like it."

" Barely started yet," Greg remarked, his eyes sparkling. He began to lap at the head of Mycroft's cock, just bathing him with that pink and wet tongue, holding Mycroft's gaze as he did it. Mycroft shuddered, letting out a noise he hadn't known he could make. Greg's eyes were almost black.

"You - y-you look - ..." The words would not come. Mycroft swallowed around them; they remained stuck in his throat.

"Mm?" Greg smiled, then swirled his tongue around the head, a wet coil of sensation that made Mycroft's brain short-circuit. He moaned his excitement, almost frantic, and felt Greg sigh against the heat of his cock. "Oh, beautiful... you do like this, don't you...? Am I discovering something here?"

_Holy God, that voice._ That voice alone could persuade Mycroft to come - that voice, and those
dark eyes, and all the pleasure that they promised. Greg began to lap at him lazily, slow flicks to the head, lengthening until Greg was licking him from root to tip over and over, desperately slow, watching him with those burning dark eyes, and the sensation was incomparable. It felt like it had been worth waiting three decades to feel. Mycroft dissolved into whimpers, feeling his treacherous cheeks start to blaze as the restlessness burned in his blood. It made him tremble. It made him weak. The soft swipes of Greg's tongue were as satisfying as cool water over a burn - and if it stopped, he would surely expire.

"Don't hold it," his lover whispered, wrapping him once more with a hand. Those beautiful black eyes eased shut. Mycroft held his breath. "You can come while I do this... it's alright."

As he gathered Mycroft into the soft, wet heat of his mouth, Mycroft immediately let go of his hair. The urge to grip was too strong. It felt too good - too slick, too soft, too hot. He couldn't bear the thought of hurting Greg. He couldn't cope with that possibility. He reached for Greg's shoulders instead, gripping the pads of muscle there as Greg's mouth enrobed him in silk and warmth and his pulse lurched into double-time.

Greg began to bob, gently; pleasure flooded Mycroft's senses. His back arched. Somewhere in the breathtaking rush of arousal he heard a cry pulled from his own throat, broken-up with desperation. Greg shuddered, and drew a little more of Mycroft in - sucking on him, massaging with his tongue, gently stimulating with his hand what his mouth couldn't reach. Mycroft gasped in despair, grasping his lover's shoulders. He felt them bulk under his hold.

It was impossibly good.

The wrap of Greg's mouth felt like nothing ever had. And those words: you can come while I do this... it's alright. Mycroft's whole body burned with it. To come like this - Greg's mouth, loving him... to let go, to feel Greg sucking on him as he came... pleasuring him. Making this good for him.

And that would be alright... it would be okay...

As he panted, squeezing Greg's shoulders, delicious little vibrations began to skitter the length of Mycroft's cock. He felt them flicker outwards into his stomach, through his thighs, up his back as he stirred against the mattress, tingling across his scalp. He realised Greg was moaning with him - enjoying this too - easing back and forth now, rhythmic, building his orgasm for him. The burning urge to come doubled. Mycroft panted, heaving, biting into his lip.

Turning his gaze down the bed, blushing in desperation, he watched wide-eyed as Greg kept going. His decadent brown eyes had closed in contentment as his mouth slid slowly up and down. Mycroft couldn't hold his whimper.

Greg's eyes opened with a flutter, and found him watching.

Their gazes settled together. Mycroft trembled, blushing harder than ever.

As he watched, Greg moved his free hand from where it rested on Mycroft's hip - reaching down his own body. Mycroft's heartbeat spiked as he watched his lover begin to rub himself, shivering. Greg's eyes melted shut. He pleasured them both in rhythm, hand and mouth, quaking with enjoyment together.

It was that sight that wrenched Mycroft helplessly over the edge - that thought - Greg stroking himself, relieving himself, enjoying his own touch as he worked for Mycroft's pleasure. The
sensations sharpened and broke free in a sudden wild rush. It left him whimpering and writhing, gasping out the first half of a broken warning before all language dissolved and he could only ache, and pant, and screw his head back into the pillows and sob. He felt Greg swallow around him as he came. It whited out the last of his senses. The world unravelled around him. Pleasure, pure as prayer, washed him to safety.

When Mycroft returned to himself, he was cradled in Greg's arms beneath the covers. Greg was stroking his back, soothing him as he shook.

"You okay?" Greg rumbled, his voice warm with love.

Mycroft shivered; his whole body heaved a sigh. "Y-Yes..."

As he stirred, he felt his lover's erection graze across his hip. Greg was still hard - aroused, watching Mycroft come; restless. His body craved relief.

Mycroft slid his hands down Greg's stomach. The muscles there quivered for his touch; Greg's breath caught.

"Rest, sweetheart," he whispered. "It's okay."

"I want you," Mycroft heard himself breathe against Greg's neck. Half of his brain reeled with despair that he'd come out with something so shamefacedly crude; the other half wanted to suck Greg Lestrade's cock until the man wept.

"You - sure you're alright?" Greg's throat muscles worked as Mycroft curled both hands around his cock. "F-Fuck... God, that - that's..."

Mycroft kissed his neck, his pulse picking up as he massaged Greg's cock between his hands. God above, he was big... he felt satisfying just to stroke - hard and hot to the touch, thick and firm and male.

Mycroft wanted it.

He wanted to feel that feeling again - what it was like to lie close to Greg as he came.

He wet his lips with a flick of his tongue, nervous all the same.

"How do I do that for you?" he asked, his voice tight. "How do I make that good for you?"

"Christ... I..." Greg swallowed, shaking. "I don't - really know how to explain. It's just about... relaxing. Enjoying it. Not - thinking about the goal much, just... spending time."

They were better suggestions than Mycroft had ever received.

He supposed there was only one way to test them.

He eased beneath the covers, trailing tentative kisses down the chest he had already come to adore.

Greg gave a deep, full-body shudder.

"Myke," he breathed. He let Mycroft nudge him onto his back, his erection jutting upwards as it strained for relief. "Myke, i-if you don't want to..."

Mycroft nuzzled into Greg's navel, determined to calm himself.
Now that he'd committed to a course of action, his heart beat with two discordant emotions: on the one hand, longing - a desire he'd never felt so potently in his life, a hunger to know what Greg felt like in his mouth - what he tasted like - what he sounded like as someone he loved took absolute care of him; and on the other hand, fear - tickling, tingling, cold as it crept across the back of Mycroft's neck. As he kissed at Greg's stomach, he tried not to notice the fear grow.

He remembered all too well the unhappy occasions on which he'd done this before.

The first time, in particular - as sharp in his memory as if it had occurred within the last few minutes. As if he'd not been lying here, whimpering as his miracle boyfriend licked his cock until he sobbed - but as if he'd been there, eighteen again and back at Cambridge, gawky and sheltered and so anxiously gay that he might as well have worn a sandwich board announcing the fact. He remembered the tiny dorm room, and the undone belt, and the hard wooden floor against his knees. Some midweek day between lectures - that casual student disregard for sexuality, which treated one's first attempt at oral sex like an episode of Countdown or a toasted sandwich. Mycroft remembered it all, no matter how desperately he wanted to forget.

No sound - nothing to reassure, nor to comfort. Just the silence, and the hand on the back of his neck. The strange air of waiting. The awful, dawning realisation that this particular endeavour truly wasn't a natural skill of his - that gentle exploration wasn't going to be enough. He'd made motions that seemed to be the right sort of thing, hoping to please the young man he loved - who, in moments of affection, could make Mycroft feel rather special if he wanted.

Mycroft had thought he was perhaps finding his way almost there - when the humourless mutter had come from above.

"You really haven't done this before, have you…?"

Shame; instant, coursing shame. Shame as thick and awful as anything he'd ever felt, in a life where shame was hardly new.

"Uhh… try it like you mean it, for a start? Just - suck on it, Mycroft... it's not rocket science."

In the end, he'd been told to give up.

Unbearable. Mortifying.

He'd wanted to still show willing and submission - to offer some kind of sexual appreciation for the man he'd just so sorely disappointed. The culmination of it all was to stay kneeling, and watch in rather startling close-up as the penis he'd just irredeemably failed was jacked off an inch from the end of his nose. Then - … dear God, if he could burn out the memory - the vague spatter of it all upon his face. Grimacing, but trying not to. It was in his hair. Near his eyes - how soon was he allowed to wipe it away? He couldn't begin to fathom the appeal, but this was wanted, and it was therefore his job to provide it - this consolation prize - this secondary substitute for the actual relief he'd been unable to give. Accepting this had felt like the least he could do.

And that was the first attempt.

The second attempt had been much the same - the third, too, though he'd been drunk on that occasion - drunk and damaged and determined he would get the knack of it at last.

He hadn't.

There hadn't been a fourth attempt.
The fourth attempt was *this*, Mycroft realised - after a gap of nearly thirty years.

Another place - another world. The gentle morning, the pulse of afterglow just beneath his skin, and the warmth of the bed in which he'd been cradled all night.

Mycroft gazed up the bed.

Dark, gentle eyes looked down into his - the eyes of the man who'd just mouthed him tenderly to climax; the man who'd stolen him out of London to safety for the weekend; the man who'd called him 'best friend', and 'partner', and 'beautiful', and woken him with flowers and champagne.

Mycroft swallowed, dryly.

"I - might not be able to..."

"S'okay," Greg breathed. He shivered, touching Mycroft's hair - stroking it back as his fingers shook. "That's not the point of this."

Mycroft's forehead tightened. He didn't understand. "Is it not?"

"No. It's just about feeling… just for a while." Greg's pupils were huge. "If you don't like it, you stop right away... okay?"

Mycroft's pulse steadied. "May we - call this a practice session?" he asked. He wished his throat weren't so dry.

Greg hesitated, catching the slight rasp of his voice. He glanced across at the bedside.

As he handed Mycroft the half-finished glass of champagne, he gave a small and nervous smile.

"Don't try this dry-mouthed," he said. "It won't be comfy for you. And it's - erm - it's better wet."

Mycroft supposed the alcoholic courage wouldn't hurt either. He swirled the glass and downed it, wondering as he did - if someone had told him what he'd be doing on the morning of his forty-sixth birthday - whether he'd have believed them.

A private Lake District hotel. A private hotel bed, with the handsome Detective Inspector that Sherlock sometimes had round at Baker Street - the man who'd supported him, befriended him and waited for him, never hurried him, never expected a thing from him - the man whose eyes flashed with delight when they looked at him, and whose hands were warm - the man whose patient love was enough to drive back shadows so fierce they'd led Mycroft to abandon any hope of a life spent with someone else.

As he handed Greg the empty champagne glass, Mycroft decided the answer was no.

He would not have believed them.

He settled into place, resting on his front. Greg's fingertips appeared in his hair. They stroked him, calming him, as he ran a hand over Greg's flat stomach and enjoyed the brush of dark hair there for a moment, the scent of the body that had warmed him all night. It would be alright, he thought. Greg liked slow. He was a patient man. With the taste of champagne still in his mouth, he nuzzled Greg's erection - licked it, gently - let the first few strokes of his tongue relax them both to this feeling.

Greg's breath tightened.
He petted Mycroft's hair as he was licked.

"You okay?" he whispered, voice slightly hoarse.

Mycroft glanced along the length of Greg's torso. "I'm okay..."

"Okay..." Greg shivered, stroking the back of Mycroft's neck as Mycroft investigated the tip of his cock - licking, swiping with his tongue. Greg's frenulum was as sensitive to tongue-flicks as it was to rubbing. Mycroft tested that for a while, finding that his own eyes soon closed and his pulse began to ease as he listened to Greg's breathing - glancing up to find him biting at his lip.

He was making no sign that he wanted escalation. He seemed at peace - seemed to be happy.

Mycroft took comfort in it. He experimented with the long, slow licks from root to tip that Greg had given him, his heart jumping as it turned the deep breaths into low, soft moans.

This seemed to be enough for now.

The minutes began to pass by.

Greg petted his hair, fingers trembling. He let out little sounds as Mycroft slowly licked the same path along the underside of his cock. Encouraged, Mycroft began to stroke him, exploring Greg's body as he licked: the dark coarseness of his pubic hair; the muscles in his inner thighs; his testes, which turned out be sensitive, and prompted a restless stream of scattered words and gasps and squirming when Mycroft gently tugged on them. Greg's hips began to rock. His moans grew tight, soft and vulnerable. Mycroft moved his licking to concentrate on the head, hardly daring to believe that this seemed to be going well. He began a tentative pattern of careful tugs to Greg's testes and licks to the very tip of his cock, tasting the clear fluid that welled up eagerly for his tongue. It wasn't bad.

His new pattern caused Greg to take hold of the edge of the mattress and grip it hard - panting, swearing softly, breathing deeper still.

Desire was winning out against fear. Mycroft could feel it - the shadows shrinking - the memories growing old.

Almost giddy with hope, he tested taking Greg into his mouth.

He'd meant just to try it, and then ease away - to settle back to lapping - but Greg's heartfelt, susurrating gasp made his stomach tighten. He took in a little more instead, enjoying the thickness sliding into his mouth. His eyes lulled shut and he shuddered.

As deep as he could, he seemed to have covered hardly any of it.

He steeled himself, pushing on - preparing to gag.

His lover's hands raked immediately over his jaw.


Mycroft shivered, swallowing. He eased his mouth back around the tip, uncertain. In response Greg's hands stroked through his hair.

"That's fine," Greg whispered, thick-throated. "Just like that..." He began to pet Mycroft again,
fingers trembling as Mycroft mouthed around him. "F-Fuck, love - that's... that's just perfect..."

Questioning, Mycroft curled his hand around the rest.

As he started to stroke in rhythm, Greg stiffened and shook.

"Ohhh," he moaned. "Oh... oh, fuck..."

The sound rippled down Mycroft's back. It sank beneath his skin, softening the frightened thumping of his heart. As reassurance and relief coursed its way through his veins, he breathed out another lungful of dread. With reassurance and relief Mycroft began to suck in earnest, moving his mouth around the thickness that filled it. He found he could rub his tongue from side-to-side, and Greg liked that - it made him moan and pant for more - and as Greg's noises became higher in pitch, Mycroft reached for his testicles again.

A few soft tugs - mouthing, enjoying.

Greg's thighs clenched around him.

"Myke - " he gasped out. "Beautiful, stop - "

Reckless want burned through Mycroft's heart. He resisted the shaking hands that cupped his cheeks to try and stop him - he nuzzled at them, reassuring them, deepening the movements of his mouth and hoping against hope, wildly, by some miracle, that - ...

A jerk of Greg's hips - a rush of salt and bitterness - a rush of realisation.

It wasn't a taste to be liked - but the desperate surge of pride and relief that it caused almost broke Mycroft's heart in two. He swallowed through instinct, his heart kicking into overdrive, and did his best to time with Greg's restless cries when to keep moving - when to slow down, soften his movements along with Greg's moans - when to stop completely, to draw back, unable to help himself licking once or twice with aching, heart-pounding relief at the tip of Greg's cock.

Greg twitched deeply.

"Myke," he pleaded; his breath caught. "Mykie, c'mere..."

'Mykie'. Mycroft nestled into his lover's arms, settling with Greg as he panted. Perhaps just this once, he thought. Post-coital only.

Greg reached up to kiss him. Mycroft hesitated, sure Greg would not want to taste himself in Mycroft's mouth - feeling somehow responsible for saving Greg from that unpleasantness - but as their tongues curled, and Greg held him and shook, Mycroft concluded there were many things about sex that he was yet to be taught.

He kissed Greg back; he stroked his hair. He let go of another heartful of dark and painful memories.

It was only the second morning, he thought. There were two nights, and two more mornings, to come.

He wanted Greg to teach him everything.

He wanted to learn.
Sorry mate. had my hands full. You ok? gave your statement alright? any sign of pritchard?  
Sent 12:12

Statement given. Thank you for being supremely unhelpful. Pritchard still at large. You “had your hands full”? For over an hour?  
Received 12:14

yeah we’re busy here. signals not great either. You and john somewhere safe though, right? reassure me please...  
Sent 12:15

Inspector. I have the keenest suspicion you are on annual leave under false pretenses.  
Received 12:17

IDK what you’re on about, mate. Just hope you’re being careful. you textd your brother for his bday yet?  
Sent 12:25

When do you return to London?  
Received 12:26

ummm... why do you ask? You planning on causing more trouble?  
Sent 12:27

And a blatant diversion from the question. How fascinating.  
Received 12:28

Sherlock... listen... we’ll talk when I’m back, ok? Promise. Put it out of your head for now. and just look after yourself until then.  
Sent 12:30
won't be around rest of the day btw. Gonna be busy.
Sent 12:31

and text your bloody brother will you?
Sent 12:31
Climb

There is only one happiness in life: to love and be loved.
- George Sand, 'Letter to Lina Calamatta'

There was something about watching Greg dress.

Warm beneath the covers of their bed, and still naked himself, Mycroft watched with shy interest as his lover moved around their sunlit room. Greg was damp-haired from the shower, and happy. He was divine. He seemed unafraid of his own skin, Mycroft thought - quite at ease being watched, and as comfortable naked as he was clothed.

He put on boxer shorts first, black - then deodorant, sprayed absent-mindedly - and then a Sex Pistols t-shirt, probably older than any of his nieces and nephews. He stretched it over his head with a yawn, and pulled it down across the muscles in his shoulders.

Mycroft had gripped those shoulders this morning. He'd squeezed at them, pawed at them, held tight to them as Greg's mouth slid around him.

The sight of them covered in clothing made his palms ache, longing to grip them again. He watched from his nest as they were hidden away, his heart thumping with quiet pleasure.

Greg smoothed the t-shirt down across his stomach - concealing his scattering of dark fur - then took khaki-green walking trousers from a drawer. Mycroft watched him pull them on over the thighs he'd rocked astride last night - thighs he'd gripped with his own as he came apart at the seams. Greg buttoned up his fly - a deft, casual movement - one that nobody else in the world was entitled to see.

His lover's body, he thought. Wrapped up in clothing.

For his eyes only.

He felt like a cat in a sunny armchair - content with the world, and quite desperately at peace. This morning, the past felt longer ago than it ever had. An iron chain had been struck from his soul. The last hands to touch him were no longer cruel and controlling; those shadows were surpassed. He'd thought he'd never be rid of them, and by some miracle, he was.

Greg had noted Mycroft's interest some way through the process of dressing.

The glinting looks it earned him were rather stirring. Now dressed, and intrigued, Greg idled across to the bed and leant over it - pinning Mycroft gently into place, dark-eyed and amused; leaning down to nuzzle the bridge of his nose.

Mycroft's heart strained with quiet joy in his chest.

"Can I tell you something?" Greg murmured - his voice a low and delicious rumble.
Mycroft looked up at him, eyes sparkling. "Please do," he said.

Greg's mouth curved.

"I don't think I've ever seen you look so bloody gorgeous as you do lying there. D'you know that?"

Mycroft fought his grin; he stirred with playful invitation against the pillows.

"Indeed?" he said. "I wonder what has caused it."


He lifted a hand, running his fingers through Mycroft's hair.

"You've curled," he remarked.

Mycroft supposed his secret would have come to light sooner or later. "My burden of genetics... normally, I - rather do my best to tame it. Air-drying exacerbates the problem."

Greg grinned; Mycroft's heart bubbled at the sight.

"What d'you mean, 'problem'? It's fantastic, beautiful... you look amazing. Look how soft it is. All your red..."

As Greg's fingers brushed through his hair, tousling the playful flicks, Mycroft's eyes closed with enjoyment.

"Christ... you're..." Greg's hands cupped his jaw, tilting his head. "You're perfect," he breathed, and caught Mycroft's mouth in a kiss.

Mycroft's heart heaved. Was life meant to feel this good? Was love meant to be this shockingly satisfying? Why had nobody told him?

As he felt Greg sneaking back beneath the covers, he started to laugh.

"Are we going to leave this room at all today?" he asked in delight, even as Greg's arms wrapped around his body. The stroke of warm hands sent shivers of enjoyment darting across his bare skin. "Oh... Greg..."

"I'm clearly not the problem here." Greg grinned into his neck, nuzzling him over onto his back. "You're the one still lounging about naked. I'm up and ready to head out."

As Greg began to kiss at his neck, Mycroft was robbed of his laughter. He stirred beneath the warm strokes of his lover's mouth, and the sweep of Greg's tongue - listening with curls of pleasure to the sounds of kisses against skin. Mycroft's cheeks flushed with heat. He bit down on a small moan, and let his eyes flicker shut.

"Greg," he whispered, resting his hands on his lover's back. He felt his throat squeeze. "Dear God... what have you awakened in me?"

"Perfectly normal feelings." Greg's hands skimmed down, fingertips brushing a slow path along Mycroft's sides. Their gentleness made him squirm. "We've escaped together, somewhere safe... somewhere beautiful. Now we're opening up some more, and getting close... s'okay to want."

"I am forty-six," Mycroft reminded him, breathless. "Not sixteen." Greg's weight atop him was
intoxicating: the stroke of clothing against his bare skin - the warmth he could feel beneath. It was rather impossible to resist.

"Yeah?" Greg rumbled into his neck, playful. "Tell the rest of you."

Mycroft's laughter rang through the room.

Greg took hold of the duvet, grinning, and tugged it up over their heads.

It was two PM when they finally left the hotel.

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*Happy birthday. Where are you?*

*Received 14:09*

*Dear God. Birthday greetings. Is this your attempt at apology? M.*

*Sent 14:11*

*And I am working. M.*

*Sent 14:11*

*An apology?*

*Received 14:12*

*Working where?*

*Received 14:13*

*An apology for the TROUBLE you have caused me, Sherlock... I hope you realise I have had to abandon my personal phone for the day? It has detonated with abuse and threats from Nicholas. All of them are your fault. If we were not genetically involved I would have you on the very first plane headed to Antarctica. M.*

*Sent 14:15*

*And who might I ask gave you my work number? M.*

*Sent 14:16*

*Where are you working?*

*Received 14:16*

*I am at McDonalds, little brother.*

*I am working the burger machine.*
It has been quite the voyage of professional discovery for me. M.  
Sent 14:19

Where do you THINK I am working? M.  
Sent 14:19

Why did you permit The Guardian to print the story?  
Received 14:20

For reasons that I could not trust you to understand or appreciate, even if you were party to them. Your immaturity and tactlessness as ever astound me. You have caused me enormous aggravation without a shred of remorse, and I am only surprised that your behaviour somehow still has the capacity to surprise me at all. M.  
Sent 14:29

We all make our choices Mycroft.  
Received 14:30

So unthinkable that we must sometimes stand by them?  
Received 14:31

And what in hell is THAT supposed to mean? M.  
Sent 14:38

John Watson has been a terrible influence on you. Please stop this pathetic attempt at nobility. It is so tedious I could expire. M.  
Sent 14:39

In fact, stop contacting me. I am spectacularly busy today... I haven't time for childishness. Thank you for your entirely suspicious birthday regards. M.  
Sent 14:40

Got your hands full, have you?  
Received 14:42

As it happens, yes I have. Dealing with the tedious consequences of YOUR inflammatory decisions. M.
The view was quite breathtakingly beautiful.

An hour's drive, and then an hour's steady climb through forest - talking every step of the way, laughing, pausing now and then to pant together and lament the lost fitness of their youth. At last, as Mycroft started to fear the trail would continue on forever, the trees began to thin around them. A stile marked the way to the summit.

Greg swung himself over it, effortless, then reached back for Mycroft's hands.

"Here," he said - he helped Mycroft across. "I've got you, gorgeous."

Their fingers tangled in the fresh air.

Mycroft smiled, flushing with happiness. As he stepped down from the stile, his lover grinned and kept hold of his hands, pausing with him here just a moment. There were other walkers around - couples - families - people on their way down from the summit.

Mycroft barely saw them.

"How many people in this world have ever seen you cross a stile?" Greg asked, his eyes bright. "Can't be that many..."

"A rare treat for you," Mycroft remarked, with amusement.

"I'll treasure it," Greg said. He wove their fingers tight, eyes sparkling, and tugged Mycroft onwards. "C'mon... should only be a few more minutes."

Blushing with delight, Mycroft followed at his side.

He didn't look to see if people had noticed them - a gay couple, holding hands. Men in love. To be seen this way in London would have petrified him to the soul. He'd worked too hard on his reputation; he moved in circles too vicious to permit a glimpse of a human heart - especially one whose natural inclination was still criminalised in seventy-two countries. Even in London, stigma was far from consigned to history. Politics was not a sentimental field.

To have associates - connections - was one thing.

To have a lover... a weakness.
But it felt so good: passing eyes, strangers glancing at them, perhaps spotting their entwined hands - knowing they belonged to each other. For a few happy minutes, Mycroft inhabited a world where Greg Lestrade was his and his alone, and every person they encountered knew it at first sight. It made his heart leap quietly behind his ribs.

At the crest of the hill, they settled on an old wooden bench together.

The mountains laid open all around, ancient and endless, and the air was as clean and bright as glass. Greg stretched his arm along the back of the bench - like teenagers at the cinema, Mycroft thought, and rested his head on his lover's shoulder. Greg placed a single, quiet kiss upon his forehead; they settled together in peace.

As one, they sighed.

"We should do this more," Greg murmured, gazing at the hills. "I mean it. Get away, just the two of us... make the world ours for a while."

Mycroft understood entirely.

"Where shall we go next?" he asked, as Greg's nose nuzzled into his hair.

His lover huffed, smiling. "I'll get us an A to Z, shall I? We can work our way through." He brushed Mycroft's errant central curl back into place. "I feel like it - might be important. Sneaking off for weekends like this."

The thought had occurred to Mycroft, too.

He laid his hand tentatively on Greg's knee.

"I - realise that my company comes with... restrictions. Challenges." He hesitated, wanting to say it but not daring. *I hope you don't mind...? I hope that, nevertheless...?* Mycroft swallowed, looking down at his hands. "If this sort of time together makes things easier for you... believe me that I'll do everything I can to create it."

Greg nosed at his temple.

"Oi," he said, voice soft.

Mycroft looked up at him, shy.

"You know I understand," Greg murmured. "Don't you?"

Mycroft said nothing, nervously letting go of his eyes. He stroked Greg's knee.

Greg went on, ever gentle.

"You've got a lot going on," he said. "As it happens, so have I. London's - complicated. And we both play high-stakes... but it's worth it. You and me. It's worth the challenges. And we'll make it work..."

Mycroft's heart flushed with relief. Greg placed a gentle kiss upon his cheek.

"I mean it," he said. "You're my best friend. You're... more than that. Way more." He paused; he sounded as if he were gathering together his courage. "Maybe, when we're back... you can start staying over with me? Or I'll come stay at yours... whatever suits. And we can spend a bit more time together."
Mycroft's pulse jumped with hope.

"I would like that." He fought to keep his voice under control, trying not to picture it already - Greg in his bedroom, dressing for work in the morning light; having breakfast at the counter together; perhaps coming home from work to find Greg already there, cooking, happily settled in his home. "I'd like that very much."

"Yeah?" Greg smiled, eyes shining with joy and relief. "Me too."

Mycroft hesitated, meeting those beautiful brown eyes. His heart squeezed as they held his gaze. How in God's name are you mine, Greg Lestrade? Of all the people in the world...

"I will make you happy." The words startled Mycroft as he heard himself speak; he hadn't meant to say them. He watched them open Greg's expression, and realised with a rush that they were true - that he believed them, utterly. He gazed at Greg, his heart beating hard. "I'll - try my very hardest - i-if you'll let me. You are... very, very dear to me, and I - ... and this weekend has perhaps shown me how - close the two of us can be. How easy that closeness is. It feels wonderful. It seems like a connection of this easiness is - rare, even by normal standards, and - and I..."

He realised he was rambling - that he had no notion of where this speech would conclude. His throat tightened, and he swallowed, glancing down between them.

"And I'd like to feel more of it," he finished, rather limply. "If that suits."

Greg's arms slid around him.

There were people here - people looking at the view. Mycroft closed his eyes, drawing his arms around Greg's neck, and the people were gone at once.

There was only Greg.

"Can I tell you another something?" Greg murmured in his ear.

Mycroft resisted the urge to bite his lip, lost in waves of happiness. "Please do..."

Greg hugged him closer.

"Never felt like this," he mumbled. "Not with anyone. Feels... real."

Mycroft's heart nearly detonated. Greg had been married - he'd stood before an altar, and made vows.

"R-Real?" Mycroft said, desperate to understand in his entirety.

Greg made a noise of quiet affection. "You're not like other people," he said. Mycroft braced, fearing he was about to hear something distressing. "You don't know all the - the stupid relationship games, and the procedures, and the usual way things are supposed to play out... so you don't do them. You just do what feels right. You don't know how special that is. How good that feels."

Mycroft found himself startled into silence, his heart and soul ringing with quiet wonder.

Greg squeezed him, one last time.

"Gonna have to let you go," he mumbled. "Or people'll think I'm about to drop to one knee."
He eased his arms from around Mycroft, grinning at the new blush he'd provoked.

"Listen, I... I love you," he said. "To bits. The more time I spend with you, the more time I want with you. This has been amazing and we've only had one night." His eyes flashed, softly. "Can I take you to dinner? For your birthday."

Mycroft wondered how many meals they had shared since Sherlock's incident in January. Countless, he thought. They'd eaten together all across London. Some places knew them as regulars now.

It shouldn't make his heart shine so brightly to be asked to share one more.

He looked into Greg's eyes, overwhelmed.

"Please," he said. His own voice sounded soft in his ears. "That would be wonderful. Thank you."

Greg's face warmed. "Ten more minutes here, first?"

"Yes..." Mycroft settled back against his side, glowing. "Ten more minutes here."

They found an Italian restaurant down a cobbled sidestreet in Windermere - candlelit, cosy and small, the air spiced with garlic and amaretto. At a table towards the back, they worked their way through three courses together, finishing with an affogato that Mycroft felt rather indecent eating in public.

Greg watched every mouthful he ate with dark, delighted eyes. A little drunk, and rather desperately in love, Mycroft glanced about the room they were in - a small handful of other couples, all absorbed in each other. He fed Greg a few spoonfuls of the dessert. He watched his lover lick gelato and espresso from the spoon, blatantly holding Mycroft's gaze as he did. The memory of Greg stroking his tongue over something else coiled with restless heat through Mycroft's stomach. The candlelight hid his blush; Greg slyly took the spoon from him, and fed him in return.

When Greg had paid the bill - insisting - they walked for a while by the lake shore, watching swans fan their wings to each other and drift in pairs upon the water. The sinking sun cast the lake in peach and pink - pale gold clouds streaked across the sky. Mycroft tried to work out how long it had been since he noticed a sunset. Its beauty made him feel oddly at place within the world - one person, living among many beneath the sky; fragile in this moment, but not afraid; utterly safe. A hand tucked gently into his own.

A little after nine, the sun finally kissed the horizon. A shiver passed through Mycroft's back. His bare hands and face had taken on a chill.

"C'mon," Greg said, fondly. "Let's get you home... sobering up yet, birthday boy?"

As a protective arm eased around him, Mycroft leant into his lover's side. "Two glasses of red," he remarked, bemused. "I'm hardly drunk."

"We'll have something back at the hotel... get that fixed. Can't end your birthday sober."
Greg kissed his forehead. A passing clutch of teenagers snapped their heads around to stare - some shocked remark was made from one to the others. Mycroft didn't catch the details. He didn't care in the least. He looped his arm around Greg's waist, rather hoping the little ingrates had continued to watch. *Let them witness happiness,* he thought. *How sad that it unsettles them.* In quiet contentment they made their way to the car, settled inside it and set out on the return drive to Brimstone, watching the woods darken around them as they drove.

The room had been cleaned in their absence. Mycroft's gardenias had been transferred into a vase by the bed.

Nestled atop the covers was a small collection of parcels - deep blue gift wrap, gold ribbons, and a box of chocolates. A card propped against them bore his name, with a single kiss.

"*Greg...*" Mycroft breathed. "Greg - have you - "

He glanced round, startled.

Greg's grin threw his heart into the stratosphere.

"Asked the staff this morning," Greg said. "Told them where I'd hidden them all... asked if they'd lay them out nice when we were gone. I had to trust them with the chocolates, though, so if they're awful..."

"Greg..." Mycroft could barely speak. He approached the bed, lost, gazing at the pile of gifts. "You - you shouldn't have..."

Arms wrapped around his waist from behind.

"If I get too much..." Greg murmured the words into Mycroft's neck, nuzzling. "Please bloody tell me. If it's not clear by this point, I like spoiling you. I like it a lot. Don't want to make you uncomfortable, though..."

Mycroft gazed at the parcels.

*Europe,* he thought.

A late October birthday - ideal in many ways. Greg's first must matter. Northern Italy, perhaps. Cinque Terre, once the summer crowds had flown on - they could rent an apartment in Vernazza and hike together between the villages, alone in nature, not a soul in the world to know where the two of them were. Sunset with red wine in Manarola. Make love late into every morning, white sheets on the bed and shutters drawn.

Mycroft turned in Greg's arms, and looked into his eyes.

His chest heaved with the words.

"Please spoil me." He’d never felt so weak in his life - so fragile - so keenly close to what he wanted. "I like it. I - I feel - ... I-I've never had - ..."

His voice cracked; it was gone.

Greg cupped his face, leant close, and kissed him.
A tie - navy textured silk, with matching pocket square; suede-lined leather gloves, perfectly sized to his hands; tickets to see Yossif and Philippe Ivanov at Wigmore Hall in December; a Frédéric Malle cologne; a keyring - a clean and modern square of steel, etched simply with the date they had first kissed.

Five digits - two dots. Mycroft's every joy.

"I know you can't exactly have pictures of me on your phone," Greg said, stroking his back as they sat together in bed. Mycroft was quiet; he was close to tears, and desperate to hide it. "But I figured... you wear a tie everyday, and gloves... only you'll know they're from me."

He kissed Mycroft's shoulder.

"You don't have to keep the keyring," he said, "if you're worried. I won't mind."

Mycroft’s throat thickened at once.

He slid out of bed without a word.

He moved downstairs to his coat, retrieved his keys from the pocket in which he habitually kept them, and set about adding them to the keyring. The careful prizing open of the metal ring helped to calm him - working the new addition round into place - concentrating on his fingers. His eyes blurred.

He didn't want Greg to see him cry.

By the time that he’d finished, Greg had come down to check on him.

"Your work phone's still going like a Christmas tree," he remarked, pulling Mycroft gently into a hug. "Flashing like mad over there... can't you - I don't know - just block Pritchard?"

Mycroft's heart thumped. Greg knew he was affected by the gifts - but wasn’t going to make him talk about it.

He settled against Greg's chest, still holding his keys.

"He would discover that I had done so," he said. "I - rather want to give the impression that I'm simply unable to care."

Greg smiled a little. "You'll be missing your other work stuff, love... all sorts could be lost in the tide."

Mycroft hesitated, suddenly regretting this morning's instinctive lie. He wasn’t sure why he’d done it. It wasn’t unthinkable that a boor like Pritchard could have bullied his way from Mycroft’s work phone to his personal, on justification of his own sheer importance.

Greg didn’t know that, though.

Mycroft didn’t want any indication that Pritchard counted as a personal contact.

"If it were important enough," he said, "Anthea would relay it to my personal phone. I’m sure England is safe."

Greg began to rub a circle on his back.
"Listen, I... I should probably've told you this morning," he mumbled. "I just - wanted you to be away from it all. For your birthday."

Mycroft stiffened. He pulled back from the hug, looking up at Greg in concern.

"Told me - what?" he enquired.

Greg swallowed.

"Pritchard - tried getting into Baker Street," he said. Mycroft’s stomach filled with cascading ice. "Bit of a revenge mission, I think. Your brother told me. They're both fine - promised me they're lying low, and the yard are out looking for Pritchard. Might even've found him by now. I just - ... God, love, I'm sorry - I just thought - what could you even do about it from here? And Sherlock's safe, so..."

There was silence; Greg’s expression crumpled.

"Are you angry?" he asked.

Mycroft took a moment to decide, looking into his lover's face. Information about Sherlock’s welfare had been concealed.

But Sherlock was safe and well - and the reasoning behind it seemed sound - and Greg, of all people, would not underestimate a danger.

Mycroft’s fingers curled around the keys he still held. He squeezed them, quietly.

"No," he said at last. Greg’s face flooded with relief. "No, you - acted in my interests. I trust that you ensured that my brother was safe - ... and, in truth, you are right that my influence from here is rather limited..." Mycroft paused, looking down. "To my benefit, perhaps."

Greg tentatively offered him a hug.

After a moment’s pause, Mycroft stepped into his arms.

Some time passed - a long, quiet, intimate stretch of time. They stood and held each other by Mycroft’s coat, quite at peace, until Mycroft found he could let go of thoughts of London.

"Did you open your card?" Greg asked him, voice soft.

Mycroft smiled faintly. "Not yet."

"'kay." Greg cuddled him close. "M'glad you like your presents, beautiful... happy birthday."

Mycroft swallowed. "You are too good for me. Far too good."

"Oi. You can take that back, this instant."

"I shan't. It's patently clear."

"It's not," Greg said, kissing his shoulder. "It's not at all. You mean the bloody world to me." He squeezed Mycroft tightly in his arms. "And that's the last of it. Now come back up to bed. There's a box of posh chocolates with your name on."
They laid in bed talking until nearly midnight, drinking wine and cuddling. Mycroft didn't want the day to end. It was the first birthday he could ever remember enjoying. At last, with the chocolate box empty beside the bed, and a distinct fuzziness fogging his eyes, he expressed the need for a shower. Greg kissed him one last time, let him go, and went to turn out the lights.

Once Mycroft had dried himself, he stood at the sink and took note of his reflection - the playful spring of his hair; the brightness of his skin. The soft lights of the bathroom fell fondly on the freckles across his shoulders.

Happy really *did* suit him.

A quiet twinge crossed his heart, as he contemplated it had taken him until forty-six to give this concept a try. He supposed 'better late than never' was common wisdom for a reason. He smiled at himself in the glass, and reached for his toothbrush.

As he took his pyjamas quietly from the side, and he looked down at them, a thought bubbled through his mind - a happy product of red wine, birthday chocolates, and love.

He considered the idea, biting his lip.

A voice spoke from his memory - as real as if it came from the door.

"You're a lanky thing, aren't you? Are those spots?"

Mycroft stiffened.

"They're - freckles," he heard himself reply. He imagined his own voice as small and silly, and far younger than he knew it had been. He could feel the harsh bulb-lighting of a student door room fall suddenly across him, garishly spotlighting every flaw. He felt his skin prickle. He wanted to turn it inside out, so it couldn't be seen. "Don't... stare, please? This feels odd..."

A huff. "Why have you gotten naked if I'm not even allowed to look at you?"

*Because you told me to do so,* Mycroft thought. *Because you wanted that.*

Twenty-eight years blinked by.

Mycroft looked down at his pyjamas, numb. He could sense his reflection beside him in the glass, a ghostly shape - a lot of pale skin; a lot of time gone by; a lot of things he suddenly didn't wish to see. *A lanky thing,* he thought. And that had been at his best, three decades ago. He can't possibly have improved like a vintage.

He'd half-buttoned his pyjama top before he dared to look in the mirror - and as he did, catching sight of his own distressed expression, he suddenly saw himself as if through new eyes.

A man in love - forty-six - dressing anxiously for bed. Someone's boyfriend. Someone's partner. A hard-worker; a secret-keeper; a man whose manner and presentation had won him a lover who wanted to spoil him, wanted to hold his hand, bought pairs of concert tickets for six months from now. Grey eyes, fragile. The kiss of red tones in his hair - the soft, burgeoning twist of his maternal line's curls.

Mycroft gazed into his own eyes, feeling his heart ache with sympathy.
He found himself looking at someone who, he realised all at once, had suffered quite enough - and suffered for no reason - someone whose only crime was being young, being hopeful, and wanting to be wanted.

His fingers shook.

He started undoing buttons.

As he stepped from the bathroom, he experienced a flash of panic as to whether this was really wise - fearing he was about to see Greg laugh at his forwardness, or be shocked. His bare feet sank into the bedroom carpet. He supposed it was rather late now.

Candlelight warmed the deep darkness of their nest. Mycroft stepped into view of the bed, sure that his shaking could be seen. He felt as shy as a baby fawn. He hesitated, waiting.

Bare-chested against the pillows, frowning at his phone, Greg glanced up.

His whole face opened.

"Myke..." he breathed.

Mycroft took a step back, hiding a little behind the door. *Dear lord, I never learn...*

"Myke," Greg said. He pushed his phone away without a thought, kicking straight out of bed. He was naked, too. "Beautiful, don't hide... c'mere..."

Mycroft blushed to his hairline as Greg came to him in the doorway. He guided Mycroft gently against the wall; he cupped his face. He gazed into Mycroft's face, his pupils huge and his expression soft.

"Look at you," he whispered. His fingers eased into Mycroft's hair. "Look how *beautiful* you are... you don't need to hide from me..."

Mycroft swallowed, shivering. He was keenly aware of Greg's naked body against his own - their chests, their stomachs - the intimate warmth of skin-on-skin. Even as he shook, longing flushed through his heart. He wanted to touch; he wanted to feel. Greg's hands had brought him comfort like he'd never known. He needed them now.

"I love you," Greg whispered. He stroked Mycroft's lips with a kiss. "You're so perfect to me... you know that? I can't believe how bloody beautiful you are..."

Mycroft couldn't believe it, either.

Then Greg sank to his knees, trailing kisses in a winding path down Mycroft's body - and Mycroft swallowed, his head falling back against the wall. He felt his heart gasp.

"God, you're so soft..." Greg's voice made him tremble - his mouth brushing with every sound, whispering against his stomach. "You're just beautiful... Christ, and you're with *me*... do you have any idea what that does to me?"

Mycroft slid his hands nervously onto Greg's shoulders. He quivered as Greg nuzzled at his hipbone.

"I can't get enough of you," Greg breathed. He began to kiss the freckles on Mycroft's thighs - loving them with his mouth, nuzzling. His eyes closed as his hands slid over Mycroft's stomach.
"God, just... just let me kneel here and worship you all night. You're wonderful."

Oh, sweet God... don't let it be a folly... don't let it fade away...

Even these gentle touches were unbearably arousing. Mycroft's mind whirled and he bit back a moan, his pulse thumping disjointedly from fear into desire.

"Tell me you mean it," he begged, his voice thick. He swallowed as he gripped at Greg's shoulders. "P-Please. Tell me you - ..."

Greg gazed up at him, his eyes dark and soft. He placed a gentle kiss at the base of Mycroft's stirring cock.

"Think I'd rather show you," he murmured.

Mycroft shuddered; it broke from his mouth in a mortifying gasp. Colour flushed his face. "G-Greg... Greg, please..."

Greg's eyes eased shut. He began to lick, soothing his tongue in gentle sweeps over Mycroft's cock as it filled. Mycroft held onto his shoulders, panting.

"Let me look after you, darlin'," Greg whispered, and gathered Mycroft's cock into his mouth.

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Dear Myke -

Happy birthday, beautiful.

First birthday with me. I'm writing this card before our first trip away... are you sick of me yet? You might have shoved me off a mountain by the time you open this. I hope I'm not driving you mental. Let's find out.

And I hope you like the card.

Why are birthday cards for blokes so boring? I figured that out of golf, whiskey and cars, you like cars the best... they had one with cuddling bears on, but... when I think about you, I don't really think "cuddling bears". I think about all the months we've had, and all the time we've spent. All the stuff we talk about. Only sometimes cars.

I hope you have a nice birthday, beautiful.

I'll do my best to make it brilliant. You deserve it... I mean that. I know you're not used to this stuff.

But thank you for letting me show you.

I can't tell you how happy you make me. I want to make you happy, too... in as many ways as I can.

I want to be the happiest secret you'll ever have.

With all my love on your birthday...

your G xxx
They went for breakfast in the restaurant next morning.

Greg had never been so proud to enter a room.

Two nights of sleeping in his arms, and Mycroft was unfolding like an orchid. The curl in his hair was unmissable now. Without product to tame it, the darker brown was giving way to a chestnut glow beneath, clean and pillow-dried and shining. As Mycroft filled a bowl with granola from the buffet, sunlight streamed through the restaurant's vast cathedral window above him, playing over his curls and igniting each one with a little flash of red. Greg couldn't stop gazing at him. He'd chosen a soft blue-grey jumper today; his socks had umbrellas on. Only Greg knew that.

He just wanted to cuddle Mycroft and carry him around.

"You seem terribly happy this morning," Mycroft remarked, returning to their table with his granola. He eyed Greg fondly as he pulled out his chair. "Excited for your bacon sandwich, is it?"

Greg grinned, watching him sit down. His heart fizzed like it was full of champagne. "Something like that, yeah..."

Mycroft hid his smile behind a spoonful of granola.

"Because you spotted the 'Coco Pops' at the buffet?" he enquired.

'Coco pops'. So-called. Greg screwed his toes into his shoes, grinning, fighting the urge just to lean over the table and kiss the life out of the man. That bright-eyed look - the feigned innocence. It was so good to see Mycroft playful. It made Greg feel like a giddy spaniel puppy - like he wanted to play, too. He wanted to chase Myke through wheat fields.

"You're amazing," said his mouth, before he could stop it.

Delight lit Mycroft's expression from within. He tried to suppress it, even as his eyes flamed like sapphires, and his cheeks offered up their familiar show of pink.

"You are ridiculous," he said, regarding Greg with amusement.

"I'm not," said Greg. "M'in love. It's the least ridiculous thing in the world."

Mycroft's expression softened. "Greg..."

"Don't speak," Greg murmured. He laid his arms on the table, rested his head upon them, and gazed up at Mycroft in joy. "Don't say another word. Just sit there and enjoy your squirrel food, and let me love you."
Mycroft covered his face, convulsing with repressed laughter behind his hands.

"Gregory Lestrade, you are - ... beyond any doubt - ..."

Greg grinned, his eyes sparkling. "I'm what?"

Mycroft sighed, shaking his head. He'd stopped trying to hold in his smile. "God help me," he mumbled. "Who was it said that love is like measles?"

Greg raised his eyebrows. "We all get it sooner or later?"

"No," said Mycroft, bemused. "The older you encounter it, the worse it is."

Greg laughed aloud. Nearby guests glanced round. "We're not old," he said. "Christ, look at us. I think I've regressed to about twenty-five..."

"I think I'd agree with you there," Mycroft said, smirking. He glanced at Greg's still empty half of the table. "Are you not partaking today? Are you just going to sit and gaze at me?"

"I s'pose I could eat a bacon sandwich while gazing, couldn't I?"

"Mm... I imagine it would enhance the experience enormously."

"Right. Won't be a minute." Greg stood up, leant over, and kissed Mycroft happily on the forehead. Mycroft protested around a mouthful of granola, his eyes flashing. "Don't miss me."

It was a gorgeous day - the best of summer, painted in colours so bright they could hardly be real. Greg intended to make the most of it. They headed out in the car not long after breakfast, and were soon winding their way through a mountain valley with the sun high on the fells above them.

Mycroft busied himself with his phone as they drove - quick and focused, flashing through messages with his customary disinterested calm. E-mails and texts blurred back and forth in a stream.

Glancing across to the passenger seat, Greg spotted a familiar name pop up several times.

"How's your brother?" he asked.

Mycroft sighed, and took a moment to respond. "Unrepentant," he decided at last.

Greg didn't know whether to smile or not. "Is he at least unrepentant and safe?"

"From me, yes..." Mycroft recrossed his ankles, frowning. "From Pritchard, hopefully."

"They found the bastard yet?"

"It's easy to disappear in London... especially when one is a man of means. I imagine he'll re-appear when he wishes to, and not before..." Mycroft paused, lingering over an e-mail. "Anthea - says an attempt was made on my property last night."

Greg's pulse lurched. He nearly crashed the car.
"An 'attempt'?" Holy shit. "You mean an attempted break-in?"

"The door alarm triggered in the night," Mycroft said. "Somewhat concerning that someone bypassed the rest of the building's security..."

Greg glanced across with concern, catching Mycroft bite his lip.

"The door was not breached," Mycroft added, swiftly.

It wasn't much comfort. Greg felt his chest harden at the very thought. Turning up on Sherlock's doorstep to yell at him during daylight hours was one thing; trying to force an apartment door in the middle of the night was another.

He just hoped they laid hands on Pritchard soon.

Man of means or not, the guy couldn't turn invisible. Someone must know where he was hiding.

As Mycroft returned to his text message, Greg said, "Everyday I get more glad you're not in London."

Mycroft paused, his fingers falling still upon the screen. "I shall be, tomorrow."

Greg gripped the wheel.

"Mm." It took a moment to soften the tension in his throat enough to speak. "If Pritchard lays a fucking finger on you, I'll make the wanker sorry he ever drew breath."

Mycroft visibly shivered in the passenger seat. "Dear lord."

"I'm not joking," Greg said. "M'not flirting at you. God as my witness, Mycroft, if he even bloody tries - "

"Heaven help me... stop, before I make you pull the car over."

Greg fought a smile, wanting to be angry. "I'm not kidding," he said. "I hope you know that."

"I believe you utterly," Mycroft said, eyeing him with a mixture of concern and dilated pupils. "I don't think I've ever been physically defended."

The mountain road was steepening. Greg shifted the gear stick with a clunk, moving his tongue quietly across his teeth.

"All these people you know," he said, shaking his head. "All convinced they're powerful. Think they've got some right to snap their fingers, and expect the world to fall into line... gotta wonder how many of them have ever been punched in the face..."

Mycroft smiled weakly. "I imagine it would do some of them a world of good."

"Yeah?" The morning light flashed beneath the sun visor. Greg reached one-handed for the sunglasses in the door, pulled them open and slid them on, not taking his eyes from the road. "Get me a list, love."

Mycroft had entirely forgotten the phone in his hand.

"Where is it we're going?" he enquired.
"Ullswater. Nice walk with a waterfall."

"And is it secluded there?"

Greg kept his face under control beneath the sunglasses. "No, it's popular... on all the postcards. Little stone bridge across it... and there's a café does award-winning ice cream."

Mycroft said nothing, still staring at him.

Greg swallowed his smile. "I know I am, love."

"Anywhere?"

"Mm. Anywhere."

"Wow... I don't know." Greg laid his forearms on the bridge, gazing into the falls as spray breathed across his face. "Somewhere warm, maybe? Somewhere the wine's reasonably priced... maybe get some sand between my toes. Take to shorts all year round and horrify the local kids with my old man knees..."

Mycroft snorted, settling into his side. "Jigsaws and fishing?" he said.

Greg flashed a grin at him. "'Jigsaws and fishing'... restore motorbikes, thanks... get into real ale. Become a certified grumpy old bugger and barbeque all summer." He hesitated, entertaining a long-held whim. "Get a dog, maybe."

"Mm?" Mycroft's head rested on his shoulder. "What manner of dog?"

"Just a mutt... a grumpy old bugger dog like me. Chew my slippers and take up all the sofa." Greg tilted his head, raising an eyebrow down at him. "Why? Did you want a posh one?"

Mycroft's eyes glittered with delight. "What distinguishes a 'posh dog' from the regular variety, might I ask?"

"Anything that comes with a certificate proving it's a dog."

"I - believe the certificates are usually proof of breeding, rather than species."

"Oh yeah?" Greg smiled, sliding an arm around Mycroft's shoulders. "I didn't come with proof of breeding. You're happy enough with me."

"Yes, well... I rather took it as given that your parents weren't siblings."

Greg nuzzled into his hair, beaming. "What about you?" he said, nosing at the soft red curls. "Where are you sneaking off to when you're done?"

"Oh, I... can't imagine I'll ever be 'done'..." Mycroft's eyes drifted across the falls, watching the water churn and crash against the smooth black stone to either side. "Rather accustomed to the working life. I'd need to be certain I could occupy myself without it."

"Jigsaws and fishing?" Greg suggested, with a flash of his eyebrows.
Reflected sunlight dappled over Mycroft's smile.

"Perhaps I shall restore motorbikes, too," he mused.

Greg's heart hopped. "Yeah? You could hand me parts."

"Indeed?" Mycroft said, his eyes gleaming. "And assist you with the motorbikes, as well?"

Greg's grin nearly split off his face. He pulled Mycroft close with one arm, kissing the top of his head. "Two nights," he muttered. "Two nights without your pyjamas, and you're making smutty remarks at me..."

Mycroft chuckled, low and soft against his neck. His arms encircled Greg's waist as he heaved a sigh.

"Perhaps I'll retire here," he said, wistfully. He gazed once again at the falls. "The air clearly does me some good. Take up walking. Bird-watching. Watercolours, and peace..."

'Watercolours and peace' sounded idyllic, Greg thought. He could almost see it: a gentler, older Mycroft, one who'd taken a step back from the world - sitting on a mountainside and committing what he made of the horizon to paper. He'd grow a beard and wear scarves. Some sort of little Scottie trotting at his heels.

At their heels, maybe.

"Would you miss London?" he asked.

Mycroft thought about it for some time.

"Yes," he admitted at last. "Always, on some level." He paused. "Though... perhaps not quite as much as I shall miss this time with you."

Greg brushed his nose through his lover's auburn curls, closing his eyes. The waterfall's peace thundered all around them. "There won't be anything to miss. We'll take it all home with us."

Mycroft snorted softly in his arms. "We'll hold each other before a waterfall every morning, shall we?"

"Maybe not a waterfall. But... we'll hold each other. We'll still have this."

"Not every morning." Mycroft hesitated, resting his fingertips on Greg's wrist. They sought beneath his sleeve and found his pulse. "We'll need to return to a - certain level of discretion."

"That's fine," Greg said, softly. "We can do discreet... we're getting good at it now."

He nuzzled at the top of Mycroft's head, tightening his arms around him.

"You worrying, love? Something on your mind?"

"Not - worrying," Mycroft murmured. "Saddened, perhaps... pre-grieving."

"Yeah? What're we pre-grieving?"

Mycroft seemed comforted by 'we'. He leant against Greg, closing his eyes. "This... openness," he said. "The ease of it. Having no other priorities." He hesitated. "Having each other's company without restriction."
Greg felt his chest ache. He kissed Mycroft's temple, wishing some part of them could stay here - just rest against this wall forever by the water, and cuddle, and listen to the birds in the trees.

"I know things are trickier back home. I'll try and make it feel the same." Christ. Say it, Greg. Just go for it. "Come stay with me," he mumbled. "As often as you want. I mean it. It's - not a forest with a waterfall and birds, but... there's me there. And you seem to like him."

Mycroft nuzzled into his neck. "I - worry that real life will be difficult to re-adjust to. I worry I'll miss this severely."

Greg breathed it in. "This is real life," he said. "You and me. Wherever we are."

He leant close, brushing small kisses over Mycroft's mouth as he spoke. His heart stirred as he felt his lover respond.

"Don't be scared," he said. "'S'no need. You won't have less of me back home - I promise. You'll have more of me."

Mycroft shuddered with sudden distress. "How?" he breathed. His eyes searched Greg's. "How is that possible?"

Greg took his face gently in both hands. "Trust your white knight, love. We'll find a way."

"Greg..."

Mycroft's distress was lost against Greg's lips; the whole world seemed to breathe out around them. As Mycroft's fingers raked through his hair, Greg felt his every nerve shiver and tingle in response. He wrapped his arms around Mycroft, pulled him close, and kissed him with a pounding heart.

Mycroft didn't let him go.

The waterfall boomed on beside them. Spray gasped across their skin, the sun settled warm across their faces, and Greg's breath caught as Mycroft's fingers scrunched gently in his hair. The flicker of Mycroft's tongue against his own made his pulse dance. He stifled a groan; Mycroft breathed it in, kissing him harder. He slipped his tongue inside Greg's mouth and they kissed like they'd never kiss again, as bird-song filtered through the trees and the forest held them safe within its folds.

When their lips came apart at last, Greg murmured,

"Look at me, love."

Mycroft's eyes fluttered open in a daze. They found Greg watching across a single inch of space.

"Things've changed," Greg said, with care. "Since we've been here... you know they have."

Mycroft's gazed softened, saying nothing.

"Back home, we'll find out what that means," said Greg. "But... I love you. I know you love me. I know you watched me sleep last night - and that's all I need in the world."

Mycroft shivered, swallowing around words that wouldn't come.

Greg's arms tightened.

"I'll give you all the space and privacy you need," he whispered. "And I'll ruin anyone who tries to take them from you... but - I'm not giving you up, beautiful. Alright? Not a moment of you."
Mycroft trembled, pale. "We can't be seen together. Not like this. Not in London. We - we simply can't, Greg."

Greg didn't remember suggesting they should be.

He was about to say so - then wondered, with a flicker of his heart, who Mycroft was really telling.

He gazed into his lover's eyes, taking a quiet mental note. They wouldn't decide anything standing here, he thought - hundreds of miles from home, when it all still felt like a fairytale.

"Don't worry," he said. He stroked his thumbs along Mycroft's jaw. "Not while I'm around. Wherever you go, if you want me, I'll be there. And the second that a door shuts behind us, I'll still kiss you like we're standing right here on this bridge. I promise."

Mycroft gazed at him, overwhelmed.

"Dear God, you... you mean it - don't you?" he whispered. "All of it. You really, truly mean it."

Greg felt his heart strain.

"Of course I do..." He stared into Mycroft's eyes. "I'll keep telling you. I'll keep showing you. Every day, if you'll let me."

Mycroft's pupils grew. He said nothing, lost and weak.

Greg's heart heaved.

"Stay at mine," he said. His gaze flickered to Mycroft's lips. "Tomorrow night. When we're back in London - please."

Mycroft's eyes shuttered. "I have - work. Tuesday. Early."

"That's alright. Get your assistant to bring your stuff... I'll make you coffee in the morning - kiss you goodbye. See you off on the doorstep in my dressing gown."

Mycroft hesitated in silence. He wanted it - desperately. Greg could see it aching in his eyes.

"It'll make going back easier," he said. "We'll cook together... sleep together." He swallowed. "And I can show you nothing's changing."

Mycroft flushed. He said nothing, hovering on the edge.

Greg leant in, closed his eyes, and stroked Mycroft's lips with his own.

"Let go," he whispered. "Please." He felt his fingers give their first gentle shake. "I know this is more than you planned for. I'm not gonna pull your 'real life' apart, I promise... just add a little joy. That's okay for now - isn't it?"

Mycroft's expression eased. He breathed out in Greg's arms, and he shivered.

"I love you," he whispered. His eyes glossed. "Very, very much."

Greg's heart thudded against his ribs.

"C'mon," he murmured. He took Mycroft's hand. "Let's keep going... we've not got to the upper falls yet. There's more to see."
Mycroft knotted their fingers together, pale and calm. He followed Greg back across the bridge, and they rejoined the trail through the trees.

They walked the path several miles into the wild, eventually reaching the outskirts of the forest, where the trees blended into open fields. Mycroft had lost every scrap of mobile phone signal. They were alone.

Greg glanced around for other walkers, spotted none, and tugged his lover gently from the path.

"Where are we going?" Mycroft asked, a little unsure.

Greg smiled, wrapping their fingers. "C'mon."

Mycroft followed him without further protest, climbing tree roots and winding beneath branches. Greg led him free of the forest, helped him over a rickety fence and into a field full of long grass, knee-deep and soft as silk. They waded through it together, hand-in-hand and without words.

Far enough from the path to be safe, Greg flattened a small circle of grass - patting it down with care, checking for stones. He then settled upon the ground, laid back in the grass, and offered an arm.

Mycroft's eyes shone. He pulled off his jumper, bundled it up to make a pillow, and laid himself down at Greg's side.

Beneath the sun, shaded by the grass, they settled close.

Greg gathered an arm around Mycroft, and kissed his head. Mycroft nestled against his chest.

For a long time they were quiet, lying in their grass-nest together in peace. Greg didn't know what time it was. He couldn't guess from the sun; he didn't care. He trailed his fingertips through Mycroft's curls, unsettling them gently. He'd miss them next week, he thought - but he'd see them again.

A crowd flew overhead. Its feathers gleamed in the sunlight, glossy and black and gorgeous. They could hear every beat of its wings.

In the silence that followed, they both breathed out.

Against his shoulder, a small voice said, "I'm - sorry I..."

Greg smiled. He tilted his chin, kissing Mycroft's head. "You've got nothing to be sorry about, love. This is new for you... and it's big. S'okay to worry about it."

"I would have this everyday if I could. Truly."

"I know."

"It's - ... my career, Greg. My reputation. All I've worked for."

" - isn't under threat from me. Not at all. Not for a second." Greg shuffled carefully onto his side to
face Mycroft, propping his head on one arm. "You can have both. M'your secret... it's safe."

Mycroft said nothing, gazing into his face.

He reached out to touch Greg's jaw, brushing the stubble there with care. His thumb stroked Greg's chin as he thought, passing gently across his lips. Greg kissed its pad, his eyes warm.

Mycroft's eyes softened with a smile.

"There you are," Greg murmured. His lover blushed. "You're thinking too much."

"Perhaps," Mycroft admitted. He took a breath, his fingertips trembling. "I - fear I'm - starting to want discordant things."

Greg wondered. "Discordant' things?"

"Opposing." Mycroft's throat squeezed. "Incompatible."

Greg gathered him closer, wrapping an arm around his waist. Mycroft cuddled into his chest.

"'kay. You want two things," he murmured, stroking Mycroft's hair. "And you couldn't have both - right?"

Mycroft gave a tiny nod.

"Which of the two do you want the most?" Greg asked.

Mycroft swallowed; his arms tightened. "I - don't know."

Greg squeezed him back.

"Then you're not ready to pick," he said. "Wait until it's easy. One day, there'll come a moment where the choice doesn't bother you anymore. It won't even feel like a choice. 'Til then, just enjoy what you enjoy."

Mycroft huffed against his collarbones. "You make everything seem so simple."

"Oi."

"No, I - I didn't mean to suggest - "

"I know... m'teasing you." Greg nuzzled for his lips, running a hand down his side. They kissed, and as they relaxed together, Mycroft settled more and more into his arms. Greg waited to speak until he'd softened. "I - suppose I've just had my share of 'complicated'. I like simple. It works for me."

Mycroft hesitated. "Your - marriage..."

Greg smiled, his heart tugging. Mycroft said the word like it wasn't really his place. "Life's tricky," he said. "Take the easy path when you can."

"Was it not - ..." Mycroft stuttered to a stop. "F-Forgive me. It's hardly my - "

"You can ask, you know... I don't mind. You let me ask about Crap Student Boyfriend of the Century."
Mycroft's face flushed. "I - elected to tell you. You never pried."

"So? M'electing to answer your questions." Greg eased a hand beneath the hem of Mycroft's polo-shirt, rubbing at his lower back - gentle patterns. "You're not prying. Ask what you want."

Mycroft took a moment to dare. Resting his head back beneath Greg's chin, he murmured,

"Was it - not easy?"

"No. Especially not towards the end." Greg closed his eyes, stroking Mycroft's bare back with gentle fingertips. It felt odd in a way, talking about this with a lover - not bad. Just new. It felt like another milestone. "Karen - got too much of a kick out of cheating to ever stop... and I was too busy 'saving our marriage' to realise I was unhappy too. Instead of telling me she wanted time together, she'd go off on carnage holidays with her mates to Magaluf... get herself photographed drunk in clubs, cuddling blokes half her age. Trying to hurt me."


"She liked seeing me jealous," Greg said. He'd done a lot of thinking after it all fell apart. Friends had helped him see where the cracks had formed, and which one had finally given way. "The fall-out would patch things up for a while, and I'd get a kick out of 'back on track', so - we'd carry on... round and round it went."

"Who - finally instigated...?"

Greg smiled slightly. "I did."

Mycroft was quiet for a while. "How did she react?"

Greg remembered the conversation like it was yesterday. "She laughed," he said. "Took ten minutes to convince her I wasn't joking."

He placed his lips against Mycroft's forehead for a moment, closing his eyes - wanting to anchor himself here in this day, not get lost in those that had gone before.

"I guess we'd always had an understanding that it was her calling the shots... she cheated, she apologised, she made amends... I just went along with it. In the end, it blew her mind that I upped and left."

"She took your loyalty for granted," Mycroft murmured.

"I suppose so." Greg let the quiet linger for a moment. "How'd your - ... never asked his name."

Mycroft hesitated. "Andrew."

"How'd Andrew take it, when you gave him the shove?"

Mycroft snorted, his mouth twisting. "Hardly a 'shove'... I shook like a leaf from start to finish... told him I was no longer sure I wished to continue our association. He didn't believe me for an hour or so... then shouted that I was a moron for another hour... there were about three minutes of tears, then further shouting..."

Greg's heart thudded unhappily.

"Then he - spent the night with a girl in our staircase. And made sure I could hear it."
The bottom dropped from Greg's stomach.

"He - ... are you serious?"

"Mm." Mycroft looked briefly awkward. "She'd - been making eyes at him for a while. He had a certain... 'alpha male' sort of - ... I wasn't wholly surprised..."

"That's - ... Jesus Christ. The more you tell me about this guy..." Greg gazed into Mycroft's face, his heart beating hard. "What did you do? Just - lie there, listening to them?"

He couldn't bear it. He couldn't stand the thought of Mycroft in the dark, being told so emphatically through a wall that he was nothing.

Mycroft flushed, gazing at his distress. "I - finished an essay," he said. "And went to bed with green tea."

Greg's heart snapped like a dry wafer.

"Myke..." he whispered. He couldn't cope with it.

Mycroft glanced into his eyes, embarrassed.

A small, strange gleam then lightened his gaze.

"She... told everyone his performance had been sub-par," he murmured.

Greg's heart leapt. He gave a small, gentle smile. "Yeah?"

"I - understood that he wasn't worth the removal of her tights. He was dubbed selfish and uncreative. I maintained a dignified silence on the whole matter... then graduated with a double-first."

Greg wrapped his arms around Mycroft.

"You star..." He kissed between his eyes, adoring him more than ever. "Where is this douchebag now? Did you ever look him up?"

"Oh, I... try not to follow his career too closely. He was sadly quite successful - far more than he deserved. Connections are everything. I imagine he's rather pleased with his lot in life..."

"D'you know where he ended up?"

Mycroft looked rather shrewdly at Greg. "Why?" he enquired, amused. His eyes sparkled. "Would you seek him out, and give him a thrashing in my honour?"

Greg laughed aloud, rolling back into the grass with a grin.

"Christ," he said. "Yes. Yes, of course I would. In fact, now I know what to get you for Christmas..."

Mycroft chuckled, settling happily back into his side. He cushioned his head on Greg's chest once more - and with a sigh, said,

"The follies of youth, Greg..."

Greg grinned. "My follies weren't even all that youthful, m'afraid."
"The follies of bygone days, then."

"Ha. Sure." Greg scooped him closer with one arm. "May they stay in the bygone days."

Mycroft's legs tangled with his own; they laid together in the sun, peaceful and happy. The world shone quietly around them.

"Greg?" Mycroft murmured, at last.

"Mm?"

"I - like this. What we have."

Greg breathed in the sunlight; he could feel it warming him from the inside out. He reached for Mycroft's jaw, tilted his head, and leant down to kiss him. His heart expanded as their mouths brushed together slowly - as soft as the long grass all around.

"That's everything we need," he whispered, as they parted. "Just - love me. Let me love you back. The rest'll sort itself."

Mycroft's face opened. He pushed closer, reached up to kiss Greg once more, and gently eased atop him in the long grass.

Greg inhaled, his heart glowing, as Mycroft kissed him like the world could wait all day. He ran his hands from Mycroft's shoulder blades to his thighs, slow, rumpling his clothing, taking in every beautiful inch of him - the man who, even at his worst, was as easy as a long afternoon in a sunny field.

Mycroft shivered, kissing him harder; their tongues curled.

The hours drifted by on the breeze.

"We look as if we've been committing indecency," Mycroft muttered, bright-eyed and embarrassed as they picked their way back to the path. He brushed nervously at the grass-stains on his knees.

Greg didn't dare tell him about the ones on his arse.

"We were just being soppy," he said. "We'd look guiltier if something criminal had happened. D'you want an ice cream?"

Mycroft's eyes rounded slightly. "I - suppose it would be remiss not to support the local economy."

_Christ, I love you._ "Yeah, my thoughts too. What d'you fancy for dinner tonight? That bistro in Windermere we spotted?"

As Mycroft's hand stole into his own, Greg's heart jumped with happiness.

"I'll - be content wherever we eat," he said. "I'm just glad to be with you."

Greg grinned, holding onto his hand. "Bistro, then. Wine and a film at the hotel after? Cuddle up on the couch?"
Mycroft groaned softly. "Greg, please... I can only take so much indulgence."

"We've had loads of exercise," Greg said, grinning. "Walked for miles. Anyway... a little of what you fancy does you good."

"So I hear," Mycroft said, bemused - and tucked into his side.
Vulnerable

To love is to be vulnerable.
- C.S. Lewis, 'The Four Loves'

As the closing credits began to roll, Greg laid back with a sleepy stretch. Mycroft stirred against his shoulder.

"You okay?" Greg mumbled, nuzzling at his head.

Mycroft chuckled. "Mm. I may have missed some of that..."

"S'fine," Greg murmured. "We had a long day... just kinda nice having you sleep on me..." He tipped back the last few dregs of his wine. "D'you want another drink?"

"Dear lord, no... I've imbibed far too much this weekend. It's a miracle I can still walk. Stop plying me with things that I enjoy."

"S'your birthday," Greg said, his eyes warm. "And you're on holiday."

Mycroft snorted. He smiled from ear-to-ear as his lover's arms cosied around his middle.

"I have a feeling you need no excuse to indulge me," he remarked - then let out a laugh, as Greg slyly tugged him onto his lap. "Greg! Greg, for heaven's sake - I'll crush you - "

"Exactly how heavy d'you think you are?" Greg said, grinning. "Idiot. C'mere..." He negotiated Mycroft to sit astride him, chest-to-chest, close and comfy. He ran his hands up Mycroft's sides. "There... see? Nobody's crushing anybody..."

Mycroft gazed down at him. Wine had warmed his cheeks, and his hair glowed red in the candlelight.

As he laid his hands on Greg's shoulders, he said, in quiet wonder,

"Why do you look at me like that?"

Greg searched his face. "Like what?"

Mycroft bit his lower lip. "As if I am quite amazing."

Greg said nothing, letting his eyes speak for him.

Mycroft blushed, overwhelmed.

"I - love you," he whispered. "Truly, I do. More every hour. You are wonderful."

Greg moved his hands down Mycroft's thighs, shining inside. "Love you too. More every minute."
"Greg..." Mycroft swallowed. His fingers trembled as they laid upon Greg's jaw. "I... I feel... like I want to - ..."

Greg smiled, waiting, gazing up at the man he loved. He could watch Mycroft like this all night - just sit with him here, and just look at him, and love him. Just the sight of Mycroft felt good. Just the warmth of his gaze.

Mycroft looked back into his eyes; his chest seemed to heave.

He reached down, shy - and pressed his gentle mouth to Greg's.

Greg's eyes flickered shut. He rested against the back of the sofa, utterly at peace, and let Mycroft take what he wanted - let Mycroft choose the moment for the kiss to deepen, and let him choose when their tongues touched. Mycroft's first shy moan caught Greg's breath in his chest. His arms tightened and he drew Mycroft closer, relishing the little tremble now passing through his lover's back. Mycroft's tongue flashed eagerly through his mouth as they stirred together, then sought a little deeper - kissing him with restless enjoyment, slender fingers now stroking up through his hair, and the nuzzle of Mycroft's cock against his own made him shiver. He could feel his pulse picking up.

_God, yes... _something lazy. Something sleepy. Just hands and kissing and lube, breathing together... just get cozy together and come... but he wanted to go down on Myke too. Nothing compared to those sounds - those delicate hands grasping at his shoulders. He wanted everything. It was their last night here, last night in their nest in the forest, and he wanted Mycroft to enjoy every moment of it.

As Mycroft let go of his mouth, Greg felt his heart give a happy stretch in his chest. Mycroft stroked a thumb beneath his lips, watching its path. He smiled and murmured, "Darling?"

_Darling._ Greg gazed at him, drugged with happiness. "Mm?"

He felt Mycroft breathe, pulling together some courage. "May I ask you something?"

"'Course you can. Hit me with it."

"It's... perhaps indiscreet," Mycroft added, nervous.


Mycroft took a moment to speak, tracing his jaw with a thumb.

"Have you - ever - ..." He flushed, with a small cough. "I-If you're comfortable answering, I mean - "

Greg smiled, holding his gaze. "Have I ever...?"

Mycroft's blush deepened. The words seemed to stick.

Greg leant up, wrapped a gentle hand around the back of Mycroft's neck, and gathered him down.

"Ask," he rumbled in Mycroft's ear, rubbing his neck. "S'okay."

Mycroft shivered against him.

"R-Received," he said. "In intercourse."
The big question, Greg thought. He didn't mind being asked. Some part of him had wondered if this discussion would come about soon - if it was on Mycroft's mind. His own experience was a good place to start. If it made Mycroft feel safe, that was a perfect reason to share.

He stroked the back of Mycroft's neck as he answered, truthful and gentle.

"Not often," he said. "And quite a while ago. But I have."

Mycroft was quiet for a short time, nuzzling his cheek. "What is it supposed to be like?"

Greg took a moment to think about it. He brushed his fingers through the curls at the nape of Mycroft's neck, following their gentle flicks.

"Like all sex," he said, at last. "Comfortable... enjoyable, for you both. If it's not, then there's a problem. You've got to have a lot of trust - just like the rest of sex."

"If it's - done with care," Mycroft mumbled. "Done properly, with... with an attentive partner..." He took a breath. "How does it feel?"

It wasn't the easiest thing to put into words, Greg thought. He gave it a go.

"Intense. It's - very good, when you're comfortable. You can feel a bit vulnerable if I'm honest, but... in the right hands, that's not a bad thing. It aches at first. Then, when you're settled, and you're relaxed..."

He sought for the words.


Mycroft gave a slight shiver, listening.

"But it depends how you want to feel with someone," Greg murmured. "If you - want a partner inside you... and it's not just - ... I mean, there are stepping stones to get there. Fingers. Toys."

"God - ..." The word seemed to escape Mycroft without his permission. He breathed in. "You - make it sound rather appealing."

Greg extinguished the warmth that curled through his stomach, reminding himself that theory and practice could be very different - especially when traumatic past experience was involved.

He took a moment to find the right words, petting Mycroft's curls as he did.

"I can probably fill in the blanks myself at this point, but... what was it like for you before?"

Mycroft shifted.

"Embarrassing," he decided, after a moment. "Uncomfortable."

"M'sorry. I mean it."

"Hardly your fault." Mycroft drew back, looking into Greg's eyes. He bit his lip again. "It was - easy to feel in some way that I was being used."

"Christ." Greg's stomach tightened. "You didn't deserve that."
"He would - ask, afterwards. If I'd enjoyed it."

Greg hesitated, searching his eyes. "Surely he'd... know if you'd..."

Mycroft glanced down between them, where his hands rested on the buttons of Greg's shirt. "I - think he imagined pained silence from a partner to be quite normal."

Greg's throat had gone dry. "Didn't he wonder why you didn't come?"

For a moment, Mycroft's eyes were looking at some other scene - some old memory.

"At first, he'd sometimes - attempt to make me - ... with a fairly aggressive resolve. And a subsequent eruption of anger, if I didn't seem to be responding appropriately to his labours." Mycroft bit the inside of his cheek. "One night he - deigned to give me oral sex. To no success. He eventually gave up, shouted at me and left, and did not talk to me for a week."

Greg took a moment to breathe, saying nothing. He didn't trust himself to speak.

"In the end, I told him I had a medical problem." Mycroft's voice tightened. "Inorgasmic. Not his fault. I put aside the evidence that, by myself, I was quite capable of climax and... and that I e- enjoyed - ...

He flushed.

"I... reassured myself that at least I had a partner..." he sighed. "Certainly more than my parents had ever thought me capable..."

Greg had never hated a faceless memory so much in his life. He didn't even know what this guy looked like, or what he sounded like - but he hated him with every fragment of his soul.

Mycroft looked down into his eyes, his gaze soft with distress. "Where were you," he asked, "twenty-eight years ago?"

Greg's chest tightened. "The wrong place, it turns out."

Mycroft smiled a little. "If only you'd been at Cambridge, studying Politics and Economics..."

"I'd rather have been studying you," Greg said. "Showing you you're normal. Showing you that you deserve to be treated like a bloody human being."

Mycroft laid his palms flat against Greg's chest. "Then... you are late, darling. But very much appreciated."

Greg ran his palms along Mycroft's thighs, quietening himself with the stroke of fabric. "M'glad I got here eventually."

Mycroft smiled a little. He leant forwards to kiss between Greg's eyes. "Stepping stones, you say...?"

Greg's throat thickened.

"Only to something you want. If you're doing it for me, I don't want it. At all. Please don't think that's 'real sex', and we've got to get there. Like we've just been kidding around so far. If you think that, I've failed on every count..."

Mycroft brushed his nose across Greg's cheek - a gentle brush that stalled Greg's breath.
"I don't believe that," he murmured. "Not in the least."

As he reached Greg's ear, he mouthed a gentle kiss across the lobe.

Hot, immediate pleasure flittered across Greg's scalp, flickered down his neck and out along his shoulders. He twitched; his fingers flexed on Mycroft's thighs.

"I like what we've found together..." The vibration of Mycroft's voice sent waves of enjoyment tickling beneath his skin. He bit into his lip. "I like what you've shown me. I like... being with you, Greg. Being together."

**Being together.**

Even the language Mycroft used for sex tugged at his heart. It was all emotion, all closeness. It was intoxicating. Murmured like this in his ear, it was drawing his thoughts in a single direction - up the stairs, into bed, to stay right there until the morning.

"Myke," he whispered, weakening. As Mycroft's tongue soothed over his earlobe, his breath caught. "Myke - "

"Mm?" Mycroft's voice lowered; another warm and wet flash, and then a whisper. "Here?"

Greg's pulse surged.

"Christ - M-Myke - " He'd always had sensitive ears. He liked talking; he liked being soothed. Shyly Mycroft drew his earlobe into his mouth, with a little graze of teeth, then began to suck.

Greg jerked. He tightened his arms around Mycroft, his eyes snapping shut as pleasure writhed from the pit of his stomach up into his neck. He gasped it out. "B-Beautiful, don't - don't if you're not - ... m's-sensitive there - "

Mycroft made a low humming noise, and began to investigate Greg's captured earlobe with his tongue - swirling, flicking, wet little sounds.

Greg's stomach twisted with enjoyment. He felt his shoulders squirm as he dug his fingers into Mycroft's thighs. "Oh...! Christ - "

Mycroft's hips nudged forward - rocking, pressing, as he continued to fellate Greg's ear without mercy.

"Mycroft - " Greg pleaded, panting as he hardened. *Oh fuck... oh fuck, yes... "B-Beautiful, I - I really - "

Mycroft's arms slid restlessly around his neck. He let go of Greg's ear.

"Take me to bed," he breathed.

Greg's heart erupted. He tipped Mycroft to the side, scooped him up in his arms, and hefted him into the air. Mycroft let out a startled cry, clinging to him tightly.

"Greg! I'm too heavy - "

"What's this *I'm too heavy Greg’ today?" Greg rumbled, as he carried Mycroft over to the stairs. "You know I'm a policeman? Manhandling suspects is day one."

"Greg, you're - *ludicrous. Your back. For heaven's sake. We are middle-aged."
"Middle-aged'? Speak for yourself..." Greg grinned. "I've got you fine, love."

They headed up the stairs, slowly.

"You're totally safe," Greg said. He laid Mycroft down in the soft white nest of their bed. "Safe and sound..."

Mycroft gazed up from amongst the cloud-like covers with a rumpled, blue-eyed softness. He was hard - pink-cheeked and hopeful - and he was gorgeous.

The sight cut Greg's breath for a second.

"Come stay tomorrow." His heart thudded. "Please. Sleep at mine. I - need to see this at home. I need it to be my bed."

Mycroft smiled up at him, shy and bewildered.

"I'd... like to," he murmured. "Thank you."

Greg knelt down, took Mycroft's foot gently in his hands, and removed his sock.

Undressing took nearly half an hour - lapsing into kissing, stroking skin as it was uncovered - at one point, nearly coming as Mycroft undid his jeans with his teeth.

At last, naked, and with the bedside lamp the only source of light, Greg pulled Mycroft onto his lap and reached for lube.

"Like this?" he breathed, between Mycroft's urgent kisses. He soothed his oiled fingers around Mycroft's cock, prompting a deep shiver and a moan. "Together, love?"

He started to stroke.

"Mmh - ..." Mycroft's thighs tensed, squeezing Greg's own where he sat astride his lap. "Yes..." He took the offered tube and, shuddering, coated his hands. "Y-Yes..."

As Mycroft's fingers slid around his prick, slick and warm, Greg's every worry vanished.

They found a rhythm together - breathing, kissing, touching. Mycroft's face soon coursed with enjoyment, his cheeks burning red as he rocked shyly into Greg's steady stroking.

Greg couldn't take his eyes away. He couldn't stop gazing at Mycroft. He was so beautiful. The quiet, heartfelt little moans Mycroft made cut him to the heart; the glittering eyes and bitten lip were more arousing than any sight he'd ever seen. His heart was pounding with protective love. A week ago, he'd never seen this before in his life - now, he never wanted to go a night in his life without it.

Gently he reached down, cupped Mycroft's balls and began to massage them, palming them gently in time with his other hand. Mycroft's lip-biting deepened. He shuddered and pushed against Greg, shaking, resting his cheek against Greg's shoulder.

"I - ... oh, God, that f-feels - ..."

Greg shivered.

"Let go of me for a while," he whispered. He let go of Mycroft's cock and wrapped an arm around his back, cuddling him, slick fingers splaying at the base of his spine. "Rest against me..."
Mycroft settled, quivering. His fingers trembled as they curled around Greg's biceps. "Are you c-certain?" he mumbled.

"Mmhm. Want to concentrate on you..." Greg tested a gentle squeeze of his balls - a careful, soft little tug. Mycroft's moan melted low into his throat. He rocked, trembling, and whimpered for the sensation to continue. Hugging him one-armed, Greg began to build a rhythm.

He noted the nervous silence as it grew. The shift from quiet moans was easy to pick up.

"You okay, sweetheart?" he murmured at last, nuzzling into Mycroft's temple.

Mycroft's hands flexed on his biceps.

"Greg..." His voice came out small; he shook a little. "Greg... I - ..."

Greg paused - only for Mycroft to whimper and rock his hips for continuation, pleading faintly.

Careful, Greg resumed.

After a few moments, his lover shivered. The words left him as a secret, gasped only for Greg to hear. "Please. T-Touch me there."

Greg's heart contracted. The question skittered through his mind - *Are you sure, beautiful?* - but he needed to stop second-guessing Mycroft's decisions... as if he'd not thought this through. As if he didn't know what he was getting into.

Mycroft knew what he was asking. The past was the past, and he'd asked anyway.

Greg knew he could make it different. He could make it okay.

"Promise you'll tell me," he murmured, his heart beating hard. "Tell me the second you're not enjoying it."

"I-I will..." Mycroft nuzzled into his neck. Nervously, with an intake of breath, he spread his thighs a little further apart.

Greg suppressed the rush of arousal that flooded his stomach. There'd be space for his own needs later. For now, Mycroft came first.

"Okay..." Still gently rubbing Mycroft's balls, he let his other hand ease from lower back to the pad of Mycroft's arse - rounding his cheek, a tender squeeze. "Just first touches, beautiful... just let you feel. Whenever you want, we'll stop this part... and we'll get back to what you know. I'll go down on you... look after you with my mouth. How's that?"

Mycroft audibly swallowed. "Oh... God..."

"Is this okay so far?" Greg asked, stroking his arse cheek.

"Y-You - you haven't - ... yet."

"No. But I still want it to be okay."

Mycroft breathed out, shuddering. Greg felt him relax a little with the knowledge that even *this* could be rejected and stopped at once.

"M'just gonna run my fingers between you. Just gentle. Is that alright?"
Mycroft nodded, wordless.

Greg eased his hand away from Mycroft's balls, wrapping it around his back instead - cuddling him - pulling him close. Mycroft shifted to lean against him. As they settled, Greg placed a kiss on Mycroft's shoulder, and ran his oiled fingertips slowly down the cleft of Mycroft's arse - a long, gentle and easy stroke, down and then carefully back up. Mycroft trembled, breathing out.

Greg picked up the lube. He quietly snapped it open with his thumb.

"Just more lube," he murmured, covering his fingers with a liberal squeeze. "Can I rub you there? Just gentle circles? I won't go inside you."

Mycroft's fingers twitched on his back. "A-Alright."

Greg put the lube aside, closing his eyes to relax. The last thing Mycroft needed was to realise he was nervous, too.

He concentrated on touch - on the gentle up and down strokes for a while, feeling his lover relax more and more in his arms, then finally let his fingertips linger over the snug ring of muscle they were brushing. He added a slow, light circle to each steady up and down. Mycroft breathed against his chest, feeling this with him. Greg realised they were breathing in sync.

After long minutes, he let his middle fingertip catch into the circle and stay with it - spiralling slowly round-and-round. Mycroft shifted. His thighs eased apart and he quivered. A small whimper left his lips.

"How's that?" Greg asked, his voice low and soft.

"F-Fine." Mycroft swallowed again. "I - ..."

"S'only me here, beautiful... just me. You can say."

Mycroft shuddered with it, breath hitching. He nuzzled closer. The words were confessed in a rush, breathed in Greg's ear. "I like the thought of you inside me. I - I want to feel - ... I l-love you - "

Greg's heart squeezed hard. "I love you, too..." He placed a kiss to the sweat-damp slope of Mycroft's shoulder. "Shall I try just one? Just gentle? And you can tell me if that's alright. If it's not, beautiful, it's okay... we'll cuddle. We'll just relax and make love."

Mycroft made a heart-breaking sound. "Don't stop," he whispered. "Please don't stop. I want to make love. I want to come with you..."

_Christ, Christ..._

"You will, sweetheart..." Greg swallowed and kissed the side of his neck, his heart burning, every nerve in his body tingling. He let the gentle swirling of his finger deepen. "You will. We won't stop everything. Just some things, if you need."

Mycroft squirmed. He started to pant. "Please - please do it - "

Greg nuzzled beneath his jaw. "Breathe in for me, beautiful."

As Mycroft inhaled, Greg closed his eyes. He breathed in, too. As gently as he could, he breached the tight ring of muscle with the tip of his finger. Mycroft made an indistinct sound. He stirred, his hands gripping at Greg's shoulder blades, and let out a soft moan as Greg kissed his neck.
"Okay?" Greg whispered between kisses. Mycroft's body hugged him tightly, a warm and resistant squeeze.

"Okay." Mycroft stretched, and let out a huff against his shoulder. "I - l-like your voice..."

Greg heard the plea for what it was. "Yeah?" He lifted his mouth to Mycroft's ear, stroking with his lips as he spoke. "Want me to talk to you while we try this?"

Mycroft nodded, panting.

Greg let his eyes close, settling himself into words. He stirred his finger carefully inside Mycroft as he murmured.

"Haven't told you yet how proud I am of you." He gently squeezed Mycroft's lower back. "Trying all this with me... discovering with me. Haven't told what it means that you trust me."

"I - I f-feel safe with you..."

"Mm? Safe enough to explore?"

"Mm hmm -"

"Safe to rest," Greg whispered. "Safe to feel." Slow, steady circles - just stretching - oil, soothing, encouraging the muscles to soften for him. *Just this for a while*, he thought. Let them both learn how this felt. "D'you know what it does to me, knowing I'm the only one? Knowing how special this is? Makes me want to guard you night and day. I could spend my life just stroking you. Giving you what you need, beautiful. Helping you come."

Mycroft shook, letting out a tight little noise. He pushed back gently. *More.* Greg didn't change - didn't advance - kept on with slow and steady circles. He wet his lips with a flick of his tongue.

"You said you liked the thought of me inside you?"

Mycroft trembled. *"Y-Yours."

"Mnhm." Greg breathed to calm himself, kissing Mycroft's neck. *"Mine. My Mycroft. Safe with me."*

Mycroft's whimper caught in his throat. He arched, huffing. *"C-Can you - ..."

"Mm?"

"I-In and out. Slowly. Please."

Greg's heart erupted. He had to stop enjoying 'please' so much - but Christ, it was working for him. He was aching, just feeling this - just listening to Mycroft whimper, feeling him stir. He carefully withdrew his finger, then eased his way back in - so slow he was barely moving.

Mycroft's mouth dropped open. His eyes closed; pleasure flushed across his face.

*"Fuck,"* he let out in a gasp, as his fingers clenched on Greg's back.

*"F-Fuck - ..."* Greg's mouth echoed it without his permission. He clamped down on it, trying to keep control. *"Christ, sweetheart... you - you like that? Feels good?"

Mycroft stirred - stretching, panting a little, his forehead dropping to rest on Greg's shoulder. His
whine of pleasure dropped into a thick, breathless moan at the next gentle push back in. He began to breathe deep and slow, and Greg settled into the rhythm, using it to guide the careful nuzzles of his finger.

"I-In me," Mycroft gasped out, trembling. "Oh, God."

His back arched - pushing down against the slow, gentle fucking.

Greg could barely breathe. He swallowed, reached his free hand to Mycroft's front, and gently cupped his balls once more - gave them a soft squeeze - began to massage them, slowly, in time.

Mycroft unleashed a stream of incoherent, soft little noises - scatters of whimpers and pleas and gasps, shaking as he squirmed between the two feelings. Taking a nervous grip of Greg's biceps, he began to rock - back against Greg's finger, forwards into the steady squeezes.

"S-Sweetheart - ..." Greg's heart was pounding itself apart. "Christ, sweetheart - you're beautiful. You're perfect."

Mycroft moaned, heaving in a breath. "Ohh... oh please, more - "

"More?" Greg tumbled his balls a little slower for him, a little firmer - easing, rubbing, comforting. "More here?"

Mycroft shivered with palpable frustration, huffing against Greg's neck. He rutted back against his hand. "M-More, Greg - ..."

Christ, Christ...

"Darlin'..." he whispered, his heart banging against his ribs. "More might hurt - "

"Please," Mycroft sobbed into his shoulder - and Greg had never been begged like that, pleaded with like that. He bit into his lip, gently pressing the pad of his ring finger into place. He rubbed with two - coaxing, but not breaching.

Mycroft's moan rippled through his soul.

"Y-Yes... yes - God, please - "

Just as Greg began to press, he caught the quiet flicker of an outside sound.

It was a ringing mobile phone.

One of Mycroft's.

As he recognised it, Greg felt part of his chest collapse on the spot.

Oh, Jesus... no. Not now. He tried to keep his focus on Mycroft, rubbing gently as he listened to the phone ringing downstairs, far beyond its owner's conscious thought. If it's important, he thought, they'll ring back.

The second the call stopped, Greg realised Mycroft had told work to ring in emergencies only.

Christ. This is serious.

What would a good boyfriend do in this moment? Mycroft was oblivious, rocking against Greg and still pleading softly for more, vulnerable, wanting to feel safe. He was trusting Greg to bring him
through this moment

But a work emergency for Mycroft meant a national emergency. It wouldn't be an intern asking how to change the ink cartridge in the printer.

And it was nearly midnight.

As he heard the phone begin to ring again, Greg realised that if the country fell to ruin because of this, Mycroft wouldn't actually thank him. He steeled himself with a breath. *God almighty, of all the bloody times...*

"Beautiful," he said, softly. He eased his hand from Mycroft's balls. "Beautiful - "

Mycroft gasped, panting - he grabbed desperately for Greg's hand, trying to guide it back where he needed it. "N-No - no, don't stop - please - "

*Fuck me up. London had better be ablaze right now. If half of parliament aren't dead, I'm going to make them dead.*

"Darlin', your - bloody phone's ringing... downstairs."

"Please, you ... wait, m-my ..." Mycroft let out a sound of despair as he caught up. "Oh - oh, fuck - oh, for the love of everything sacred in this - "

Greg wrapped both arms around him, gripping him tightly, and whispered,

"Lie down, sweetheart. It's okay. I'll go get it... you just lie down, okay? Just - just lie here and rest. I'm coming back."

Mycroft sank to his side on the bed, flushed in the face and panting. Greg pushed free of the covers, moved quickly down the stairs and followed the functional ringtone to Mycroft's jacket on the door, unzipping it quickly and retrieving the fucking thing.

*ANTHEA CALLING...*

*Three Missed Calls*

"Bollocks..." Greg mumbled, his heart squeezing.

As he brought the phone back upstairs, Mycroft sat up slightly and extended a hand for it. He was flushed, distressed; he'd pulled on underwear. "Who is it?"

"S'your assistant." Greg handed it over. He sat beside Mycroft on the mattress, his stomach knotting. "M'sorry, sweetheart."

Mycroft's tone was flint. "Not as sorry as she's about to be." He answered the call with a slash of his finger, chest heaving. "Yes?" he snapped.

Greg heard the muffled flicker of an apology begin.

"'Absolute emergency'," Mycroft barked. "'Nothing less than critical'. What in God's name justifies this?"
As she explained, Greg watched.

Mycroft’s face didn’t move a muscle. He listened in silence, breathing, processing whatever he was being told.

"When?" he said at last.

As his assistant replied, Greg quietly stroked his bare thigh.

"And what condition is he in?" Mycroft asked.

*Christ. That's not good.* Something about 'he' made Greg's heart constrict to half its size.

He realised with a cold rush that Mycroft was turning pale.


Mycroft pushed his hand away.

He sat up, got out of bed and moved straight to the wardrobe, tucking the phone between his ear and his shoulder.

"Yes. Yes, of course. Where?"

Greg's pulse began to race. He watched Mycroft wrench a shirt from the wardrobe, fighting it off the hanger.

"And they have a landing pad there, do they?" Mycroft said.

Greg got to his feet at once.

"Yes," Mycroft said into the phone. "Fine. Update me by text."

He closed the call and pulled the shirt on, shaking.

Before Greg could ask, he turned around and said,

"Sherlock has been attacked near Baker Street. His injuries are severe. He's been taken to St Mary's Hospital."

Greg's jaw dropped. "*Attacked - *"

"Pritchard." Mycroft wrenched open a drawer, grabbing clean trousers. "They're sending a helicopter."

*A helicopter. "Christ - where's - "*

"The nearest landing pad is at a hotel in Windermere."

"Right." Greg seized his jeans from the floor. As he kicked his way into them, he said, "Pritchard in custody, right? D'you know who's dealing with him?"

The moment he heard the silence, he knew.

"Pritchard... has *not* been apprehended." Mycroft's voice broke. "He remains at large."
This chapter is now returned to you all in its evolved form, with my heartfelt thanks to Bourbon for first-reading the new version. I've made some changes for clarity. It's also now substantially longer - I hope you enjoy it.

Thank you to everyone taking the time to read and comment. It lights me up to know you're still enjoying the story, and I'm hugely grateful for all your encouragement. You guys are the best of me. x

If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more.

- Jane Austen, 'Emma'

Mycroft didn't make a sound during the flight. He didn't seem to know anybody else was there. He sat in silence from the moment they boarded, pale and unwell as he gazed without emotion through the side-window. Roads, towns and cities swept by far beneath them, scatterings of light in the darkness - but none of it seemed to register in his eyes.

He stirred only to glance at the flash of the phone in his hand. His replies to his assistant were typed swiftly, silently, and sent with no visible relief - then he returned to his nervous, soundless gazing.

He looked as if the world had fallen to pieces around him.

Greg sat beside him in silence, his heart breaking more and more with every mile.

He wanted to put an arm around Mycroft - to touch him, comfort him - promise him things he had no right to promise. *It'll be fine. Honestly. Sure he's in the best of hands.* But something told Greg that the last thing he should do in this moment was touch. He could read Mycroft's tense shoulders, the paleness of his cheeks and the misery in his eyes as clearly as he could read a printed warning label. *Don't,* every signal said. *You're not here.*

The pilot - and the government agent who sat beside him - were giving Greg the exact same signal. They hadn't so much as looked at him, let alone spoken to him. He got the feeling that his presence on the flight had been news to them. He didn't know how many regulations and protocols Mycroft had broken by doing this - and he certainly didn't dare ask.

All their things were still at the hotel.

He'd only just remembered to grab his phone, his wallet and his keys.
It didn't feel real.

Just before three AM, they landed on an unmarked rooftop in central London.

Mycroft didn't say a word as he disembarked, paler than ever, and looking ten years older than he had three hours ago. He helped Greg down from the helicopter in silence, led him immediately through a featureless grey door, and then down through a darkened office building. Greg kept close at his side, and made no attempt to either look around or talk.

Outside on the road, a car was waiting.

Mycroft held the door for Greg with lowered eyes.

Heart aching, Greg got in.

As he did, Mycroft's assistant - groomed, wide-awake and ready to go - glanced up from her phone. Spotting a man who was not her employer climbing into the car, she blinked into astonishment.

"Oh!" she said.

Greg froze. He had a feeling Mycroft had just forfeited a well-kept secret.

Mycroft got into the car beside him, slammed the door, and said stiffly,

"St Mary's. Now."

His assistant vanished at once into the depths of her Blackberry.

Greg's stomach heaved.

Christ, beautiful... they didn't know, did they? None of them knew you were with me. It looked like he'd been right to keep quiet. This was even more of a disaster than he'd thought.

So long as Sherlock's alright.

If Sherlock was alright, the rest would be too.

They drove to the hospital in continuing silence. Mycroft sat still and stiff-backed beside Greg, turning greyer and greyer with every set of traffic lights. As they finally neared St Mary's, Mycroft gave an uneasy shift at last - raising a hand to try nervously flattening the curl of his hair in the rear view mirror. His fingers shook as he did.

Greg's heart thudded with distress.

God. What the hell must this be doing to you? - wrenched from one of the most vulnerable moments of his life, to find out that his brother was in bits in a hospital bed. Now he was surrounded by MI5 colleagues, all of them trying not to stare at his long weekend curls. Mycroft looked like he'd spent three days having luxurious, playful sex in a hotel. He hadn't - but how the hell could he ever tell them that?

Greg was realising with every passing minute that fear, fragility and guilt were building to a lethal level of distress in Mycroft - and there wasn't a thing he could do about it. He only hoped that seeing Sherlock helped.

At the hospital they were directed to the major trauma ward - Queen Elizabeth building. Greg's heart beat even harder. At least it's not the bloody morgue. They took the lift together, still in
silence - and as they ascended towards the ninth floor, their faces pale beneath the strip-light overhead, Greg realised this was his last chance to offer comfort. It was now or never.

He didn't speak - he knew Mycroft wouldn't cope with that.

Instead, without a word, he slipped his hand into Mycroft's gloved palm. He gently gripped.

Mycroft didn't move. He faced the closed steel doors as the lift panel rolled from floor-to-floor, nothing showing in his face - fear, guilt, distress - nothing. The numbness was somehow worse than if he were crying. His fingers twitched in Greg's.

As the lift came to a halt, and the doors began to open, Mycroft drew his hand away. He stepped out without a backwards glance.

Greg followed, his throat tight. He had an awful feeling the worst of the night was yet to come.

At the desk, they were informed with a little frown that it was hardly visiting hours.

Greg pulled his Scotland Yard ID from inside his coat.

"We're here for Sherlock Holmes," he said, presenting it without a smile. "Brought in two hours ago after a serious assault. Which room?"

The nurse flushed, embarrassed. "S-Sorry, inspector - I didn't realise. Down there, on the left - number fourteen. He - might be asleep."

As they moved along the darkened corridor at speed, Mycroft finally spoke. His voice didn't sound like him.

"Thank you."

"We'll be alright," Greg said. "Promise."

Shaking, Mycroft reached for the door.

The room beyond was quiet, and full of shadow. A clock ticked somewhere in the silence. Its steady sound underlaid the beeping of a heart monitor, while an angle lamp by the bed provided the only light. It illuminated a figure at Sherlock's bedside - head held in his hands, shoulders fallen, hair a mess.

As they entered the room, John looked up in exhaustion.

Greg's heart tugged. The poor guy was knackered. He looked as if he'd not slept for weeks, and Greg wished at once that he'd called. He hadn't thought - too busy rushing to get to the helicopter, and three hours had passed in a flash.

Seeing them arriving together, John's face crumpled in confusion.

"Greg?" His eyes found Mycroft's dishevelled curls - they widened in surprise. "Mycroft..."

Mycroft crossed to Sherlock's bedside at once. "How is he, Dr Watson?"

John glanced down into the bed, uneasy.

"He's... stable. Been asleep since they brought him in. It's what he needs right now... rest, I mean. Sleep off the shock..." John hesitated. "How - did you both - "
"What happened?" Mycroft asked, wearily taking a chair.

As John explained, Greg moved to Mycroft's side and gazed down into the bed.

"We were out of tea, would you believe?" John rubbed at the side of his neck, his voice small. "He offered to go get some... thought it was nice of him, so I... I didn't think..."

Sherlock was a mess. The lavender sheets made the bruising seem so much worse against his snowy-white skin; he looked oddly young. Greg tried not to look at his curls - but then, looking at his injuries was worse.

He'd been punched - repeatedly. Eyes, nose and mouth.

This wasn't an attack.

It was a battering. It was brute, remorseless anger.

"Then I realised he'd been gone a while," John mumbled, exhausted. "He wasn't answering his bloody phone, so I went out to look for him..."

Greg took a breath.

"Thank Christ you did," he said. Mycroft had lapsed into silence once more, staring down at his brother without a sound. Greg wanted to lay a hand on his back more than anything in the world. "Where'd you find him?"

John fidgeted with his sleeve.

"Slumped against a phone box on Baker Street," he said, his eyes fogged. "Covered in blood. Trying to stand up. He said he'd been dragged into a stairwell by two blokes, and Pritchard was there... he passed out before he could tell me any more. Everything's - been a blur since, if I'm honest."

He bit the side of his mouth, glancing down at the floor.

"Shouldn't have let him go on his own," he muttered. "Should've... got my coat. Gone with him. All for a bloody box of tea..."

Greg's heart squeezed.

"Mate..." he said. "You couldn't've known. Busy road like Baker Street? This isn't your fault."

John quietly cleared his throat. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm... trying to tell myself that." He took in a breath. "Shock. That's all. I'll be fine once he wakes up."

A half-smile crossed his face - a tired flash of bravery in his eyes.

"Always worries me when he's quiet," he muttered.

Greg returned the quiet smile. "By any miracle," he said, suspecting the answer already, "has somebody gotten hold of Pritchard?"

John gave a short sigh.

"No," he said. "He was long gone even when I got there. Scotland Yard've got people out searching, but... well..."
Thought it was a lot to hope for. Greg reached into his back pocket, fishing out a ten pound note.

"Here," he said, handing it over. "You're shattered. Go get a coffee... stretch your legs a while. We'll watch him."

John's face flooded with relief. "Are you sure?"

"Course. You look like you need it." Greg patted him quietly on the back as he passed. "He'll be fine, John. Seen him through worse than this. We'll manage between the three of us... always do."

John smiled, appreciation quietening his gaze.

"Thanks, Greg... I - won't be long."

"Take as long as you need," Greg said. "Cavalry's here."

John let himself out of the room.

Greg waited until the door had closed.

He then approached the chair in silence. He placed his hands on Mycroft's shoulders, and held them there in the darkness.

Mycroft didn't speak. He didn't move.

Greg squeezed, very gently.

"You know this isn't your fault, either... don't you?"

Mycroft was silent for some time. When he spoke, his voice was weak.

"Please do not patronise me in this moment." Greg heard him swallow. "That is the very last thing I need."

Greg took the blow, unharmed. He kept his hands right where they were, and kept his voice soft. "Not patronising you," he murmured. "I just want it to be said. You couldn't've known, love... you couldn't've stopped this."

A shudder passed through Mycroft's shoulders.

"I - h-hardly - ..." He breathed in, sharp. "You're wrong. This was entirely preventable. I let this happen."

"You told Sherlock to go out alone, did you? When he knew Pritchard was after him?"

"I should have done as Nicholas asked," Mycroft breathed. "I should not have - ..." He tightened into sudden silence, then dropped his face into his hands. He dragged his fingers backwards through his hair. "Oh... oh, God... oh, God, what have I done?"

Greg rubbed his back in long, settling sweeps.

"Hey," he murmured. He leant down, pressing a quiet kiss into Mycroft's hair. "Easy... Nick Pritchard caused this. Not you. It's not your fault Pritchard's violent. Not your fault Sherlock takes stupid risks and thinks he's immortal. Not your fault this happened... alright?"

Mycroft shook beneath his hands. Greg could feel him breaking apart.
"I could have prevented it," Mycroft whispered into his palms. He shivered, stiffening. "All of it. Just - kept the wretched man's perversions quiet, just - ... why, why did I have to - "

*Perversions.* Greg's stomach clenched. He kept it from his voice. "You did the right thing, beautiful."

Mycroft tensed.

"Do not call me that here," he breathed. "My little brother is lying before us, beaten to a - ..." He clamped into silence again, fighting with his own throat. He shuddered as Greg stroked him. "The right thing would not have led to this," he whispered. "This is incontestable proof that it was not the right thing."

Greg carried on rubbing in slow, easy circles. "Sherlock wanted the papers to hear. He made the choices he made, Myke. This has come out of his decision."

"Because he doesn't appreciate *consequences,*" Mycroft bit out. "I'm supposed to *know* that. I'm supposed to shield him from himself. I'm supposed to prevent this sort of thing happening. I'm the older one, I'm the responsible one, and he is *reckless,* and he doesn't think - and I'm the one supposed to stop this. *I'm the one supposed to think.*"

*Christ alive, your parents.* Greg braced himself.

"Blame me, then," he said. "Where's my share in this? You'd decided to over-rule Sherlock. You'd decided to hush it all up. You only let The Guardian run with it because - "

"I'm trying not to recall that," Mycroft said. His voice tightened. "Trying rather hard."

Greg continued to stroke. "Rather you blame me than blame yourself."

Mycroft pushed his hands across his face, weary.

"I could have ignored you," he muttered. "I chose not to. I - made that choice. And now Sherlock is - ..."

"Have we established this is a messy situation yet?"

Mycroft drew a long, low breath. "You - don't understand politics. You don't understand N-... *Pritchard.* I let you influence me, and I let my heart intervene in the business of my head, and now my brother has paid the price for it. I fail to see the complexity."

"He's paid the price of *goading Pritchard,*" Greg said, quietly. "And Pritchard's paid the price of hypocrisy. He'll pay the price for attacking Sherlock. And we'll get this sorted out."

Mycroft said nothing. He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, rubbing hard.

Greg could almost hear the rush of thoughts, sweeping him away. He began to rub Mycroft's back once more - easy, calming strokes.

"I'll get you a copy of the tape, love," he promised.

Mycroft muttered into his cuffs. "'The tape'?"

"Pritchard's interview." Greg worked carefully into the knot between Mycroft's shoulders. "When they throw the tosser into a cell, and I get twenty minutes alone with him."
Every muscle in Mycroft's back turned to granite.

"No," he said at once. "No, that - would not be wise. You must leave this to someone else. Some other officer."

Greg frowned, gently. "Why?"

"I - don't wish for Pritchard to sense any - connection that you and I - ..."

Greg snorted.

"He can sense what he wants," he muttered. "Then he can explain to me what possible hold he thinks he's got over you, beautiful. God knows I'm missing something."

Mycroft was silent for some time.

"Greg," he said, at last. His voice had changed. It was tighter, nervous - oddly small. "This... this isn't easy for me to - "

He was interrupted by a deep, dragging breath. Mycroft raised his head from his hands at once. He sat up, pushing Greg's hands nervously away from him, and leaned forwards in desperation. "Sherlock?"

Greg watched, his heart pounding, as Sherlock shifted beneath the sheets. "Christ... he's waking up..."

Mycroft scraped his chair closer. "Sherlock - "

As they watched, Sherlock swallowed. His face tightened beneath his injuries, and he began to cough around his bruised ribs. Mycroft's hands tensed in response against the bedside, distressed. Greg put a hand on his shoulder.

At last, with a weary flutter, Sherlock opened his eyes.

He regarded them with heavy-lidded vagueness for several moments, as if uncertain he was really seeing them. He studied Greg first, bewildered - then, with a slow blink, he turned his eyes to Mycroft. His eyes flickered from the dishevelled suit to the cuffs without cufflinks, the haphazard knot of his tie, and the scruffy auburn curls.

A sly smile formed beneath the bruising.

As Greg watched it appear, his heart tensed.

Of all the reactions he'd expected, that was not one of them.

Sherlock drew an idle breath. "Oh, Mycroft..." he murmured.

Greg glanced at Mycroft with unease - just in time to see his expression shutter.

Mycroft's fingers curled into his palms. "How are you, Sherlock?" he asked.

Sherlock gave a low, rather throaty chuckle. It looked as if it hurt.

"Good of you - " he rasped, and then coughed again, shuddering. He breathed his way through the pain. " - to c-come and apologise in person... moving. It really is."
Greg felt the temperature in the room drop by several degrees.

"Apologise?" Mycroft said, his voice stiff.

"Mm," Sherlock murmured. "I'm listening. In your own time, though."

Mycroft took a second to respond. "Apologise for - what, precisely?"

"Your hypocrisy... brother mine..." Sherlock's eyes wandered with unconcealed glee over Mycroft's curls. "Spectacular hypocrisy, at that..."

Jesus, this isn't good. Greg had the feeling he should intervene sooner, rather than later - but he didn't know how soon would make things worse.

Mycroft's reply was guarded, his voice tense.

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about. I'm here because you're injured, Sherlock. Because your reckless decisions have - "

Greg folded his arms, looking down. He took a breath. "Myke."

Mycroft turned. "Kindly do not call me that," he snapped. "My name is 'Mycroft', inspector. I'll ask you to use both halves."

Christ.

"Your brother's had a rough night," Greg said, breathing in. "Let's go easy on him."

Sherlock gave an exhausted chuckle.

"Please, Lestrade," he mumbled. "Don't intervene. This is just too good. Let him dig the hole deeper first. I could do with a laugh..."

"I am not digging any hole," Mycroft retorted, bristling, "and I'm not entirely certain what you're trying to imply, Sherlock."

Sherlock sighed; he gave a pained, quiet stretch.

"I'm not 'trying to imply' anything, Mycroft... I'm stating, beyond all doubt, that you've spent a significant part of the last three days in a hotel somewhere - on the receiving end of our good friend Inspector Lestrade."

Jesus Christ. Greg kept his face firmly in neutral, glancing at Mycroft for reaction.

Mycroft had gone drip-white.

"I'll further deduce that Inspector Lestrade is a man," Sherlock added. "And, by biological technicality, so are you. Forgive me for having to spell this out, dear brother, but your dirty weekend together would therefore fall under the classification of homosexual activity - 'homo' from the Greek 'homos', meaning same - and 'sexual', meaning sexual - the specific form of exercise that has now left you looking like a dowager duchess's prize poodle - all of which combines to draw me to the conclusion that you are as gay as you were twenty-eight years ago, Mycroft, and a hypocrite to condemn my investigation against your terribly good friend Mr Pritchard - and I await your vastly overdue apology to me with bated breath."

There was a long, awful silence.
Mycroft moved.

Greg got there first. He put both hands on Mycroft's shoulders, forced him back into the chair, and said, "You're better than that. You'd regret it."

Mycroft shuddered. He hauled himself under control, breathing hard, and twisted away from Greg's hands.

"You are mistaken, Sherlock." His voice shook. "I am not gay. I haven't the slightest sexual interest in Lestrade, and I do not care for the accusation that I do. I have nothing to apologise for. The fact I hadn't time to dress properly or tend to my hair before rushing to see that you were - "

Sherlock laughed - a pained croak that spread into a grin. "Mycrof... Mycrof, stop... you're killing me..."

Mycroft jerked.

Greg pressed down on his shoulders again, keeping him exactly where he was.

"Right," he said, his voice hard. "Both of you. Enough. Sherlock, give your bloody brother a break. Myke, you're stressed. Let's take this down a notch."

"Do not call me that!" Mycroft said, and lashed his hands away. "For heaven's sake, inspector - it is Mycrof! How many times must I - "

This was getting out of hand. Greg took a breath, bracing himself.

"Look," he said, his heart tightening. Here goes nothing. "Look, he's... your brother. Does it matter if - "

"And he's nowhere near as bloody clever as he thinks he is!" Mycroft raged, his pupils shrinking to pinpricks as he turned on Greg in a panic. "Otherwise he would realise that he's talking utter rot, Lestrade, wouldn't he? And if you could refrain from taking that chummy tone with me, I'd much appreciate it!"

Bloody hell. Greg stared into Mycroft's face, lost, trying to find some response to give those furious eyes, as he felt his heart thudding in his chest. Words wouldn't come. We should be asleep right now, he thought. Curled up in bed - his Myke, soft in his arms - safe and sound in the forest.

"You're hurting him," Sherlock said - and as Greg glanced numbly from one Holmes to the other, he found Sherlock watching him from the pillows.

He realised with an uneasy lurch that Sherlock was still addressing Mycroft.

"You're prepared to deny him to the bitter end," Sherlock murmured, astounded. "To guard your shame... just like Pritchard. Congratulations, Mycroft. You've reached levels of sanctimony that I didn't know existed."

Greg's heart heaved itself into his throat. He swallowed it and intervened before this could possibly get any worse.

"Enough, Sherlock," he intoned. "You're done now."

"On the contrary, Lestrade, I'm afraid I've barely - "

"I said enough, Sherlock!" Greg barked, drowning him out. "Your brother's telling you he's not
gay, and that's the end of it. Alright? Nothing's going on. I don't know what you think you've seen, but you're barking up the wrong tree."

Sherlock's eyes rolled to the ceiling.

"Give me strength," he muttered, laying a hand across his brow. "Can we please drop this tiresome charade? I have in fact had rather a long night. Let's just get this over with. I'm ready to hear your apology, Mycroft. Begin whenever you wish."

Mycroft jerked suddenly to his feet. The chair clattered aside.

"For what possible reason," he seethed, white-pale, "do I owe some grovelling apology to you?"

Greg glanced at the door. "Myke - easy. It's three AM."

Mycroft didn't hear him. He didn't seem to see or hear anything but Sherlock, smiling bright-eyed from the bed at him as Mycroft shook from head to foot.

"Some bastion of ethics now, are you?" Mycroft raged. "A paladin of truth and righteousness? Thirty-nine years of age, and suddenly you're a champion of LGBT rights. Transparent, Sherlock. All of it. It's so that you can hound me. So you can have your fun at my expense. So you can march into whatever corner of my private life you bloody please, cause me all the trouble you like, and start demanding I air my soul for the masses to mock and jeer at along with you. A moral crusade, is it? Or are you still just a bloody seven-year-old, sticking your tongue out at me?"

Sherlock continued to smile, delighted, saying nothing.

Greg put a hand on Mycroft's arm, unsurprised to find him shuddering.

"Public," he muttered. "Nurses. Other patients. Three AM. Come with me, right now. You need air."

Mycroft wrenched his arm away. "I do not need air," he bit out, his eyes still fixed on Sherlock. "I need - him - to stop - ... to stop this - attempt to humiliate me for - ... this ridiculous notion that - you and I have any sort of - ..."

Sherlock's eyes suddenly gleamed.

"Say it," he breathed. "Do it, Mycroft. Deny him to protect your precious privacy - or admit that I'm right."

Mycroft shuddered the entire length of his spine, his fists clenching. "I am not in love with Lestrade," he bit through his teeth.

Sherlock's laugh twisted Greg's heart to half its size.

"I never suggested love, Mycroft!" he crowed. "I suggested the two of you were fucking!"

That word, ugly in Sherlock's mouth, was the final blow. Greg saw Mycroft convulse with it. Revulsion roiling across his face as three days of patient love and courage vaporized in a heartbeat. Greg's heart dropped nine floors.

Mycroft grabbed for the door.

Greg lunged, blocking him with an arm.
"Hey - " He lowered his voice. "Hey, hey - look at me."

Mycroft did not look at him. His shoulders had set like rock. He looked as if he were about to vomit.

"Wait outside for me," Greg said quietly, his heart pounding. "Give me a minute with him. Then we'll get a taxi and get out of here. Alright?"

Mycroft shuddered, his eyes flashing with panic.

"To where, inspector?" he muttered, as Sherlock watched every word from the bed. "We live in separate areas of London."

Greg said nothing, waiting calmly for his eyes. Mycroft's gaze flickered into his and then away, his mouth now locked shut. He looked like a snared animal, waiting for hands to close around his neck.

"I'm told that guilt is hard to deal with, brother mine," Sherlock said from his sickbed, cold, "so I'll permit you twenty-four hours to cry all over Lestrade, contemplate your holier-than-thou attitude towards me, and then get back here with an apology. Verbal will do - but a signed letter for the wall would be marvellous as well."

Greg's hand tensed on the door, his jaw setting. He took a second to remind himself that he liked Sherlock.

"Your brother's got nothing to apologise for," he said, flatly. "And you're dropping this. Now. Before the pair of you damage your relationship beyond repair. Right?"

"The pair of - ?" Mycroft's face opened. "What have I contributed to - "

Sherlock groaned, throwing his back into the pillows with a thump.

"For god's sake, Mycroft, what haven't you contributed?" he despaired. "Your ex-boyfriend has just battered me like some disgruntled drug dealer. Your current boyfriend is now standing here, lying to me - with creases in his shirt that would probably fall foul of most country's obscenity l-

Greg's heart slugged to a stop.

"Whoa - whoa, whoa - "

He'd misheard. He must have.

"Pritchard battered you," he said, staring at Sherlock. "Nick Pritchard. Your gay rights arsehole."

Sherlock looked back at him, suddenly silent - working something out.

Mycroft lunged for the door.

Greg wasn't fast enough. He didn't reach the handle in time. Before he knew it, Mycroft's coat vanished through the door and it gave an echoing slam.

Greg turned in horror to the bed.

"Andrew," he said, his stomach gripping. "He - was called Andrew. Cambridge." Shit. Shit, I'm saying too much. Why can't I fucking stop? "The - the tosser when Myke was - ..."
Sherlock snorted.

"Oh dear," he muttered. "The plot thickens. He was called Nicholas Pritchard when Mycroft was fucking him at Cambridge. He remains Nicholas Pritchard, now - though you're correct on one count, Lestrade. He is a tosser."

Greg knew he'd regret it - but it left him before he could stop it.

"So are you, mate."

Sherlock's face slackened.

Greg reached for the door, wrenching it open and left.

There was no sign of Myke along the corridor. Greg broke into a run, racing the way they'd come, with his heart pounding in his throat. As he flew past her desk, the nurse on duty called out in alarm and dismay. Greg ignored her and ran.

Just before he reached the ward doors, they opened.

John appeared. He was holding a cardboard tray with three coffees, a pack of sandwiches, and a get well soon card.

"Oh!" he said, seeing Greg sprinting towards him. "Are you both - ?"

Greg lurched to a halt.

"Mycroft," he gasped. "Mycroft. Where is he? Where the hell's he gone?"

John glanced back through the doors in alarm. "Mycroft? He - just got into the lift... is Sherlock alright? Has something happened?"

"He's fine," Greg bit out. Christ almighty. "He's bloody fine..."

He hurried past John, and burst through the doors with a wild squeak of hinges. The nurse's final pleading cry was lost in the slam behind him.

He reached the lift to find the doors shut and the buttons flashing. Greg jammed them all in a panic - then realised Myke would be long gone before the bloody thing even got back up here. He wheeled around, and spotted a door leading to stairs.

They were on the ninth floor.

Greg swore under his breath as he sprinted down the stairwell, fighting to get his phone from his pocket. He flashed open quick contacts and hit the top entry without needing to look, clamping it to his ear as he whirled around another corner. He raced down four more flights before the call ended unanswered. He rang again, panting. He clattered through double doors at the bottom to find himself in another corridor, facing a wall of blue-and-white arrow signs. He scanned the list at speed, frantic. Exit. Left. He took off again at a run.

As he burst into the hospital's main reception, the few people around looked over in alarm. Greg barely saw them. He scanned the space for Mycroft, his pulse hammering, but couldn't see him.

Then he spotted, past the welcome desk and through the glass front doors, a waiting black Audi on the pavement.
The car was here. He was still here. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.* Greg sprinted for the doors, hurled himself through them and took the steps to the curb three at a time, expecting to hear the roar of the engine and the screech of brakes at any second. *Don't you go. Don't you dare turn tail on me. Not now. Not after all this.*

He staggered in front of the car, panting, and threw both hands down on the bonnet.

"Wait!" he gasped.

*Bloody hell, I'm too old for this. I was too old for this five years ago.*

"Wait," he heaved, staring into the tinted front windshield. He couldn't see a thing inside the car - but he knew Myke could see him, and hear him. "Okay? Just wait..."

The car did not respond.

Greg dragged air into his straining lungs, shutting his eyes in relief.

"I'm not angry," he gasped. His head hung as he steadied himself on the bonnet. "I'm not upset. I don't care. I get why you lied. About me. About Pritchard. I get that you're scared. I know it feels like it's all gone fucking wrong. But don't you dare try to run from me, Mycroft Holmes."

The car retained its silence, unmoved. Greg gazed into the windshield, his shoulders aching as he breathed.

"This is more than that," he told the black glass. His eyes burned. "And you *know* it is. And I will bloody run after you. So help me Christ, I will run a thousand fucking miles before I let you go. Now get out of the car, and come and talk to me."

There was a long, desperate pause.

And then the passenger side door cracked open.

Greg watched, his heart pounding, as a graceful head ducked beneath the roof and stepped out.

Mycroft's assistant stood to her full height. She faced Greg over the open door, phone in hand. "Where is Mr Holmes?" she said.

Greg's heart thudded. "He's - in there. With you."

"He is not." Concern stirred beneath her icy features. "Where did you last see him?"

"In the - ... leaving his - brother's - ..." *Christ, but if he's not... then where...?" He took off. He came here - to the car - so you can get him out of here. Where *is* he?"

Mycroft's assistant unlocked her phone without a word, flicked through several screens and then held it to her ear.

Greg watched her, his chest rising and falling fast as she waited.

After several seconds her face closed off. She hung up as Greg's heart dropped to the pit of his stomach.

"Did he answer?"

Her expression was response enough. "Please call him immediately, inspector. We need to
ascertain his location."

"I've tried," Greg said, panting. "He's not answering me either. He's - ... his brother was - goading him and he just - " He took a sharp breath. "You're MI5. Get him - tracked or something. I don't know. You must know where he is. Where else would he have gone, if he's not -"

Anthea's eyes flew wide, affronted. She gestured angrily into the empty backseat of the car.

"Be my guest!" she said. "If you wish to mount a more thorough search than I have - though I very much doubt he'd fit in the footwell."

Jesus bloody actual hell. "This is bad," Greg said, his chest clenching around his heart. "You don't understand. Pritchard's not been found. He's still out there."

Anthea steeled herself with a breath.

"For heaven's sake," she muttered, slashing through her phone. "You inform me of this as if it is news..."

She tapped the screen and held it to her ear. The call was answered within moments.

"We have a minor situation," she told the phone, as she dipped back into the car. "Regent is out of location. Get the S24 systems online." She called through the open door. "Move away from the car, please, inspector. I will deal with this."

"You're - you're just gonna leave me to - ..." Greg swallowed. "Fine. What should I do?"

"I suggest you go home," she called, "and carry on as normal. This is now out of your hands."

The door slammed.

Numb, Greg staggered out of the way.

The engine started, and the car pulled away.

As Greg watched it drive off into the darkness, his heart strained against his ribs, telling him that was Mycroft's car - and Mycroft must be in it, and he was letting him drive away. He needed Greg, and Greg was letting him go.

Shit. Shit, shit... how could this possibly get any worse?

Greg fumbled for his phone. He pulled up his contacts again, found the name that now made his breath stop, and pressed it to his ear. The phone rang, dull and unanswered, as his pulse thundered in his throat.

What now?

What the hell now?

He couldn't just stand here on the hospital steps all night.

But if Mycroft wasn't answering his phone, it meant he didn't want to be found - and that meant Greg could trail the streets until sunset, and see no sign of him. Anthea and MI5 would find Mycroft long before he did.

Myke had gone home, maybe. Got a taxi. Wanted quiet - familiarity - somewhere to hide. Not
wanted Anthea to see him in an even worse state than he'd arrived - weekend clothes, weekend hair, and now broken into bits by - ...

*God almighty, Sherlock... pull your fucking punches...*

And Pritchard.

*Fucking Pritchard.*

Two monsters in Greg's mind had blurred suddenly into one. The Cambridge university arsehole who'd used Mycroft as sex relief, smashed his confidence so small that it was twenty eight years before he could trust someone to touch him again - and now, three decades later, a millionaire businessman hiding himself behind anti-gay right-wing hot air. *Why didn't I see it? How could I be so bloody blind?* No wonder the wanker had a hold on Mycroft. No wonder he left Mycroft scared.

And Sherlock had *known* - gone after Pritchard all the same - kicked the hornet's nest, then kept right on kicking it.

And now he wanted Myke to confess and apologise.

Greg was tempted to head back upstairs, and call him a tosser again. He didn't deserve to be battered to a pulp, but holy fucking hell. Couldn't he see the position he'd put Myke in? If this was just some hypocritical tory wanker, wanting Mycroft to cover up his cheeky indulgence in rent boys... that was *one* thing. Demanding Mycroft's political protection from his own abusive ex was another.

Greg pushed his hands over his face, breathing into them for a few moments of silence.

Anthea would get people out looking for Mycroft. She'd track him down. Short of finding himself a torch and wandering nearby streets, calling for Myke like a lost cat, there wasn't much Greg could contribute to the search.

But there was another search he could lead.

This was all Pritchard - all of it. Sherlock was careering through the chaos like a loose cannon, making the whole thing worse, but it was Pritchard at the heart of it. While he was at large, he held all the power - even in disgrace. It was brute, physical power, and while it was crude and bull-headed, it still trumped all the other kinds. Intelligence, politics, reputation: they didn't matter. *'You've humiliated me, so I'm gonna batter you.'* Men like that spoke violence as their mother tongue, and Greg had spent his life dealing with them. He'd put thousands of them away. Violence was the only language they really understood - the rest was just posturing.

The thought of walking into a hospital room - seeing Mycroft lying in the bed like that - injured like that - battered like that...

Horror rippled through Greg in cold, sickening waves.


He couldn't help MI5 find Myke - but he could help Scotland Yard find Pritchard. He would get home, get a few hours' sleep and a shower, and get to work. Myke might even be answering calls by then - calm by then - home safe by then.

"Jesus, what a mess..." Greg muttered, scrolling through his phone contacts for a taxi company.
When it was on the way, he opened up his texts.

The last one was still sitting there from Friday morning - nearly three days ago now.

*I'm in the taxi now... should be with you by nine. Greatly looking forward to it. M xxx*
Received 08:41

As he read it, Greg's heart rolled in his chest.

How could things have changed so much in three days? And then changed again in three hours?

He typed with care, his fingers shaking.

*Hey... answer your phone for me please? We're all worried... please let me know you're somewhere safe and you're alright*
*Sent 03:46*

He hesitated, gazing at the empty space beneath. Into it, he added another message.

*I love you sweetheart*
*Sent 03:46*

As he finally climbed into bed, dead with exhaustion and hardly aware of the flat around him, Greg took one last check of his phone.

The message window had updated.

*Seen 04:09 ✓✓

Greg gazed at the single line of text, his breath tight in the darkness.

He wondered why it made him feel afraid.
Cruelty is the highest pleasure to the cruel man; it is his love.
- Walter Savage Landor

And it had been such an ordinary Monday until that point - his Whitehall office, the morning light, the analysis he'd been completing for the treasury. Anthea had brought him his usual coffee at eleven. She told him that Hanbridge was running late for their one o'clock, and that the arrangements for the September summit in Berlin were now all made.

It had reminded Mycroft, with a rather soft flush of the heart, to send a text to Greg. He was curious to see how this 'birthday weekend' plan of his was developing. He hadn't been entirely able to shake the feeling that such a thing was ludicrous - but it was a wonderful sort of ludicrous, all the same.

Greg was... kind, to insist. To care quite so determinedly.

It was rather stirring - and four days of his company would never be an unwelcome prospect.

They'd had tapas together on Friday. Tapas, for God's sake - baffling and magnificent, Soho's wild lights shining in those dark and playful eyes. Talking, relaxing. Sharing a platter of miniature desserts. Greg grinning at him across the table. Lord help me. To the world, just good friends - but how Greg made him laugh, and the way he looked at Mycroft in the candlelight. In the taxi to Greg's flat, basking in the glow of perhaps one too many glasses of gin, Mycroft had longed to reach across the seat to him in the dark - slide his fingers quietly through Greg's, and touch his hand - even here - even in public - their perfect, wonderful secret, just one moment of indulgence together.

In the end, nerves had stayed his hand. The quiet lock of Greg's front door had then ribboned them in privacy; they'd laid kissing on his couch past midnight.

And now they were going away for the weekend.

It took most of Mycroft's self-control to maintain a neutral expression, as he reached into his drawer for his personal phone.

" - rescheduled to Tuesday, sir, if that suits. The rest of your Monday appointments I should be capable of handling myself."

Mycroft sipped at his coffee, unlocking his phone with an idle press of his thumb.

"Excellent," he murmured. "Thank you, Anthea. I do appreciate your help with these rearrangements."

"Not a problem, sir," she said. "Rather kind of your aunt to mark your birthday."
Mycroft put down his coffee with a faint smile.

"I wouldn't usually take off for the weekend on such short notice... but her advancing age does worry me. Why she continues to live so remotely, I just don't understand. She tells me solitude is good for the soul."

"So I hear, sir. Are you certain I can't assist with travel arrangements?"

As he opened up his messages, selected Greg's name and scrolled with absent-minded joy through their soft goodnights of the previous evening, Mycroft resisted a smile.

"No need to trouble yourself," he said. "Rather thrilling to book my own train tickets for once."

"And - packing, sir?"

Mycroft gave her a bemused glance. "I've already located the various hideous jumpers she's so kindly provided me over the years. Believe me that I wish no human eyes to fall upon them but my own."

She chuckled, quietly. "Yes, Mr Holmes. Very good."

Mycroft scrolled back to the bottom of his messages, reaching for his coffee as he let his mind toy with ideas for an introductory witticism. Anthea turned to leave.

She was interrupted by sudden shouting from the corridor outside - and then a bang, as of a door suddenly thrown open. Rapid, heavy footsteps came this way.

Mycroft's every muscle stiffened. He put down his coffee at once.

"Behind my desk," he said. His assistant obeyed without a word. He depressed a concealed panic button with his left hand, and with his right reached for the umbrella propped against his chair. It was in his grip as the door crashed open. Anthea flinched wildly.

It was a mark of his career that Mycroft's eyes ascertained no evidence of a firearm before he'd even recognised the intruder.

As he did, his heart gave an ungainly and unhappy lurch in his chest.

He steadied his assistant with a quiet hand - the lightest touch of her elbow - drew a breath, and said,

"This is irregular."

Nicholas looked as if he were ready to choke the life out of something. Rage wracked every inch of his expression; his fists were clenched. Each breath dragged its way from his throat as he faced Mycroft across his desk.

"Did you tell him to do it?" he breathed.

Mycroft kept his face impassive. "I don't understand what you're asking."

"Did you tell," Nicholas raged, "your fucking brother - to stick his fucking nose - "

Anthea jerked at the obscenity. Mycroft steeled his nerves, suspecting this was the start of something he would later dearly wish had never happened.
As security officers careered into the corridor outside, he raised his voice.

"This is not an emergency situation," he called. "Mr Pritchard is not a threat. Do not fire."

Anthea was still frozen into place behind him, unbreathing.

Mycroft inclined his head to her.

"Please leave us to talk," he murmured. "Explain to security that there has been a false alarm, and we are fine. I will handle this."

She glanced into his eyes.

It was the first time in six years she'd ever questioned him.

Mycroft held her gaze, calm, and willed her to do as he asked.

Shaking slightly, she stepped away.

In the doorway, just before she left, he saw her glance back towards him again - another frightened flash of her eyes - but she said nothing.

The door closed, and the two of them were left alone.

Mycroft steadied himself with a breath.

"I haven't spoken to my brother in some weeks," he said. "I'm afraid you'll have to explain."

Nicholas's eyes burned into him from across the room. He shook with every word; the muscles stood out in his neck like ropes.

"Fucking - charity," he spat. "Fucking do-gooders. Some... 'gay rights' horse shit. Digging around in things that don't concern them. And now I've got the fucking newspapers ringing me - asking if I want to fucking 'comment on the accusations'. You're going to sort this out. You're going to sort it out now."

"What accusations?" Mycroft asked, calm even as his skin grew cold, "and what is this to do with my brother?"

"He's been working for them. Investigating me. My - private life. About to 'expose me'. Some big scoop. Claiming I'm some kind of bloody pervert! Not as long as I live! Not as long as I fucking live - d'you understand me?"

Oh - no... for the love of everything good, no...

"Sherlock has been investigating you on behalf of a charity?" Mycroft clarified, his heart beating hard.

"Following me!" Nicholas roared. "Going through my fucking bins! Talking to my staff!"

"And the charity have approached the newspapers with allegations?"

" - not going to fucking stand for this - d'you hear me? - not for a single fucking minute - "

"What allegations have been made?" Mycroft demanded, willing himself patience.
The stream of profanity cut. Nicholas's face worked around the answer.

"Escorts," he spat at last.

Mycroft's stomach turned to lead.

He looked into the eyes of the man who'd taken his virginity - held him to a dorm room bed one Saturday evening, twenty-eight-years ago, told him to breathe and it would stop hurting. It hadn't. Afterwards, he'd told Mycroft he should have drunk more and tried to relax. He told him it would be easier next time.

It hadn't been.

"A gay rights charity?" Mycroft checked, numb.

Nicholas's eyes hardened. He said nothing whatsoever.

God almighty. Of course the allegations were true. Sherlock would have taken it upon himself to supply his clients with nothing but the brutal, unedited facts, and in copious supply, and from the expression Mycroft was now receiving across his desk, these facts were lurid in the extreme.

Finding his knees suddenly weak, Mycroft reached without emotion for his chair. He sat down, moved his personal phone to his desk drawer, and tried to think.

"And the media have been informed?" he said. "All major outlets?"

"Think they're gonna hang me out to dry," Nicholas grunted. His eyes blazed. "Think I'm gonna be the scoop of the summer. I don't think so."

Mycroft breathed. Of all the people, he thought. He couldn't slow his pulse enough to process it. Of all the people in this world for Sherlock to have chosen to antagonise.

And worse, Sherlock could claim no defence of ignorance.

He would not have forgotten Nicholas's name. The Christmas when he was seventeen, in a particularly spiteful mood, he'd taken it upon himself to search through Mycroft's possessions in the attic, allegedly in search of a book that had taken from his bedroom. Mycroft hadn't even entered Sherlock's bloody bedroom - it was nonsense - and he'd since become convinced that the issue of the book was an outright fabrication. Sherlock had just wanted an excuse to conduct a search.

And amongst Mycroft's university notes, he'd found letters - Mycroft had only kept the wretched things to ensure they never fell into the wrong hands. The ensuing scene out between them had been ugly. Mycroft had returned to London in a rage that very evening, telling their parents he'd been recalled to work on urgent business.

He hadn't spoken to Sherlock for nearly nine years. Not until their grandmother's funeral. An awkward encounter at the wake - a feeling that Mamé would not have wanted this between them - a stiff-shouldered handshake, offered and accepted.

And now this.

Of all the people.

Mycroft thought for a moment to ask what specific indiscretions Sherlock had uncovered - then
told himself, coldly, that he knew enough of Nicholas's inclinations to surmise.

He dragged his thoughts together, wearily, and said,

"I had no knowledge of this. It's regrettable that Sherlock has chosen to involve himself. I am sorry."

Something strange stirred beneath Nicholas's face. Mycroft found himself on the receiving end of a look that made him feel at once half his age.

"Regrettable?" Nicholas snarled.

Mycroft hesitated, saying nothing.

Nicholas huffed. "You think I'm here for sympathy?" he barked. "I'm here for you to fix it."

Mycroft regarded him with concern, feeling the muscles in his shoulders harden.

"I fail to see how I can intervene." Or, for that matter, why. "If I'd been made aware of Sherlock's investigation at an earlier stage, I could perhaps have reasoned with - "

Nicholas made an ugly noise, pushing his tongue into his cheek. He looked down.

"You think I don't know," he growled. Mycroft stuttered into silence. "You've got holds over them," Nicholas said. "All of them. Newspaper editors, owing you favours. I know how politics works. I know how Whitehall works."

Mycroft kept his face under control. "I'm afraid you've misunderstood the scope of my profession."

Nicholas's jaw worked.

"Don't fucking lie to me, Mycroft. You're not that smart."

Mycroft's heart clenched. "Truly," he said, "I have no authority over the press. I'm an advisor to the cabinet. This is vastly outside of my remit."

"No... but you've got influence," Nicholas intoned, eyes wide, "haven't you? There's pressures you can apply. Threats you can make. Don't tell me half the country doesn't owe you a favour."

"I - ..." Have no wish, whatsoever, to sacrifice my carefully-constructed relationship with the leaders of the British media for your benefit. "I - regret that you've been caused trouble. But at this stage, you'll find there's very little I can - "

"Trouble?" Nicholas spat, his face wrenching open with it - and before Mycroft could get his chair back from the desk, Nicholas lunged.

Vicious, vice-like fingers went straight for his hair - caught, twisted and pulled. Mycroft yelped with pain as Nicholas hauled him up to the heights of his chair, tightening his grip without mercy. Mycroft scrabbled for his forearm - clinging onto it not to fall, struggling to force the fingers to loosen, panting through his teeth in pain.

Nicholas wrenched his head to one side, bent down, and dragged Mycroft's ear up to his mouth.

"You even think," he whispered, "about going for that security button - and I'll push it with your fucking face. Right?"
Mycroft's chest heaved, his fingers locked around Nicholas's wrist in white-knuckled panic. Agony screamed through his scalp.

"You listening to me now?" Nicholas breathed.

Oh, God - oh, God -

"Thought so." Nicholas curled his grip, pulling Mycroft's head backwards and forcing his neck to arch.

Mycroft screwed his eyes tight shut, wishing himself at once out of existence. Nicholas smelled of hot breath and black coffee and men's locker rooms, and some sharp and sour cologne he'd slapped on by the palmful - and with a single gasp of it, Mycroft was eighteen all over again.

He began to shake.

"So you're gonna help me out with this," Nicholas husked, holding him like a snared fox. "Right? You're gonna bring your dirty little brother to heel. You're gonna make some phone calls for me, and tell your newspaper pals that my right to privacy trumps the public's right to perve over whatever they want. Tell the papers what you have to. I don't care. You're just gonna make this go away."

Mycroft swallowed, struggling to breathe with the pain.

A strange, wild surge of bravery flashed through his heart. Greg would not permit this. The thought ached through his throat. Greg would not let him be hoisted from his chair like a rabbit to be skinned, threatened and bullied and frightened.

He wanted to be the person Greg seemed to think he was.

"I - ..." He jerked, gasping, as Nicholas's grasp clenched ever harder. He gritted his teeth. "No, Nicholas. Put me down. This instant."

The bones crunched in Nicholas's jaw as he rolled it.

"You used to try and make me happy," he said. "Remember?"

Mycroft froze.

"I remember." Nicholas's breath curled across his ear, hot. "Think I've even got some old snaps lying around of you trying to make me happy. Trying your best to, anyway. Are you telling me you need a reminder?"

"You - " Panic ripped through Mycroft's chest. His pulse spiked. " - ... d-destroyed. You swore. You swore to me that you'd - "

"Did I? Suppose I must have missed a few." Nicholas hummed. "Maybe a letter or two as well. You remember those long bloody letters you used to write me? Harping on..."

His fist squeezed in Mycroft's hair - sovereign rings biting against his skull, scraping, digging in. Tears blistered behind Mycroft's closed eyes.

"Smart move, in the end..." Nicholas muttered. "Funny. Looks like power is a dirty game, Mycroft - and I'm not getting fucked. Not by you. Not by your prancing baby brother. Not by anyone. Do you understand?"
Mycroft swallowed, his stomach lurching.

"So you fucking sort this out," Nicholas breathed. "You shut the papers down. You shut your faggot brother down. You shut all of it down, or I’m gonna shut you down. Both of you. Have you cottoned on yet?"

Mycroft's heart caved.

He nodded, breathless with pain.

"At last..." Nicholas grunted, and threw him forwards onto his desk. "Christ almighty... the things I have to do..."

As he heard Nicholas move away across the office, Mycroft kept his eyes shut. The polished mahogany of his desk was calming - its solidity beneath his cheek, featureless and smooth - and he concentrated on it, letting the pain ebb as he panted. The panic slowly began to ease.

The crunch of a chair - and the click of a lighter - brought it rushing back at once.

Mycroft lifted his head in alarm.

Nicholas had sat down. He'd kicked his feet onto the Edwardian coffee table, cigarettes in hand, and was scowling as he lit one.

Mycroft's heart tensed. "W-What - what are you - ?"

Nicholas snorted.

"If you think I'm going," he said, his eyes narrowing as the cigarette took light, "before I've heard you speak to every editor in this country, you're an even dumber cunt than I knew."

Panic roiled across the back of Mycroft's neck. Such a task would take hours.

Nicholas shook the lighter into his pocket, leant back in the Hepplewhite armchair, and blew smoke towards Mycroft's ceiling.

"Pick the phone up, Myke." His eyebrows arched. "Unless you want to skip straight to my other ideas for sorting this?"

Mycroft inhaled without a sound.

He reached in silence for the phone.

Nicholas sat and smoked until it was over, listening to each torturous conversation as they unfolded one-by-one. The hours went by and he didn't move, occupying himself with his phone, his cigarettes, and leering at Anthea whenever the poor woman made transparent checks on Mycroft's safety. On the third such occasion, furious for her, and barely halfway through his list of contacts, Mycroft allowed his expression to take the shape that it wished to. Nicholas turned back from openly watching his assistant leave the room, grinning - then caught sight of Mycroft's frown.

The grin dropped from his face at once. It vanished into nothing.

"You got something to say?" he jeered.

Mycroft said nothing, nausea coiling through his stomach. He keyed in the number for the editor of The Observer, and returned to his task.
Nicholas sat back, with a glower, and lit another cigarette.

When he finally left mid-afternoon, satisfied, with a short slam of the door, Mycroft laid his head in silence upon his arms.

Time passed.

A thought finally arose in the misery.

Mycroft reached, numb, for his desk drawer.

It was three o'clock. He registered it only in the back of his mind, too broken for that fact to mean anything. He opened up his messages, touched the name he wanted to see above any other, and gazed at the words that were waiting for him.

you okay? Thinking about you xx
Sent 13:36

Mycroft's hand tightened around his phone.

He typed back, shaking. Tears welled in his eyes as he smiled.

Seven days later, Greg Lestrade woke to the sudden stream of his alarm. He felt like he'd only just shut his eyes - but with a bleary check of his phone, he realised it had been two hours. It was six AM, and he had work to do.

He unlocked his phone in the darkness, squinting at the glare.

No New Messages.

Not a surprise.

It still sank his heart like a stone.

He realised he should have asked Anthea for her contact details. He could hardly just ring up MI5, and ask if they'd found Mycroft yet. Until someone thought to let him know what was happening, he'd just have to wait and hope. It wasn't going to be an easy day.

He stumbled out of bed, steered himself into the shower, and turned it icy cold to shock himself awake.

As he stood by the mirror in a towel, and reached his hand towards an empty corner of sink, he realised he'd left his razor in the Lake District.

"Bollocks..." Everyone at the Yard would just have to cope with him looking as crap as he felt. He threw his towel into the laundry and went to get dressed.
He bought breakfast at a greasy cafe near work, ate it without tasting a mouthful, and startled them all by walking in on the stroke of seven AM.

"Sir?" Sally looked up from her desk in astonishment. "Aren't you still on annu-"

"Nick Pritchard." He wouldn't usually interrupt her - but the last thing he needed was to talk. He unzipped his jacket. "Where are we at? What's going on?"

His sergeant hesitated.

"You - heard about - "

"Oh, 'the freak'?” Greg said, tossing his jacket into his chair. "Otherwise known as my mate? Yeah, Sally. I did. You were going to call me first thing, right? Must have slipped your mind. Good job I'm here now. I want the file on my desk in five minutes, and the phone number of whoever was handling it. They're not anymore."

Sally flushed. "I - was handling it, sir..."

"Correction," Greg said. "You weren't handling it."

He looked her in the eye.

"Sherlock told you the guy tried breaking into his flat," he said. "Told you he was under threat. Now he's had his face caved in, and Pritchard is still on the run. You weren't handling it at all. You were making a magnificent bloody mess of it, Donovan. How many street teams are out?"

He watched her expression shift.

"We - thought that - " she said. "And I mean, that time of night, we couldn't start door-knocking... and in the time that's passed, Pritchard could be anyw-"

Greg lost it.

He knew, deep down, that it wasn't her he wanted to shout at. He knew that by two he'd be quietly approaching her desk, putting down a posh mocha from the café she liked down the street, and a raspberry muffin, and telling her in a mutter that he was a dickhead - and she would quietly agree with him, and tell him it was fine, and they'd share a gruff hug and get on with the job.

But right now, he needed to tell someone they'd fucked up.

They'd fucked up on a colossal scale, and this whole mess wasn't his fault. He wanted it put right.

"Get street teams organised, now!" Nearby heads jerked towards his voice, then quickly away. "Get door-knocking organised, now! Get someone outside Pritchard's house, and his office, and the house and office of anybody who bloody knows him! He's not vanished into thin air, Donovan! Get the street teams out, get his house searched, and let's get the arsehole found before he batters someone else!"

Sally held her ground, pale.

"What d'you mean - someone else? He's got the F-... Sherlock - now. He's got him. He's done it." She tightened her fists. "I screwed up, alright? But it's done now. Pritchard's no longer an active threat."

Greg's heart and stomach clenched.
"He's not done," he bit out. Saying it made it true. His throat muscles worked around the words. "He's half done. That's why he's disappeared again. And he's now had a whole night to get cosy somewhere, to get his head down, and wait. Thanks to you, Donovan. Because you've taken it upon yourself to decide which members of the public count as actual people in deserve of protection."

She stared at him, mute and guilty. Greg forced himself to breathe, his throat hardening with his heart.

"Get me the file," he said. "Get on the phone to uniform. Get the street teams out. And let's start treating this like it's an actual bloody crime."

Sally got up without a word, flushing scarlet, and ran to fetch the file.

Greg stormed into his office. He slammed the door so hard the wall shook, and got to work.
Hey... hope you are ok... can you ring me if you get this?  
Sent 11:00

The message was seen almost immediately.

There was a long, long pause - and then Greg's heart hurled itself into orbit, as the typing icon appeared.

I am at work. M.  
Received 11:02

Jesus.

Mycroft would have his hair slicked back to his skull so tight that it looked black. Greg could almost see him at his desk in Whitehall - see him like he was right here at Scotland Yard, sitting feet away.

Can we meet somewhere?  
I really need to see you  
Sent 11:02

what happened yesterday  
was out of line. It was bloody awful. I need you to know...  
Sent 11:03

Each message was seen as it arrived. No typing bubble appeared.

It hurt to know Mycroft was sitting at work, watching his messages come through - alone in his office, pretending everything was fine. It hurt to know they should both be at breakfast right now, talking and flirting like they were twenty, planning a last walk through the woods together. A last
chance to hold hands; to kiss in the sunlight, before it was all over; rest against a tree, hold each other and make plans.

'I am at work.'

Greg fortified himself with a mouthful of cold coffee. Maybe Myke couldn't cope with emotion right now. Maybe it was too much - to drop that fast from happiness into guilt, and shame, and whatever the hell else Myke was feeling right now. He'd done what Greg had done - thrown himself into work. Maybe that was where he felt safe for now.

Greg told himself Mycroft's safety was paramount, and pushed on.

Heading the pritchard case now. Have you had contact from him since last night?  
Sent 11:08

The typing bubble appeared. Greg's heart hopped along with it.

No. I've had no contact. M.  
Received 11:09

Any ideas who might have offered to shelter him?  
Sent 11:09

Anyone Sherlock has ever antagonised. Anyone I have ever antagonised. Most of the financial quarter. Half of the Government front bench. All those who work for him and wish to retain their jobs. M.  
Received 11:11

Ok. If you think of anybody in particular let me know  
Sent 11:12

do you mind if we look at your message/call log? He left you voicemails. We can pull background audio from them might tell us where he made the calls... the sooner we can find him the better  
Sent 11:14
The message was seen on delivery.

No response began.

"Christ..." Greg whispered, pushing his hands over his face. Sally had brought him a fresh coffee, and he'd barely even noticed.

How could this possibly have gone so wrong? This time yesterday they'd been lying in long grass, feeling like no-one else existed in the world.

He tried calling.

It was not answered.

Myke... you know you're in danger right? Pritchard has gone to ground again for a reason. this is now scary...
Sent 11:22

Do you think anyone is more keenly aware than I am of the harm he plans to cause me? M.
Received 11:29

Then please... let my people listen to those voice mails
Sent 11:29

It'll be a massive help.
Sent 11:30

I'll keep your name out of the case. I know you're struggling right now. I know everything has gone to shit and you are freaking out. Just please... I want to fix this for you and I want you to be safe. this is all getting worse. We can sort it.
Sent 11:31

please answer your phone?
Sent 11:36

The reply, when it arrived, was blunt.
Greg took a moment to steady himself, feeling his heart twisting against his ribs. This wasn't even back to square one. This was civil - brutal. He'd been demoted as low as he could go. Christ Almighty, Sherlock. You've got a lot to answer for, mate...

Greg took a breath, and rubbed at his eyes.

*Find Pritchard,* he told himself. *Get hold of Pritchard, then sort this out. He's stressed. He's nervous and he doesn't know how to handle it. We do. Come on, Lestrade. He needs you.*

*Ok... would you be willing to set up a meeting with him? We could watch for Pritchard arriving and then make an arrest, get him into custody*  
*Sent 11:42*

*He refuses to answer my calls. Seems my window of apology is now closed.*  
*M. Received 11:43

*Jesus jumped up.* Myke had tried to ring and apologise.

Greg didn't even know what Nick Pritchard looked like - but he was imagining the bully to end all bullies. Swaggering, thick-necked and mean. How many people in this world could intimidate Mycroft Holmes into an attempt to say sorry?

The only option now was to take the bastard down.

And try to keep Myke out of his reach.

*Did you get home ok?*  
*Sent 11:45*

Greg waited, drinking his now cold coffee. The message was seen a few seconds after delivery.

Over an hour later, the reply finally came.

*Yes I did. M.*  
*Received 12:57*
Greg put his head into his hands, raked his fingers through his hair, and shut his eyes.

He held himself there for some time.

The division carried on outside his office door - phones ringing, people talking, file cabinets opening and shutting - but it might as well have been happening on another planet. He wasn't here. He was three hundred miles away, carrying Mycroft Holmes gently up a staircase - laying him down upon soft white covers - blue-grey eyes gazing up at him, shy.

'I will make you happy,' Mycroft had said. Sitting on a bench on a hill, like they were on top of the world. 'You are... very, very dear to me.'

Greg massaged his temples, shutting his eyes tight.

He couldn't really stop hearing it. 'I haven't the slightest sexual interest in Lestrade, and I do not care for the accusation that I do.' He knew why Myke had done it. He knew why it had happened.

He just wished he could stop hearing it.

In the wake of the words came memories, ripping him apart. Two nights ago - glancing up from his phone towards the opening bathroom door - Myke, naked. Nervous in the lamplight. Nearly crying as Greg comforted him, stroked him, loved him, told him his body was beautiful. 'Tell me you mean it,' he'd begged. 'Please.'

Now Mycroft was closing off. Shutting down.

Greg wished they'd left the hospital together, got a taxi, and laid in bed and talked - made it alright.

What if you can't cope with this, sweetheart? What if I don't get to hold you again? He wanted to hear Myke's voice more than anything in the world - that note of softness he kept just for Greg. Mycroft was his best friend. Those blue-grey eyes, just learning how to be playful. They'd just gotten there. They'd just, just gotten there.

And now...

It hadn't been like this before. Quietly pretending they were just good friends - walking in Hyde Park together. Concerts. Dinner. God, take me back... take me back there, please... that night at The Diogenes - billiards - maybe then, it had felt like this. Mycroft's first big panic. Not on this scale - this was a whole new level, and Greg didn't know how to begin fixing it - but he'd seen a glimpse of it, then.

He could see where it all came from. Pritchard could take most of the credit; the parents could take all the rest. Mycroft had grown up feeling like the world was waiting to pounce on the first hint of sentiment or weakness, and Sherlock never wasted an opportunity to remind him.

And that weakness was now Greg.

"Bloody hell..." Greg mumbled, gripping his hair in both hands.

And what to do about it?

Hardly anything, he thought, miserably. Myke wouldn't even pick up the phone. The awful possibility of it had overcome him in the taxi home last night - sitting in the back with his head in
his hands, trying not to cry, realising in a strange rush of panic that Myke might decide it was safest to close up for good. To end this, get rid of the secret, and then it couldn't be discovered.

And now he was locked himself up like a prison - and Greg couldn't even ask if he'd gotten home safe.

Even that was over familiar. He'd been relegated to that sort of distance. 'And if you could refrain from taking that chummy tone with me, I'd much appreciate it.'

Greg's office door opened with a clunk.

He let go of his hair. "What?" he asked, looking up in a daze. Christ, I'm so tired.

Sally hovered in his door.

"I've got surveillance sorted on that address you wanted," she said, tense. "And - street teams are out. Just getting on with CCTV from Baker street." She hesitated. "D'you - want more coffee?"

Greg's heart ached. God, I'm a shit boss. He looked into her eyes.

"Sorry, Sal." He hesitated. "Didn't mean to shout. I - didn't sleep. And I'm also a dickhead."

Sally looked down at her feet, flushing.

"I'm - sorry too. Should have taken him seriously. Thought he was just being... I don't know. Himself. Winding people up, causing trouble. I - didn't think Pritchard would actually - ...

Greg processed this, taking a stiff breath.

"Yeah," he mumbled, at last. "Yeah, I... can see that. Honestly? He is winding people up. He's just picked the wrong person this time."

He pulled his lip between his teeth, weary.

"Always knew someone would batter Sherlock one day," he said. "Didn't think it'd be over gay rights."

She gave him a weak smile.

"Funny old world." She crossed her arms, huffing. "But I mean... nobody deserves to be - ... and Nick Pritchard's clearly a tosspot, so...

Greg smiled faintly. You've no fucking idea, Sal. "Been reading the papers?"

"Yeah," she said. "Sounds like he's the whole nine yards... millionaire douchebag with bells on." She ran her tongue around her cheek. "Trophy wife, wears proper fur.... held his son's eighteenth birthday party at some 'gentlemen's club' in New York, spent a hundred grand on champagne... another hundred grand on 'tips'... thinks women can't park or be trusted. That kind of guy."

Greg had never hated someone more. "All while secretly gay."

"Suppose it wouldn't fit with 'the image', would it?" The corner of her mouth tugged. "Who was it said, 'to be loved is a strength, to love is a weakness'? My cousin got it tattooed after her divorce..."

Greg had never heard it before. "What d'you mean?"
"Well... you stand there on your doorstep for photographers, while your posh wife beams at you in all her dead animals... and you pay for strippers to make a fuss of your kid to prove he's a 'man' now... you're gonna feel like a big deal, aren't you? But when it turns out what you really want isn't all that traditional, you're showing your soul a bit. You're not a big deal anymore. You're just... a normal person, wanting things. Like the rest of us."

Greg's heart tightened. He found himself running his thumb up and down a pen, thinking. "Do people really care that much what everyone thinks?"

Sally snorted. "This is London, sir. You've met the upper crust, right?"

Too many of them, Greg thought. He put down his pen, suddenly tired again.

"Life's too short," he muttered. He shot her an apologetic look. "Bringing us back to, 'I'm a dickhead'..."

She smiled, biting her cheek. "S'okay, sir. We all are." She rocked back on her heel. "Conciliatory coffee?" she offered. "Look like you need it."

Greg glanced at his computer screen. No major updates on Pritchard yet - inquiries were being made, but the people they needed to talk to were important twats who thought the law could bloody well wait.

He glanced at his phone, and that quiet, cold 'Yes I did'.

He then glanced up at his sergeant of six years.

Greg found her a proper smile, and got out of his chair.

"Yeah," he said. "Conciliatory coffee. Just nipping out then, Sal. Mocha, is it? D'you still like their raspberry muffins?"

Greg held out until six - at which point he could barely keep his eyes open. He'd spent two hours asleep out of nearly forty, and he couldn't process typed letters anymore. There'd been no sightings of Nick Pritchard in London, and nobody had anything to tell uniform yet. CCTV from Baker Street showed plenty of people - it would take time to figure out which of them knew something. It would take time to find out who they were. Greg was waiting for now - waiting, and passing the hours.

"Zsa Zsa Gabor," Sally said, leaning round his door as he pulled on his jacket.

He frowned. "Mm?"

"Zsa Zsa Gabor said 'to be loved is a strength, to love is a weakness'."

Greg's brain finally caught up. "Oh!" he said. "Right."

"She also said, 'I've never hated a man enough to give him his diamonds back'."

Greg smiled, trying to concentrate on his buttons. Why had he bought a jacket with so many? Jesus, I need to sleep. "You heading off soon?" he asked.
"Another hour, maybe. Finish a few things off..."

"Alright... tell the surveillance lot to ring me if there's any problems..."

She gave him a slanted smile. "You're knackered," she said. "They can ring me, sir. It's fine."

He shook his head. "I want to know. Calls straight to me."

"If you're sure?"

"I am. S'important."

"Right... well, try and get some sleep, anyway. You alright driving home?"

Greg huffed. "My car's still in the bloody Lake District," he muttered, sliding his phone into his pocket. "M'getting a taxi..."

He realised his mistake too late, as Sally gave him a startled look. "What's your car doing in the Lake District?"

He frowned, guarded.

"Helping my mate move, wasn't I?" he said. "He's up near Windermere."

"Jesus. That's - a long way to drive to help someone move..." Sally paused. "How did you - get home from the Lake District without you - "

Greg picked up his laptop.

"Right," he said. "I'm off, Sal. See you in the morning. Ring me if anything else happens."

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Greg's flat was oddly quiet.

At least I'll sleep, he thought, dumped his laptop onto the sofa, and headed through to the kitchen. Food. Easy. Quick. He threw pasta and cheese and bacon together, stirring the pot without the vaguest interest in how it was turning out. So long as it was edible, he didn't care.

As he let the pan sit for a minute, he checked his phone.

A text from John - Sherlock was doing well. 'Sore and cranky', John said. Greg bit his tongue, telling himself that at least Sherlock was under guard at the hospital, safe. He texted back, thanking John for the update - and carefully ignored the enquiry about himself. He didn't know what Sherlock had told John about last night. He didn't want to force John to stand between the two of them - this thing was enough of a mess already.

Apart from that, he had no other messages - no calls, no texts.

It wasn't unexpected.

It still made him feel hollow.

Greg put his phone away. He scraped the mess of cheese and pasta into a bowl, ate it standing at
the kitchen counter, and checked the time.

Just past seven.

If he went to bed now, he'd be up at three. He didn't know what else would keep him awake
though. If he was up again at three, at least he could lie in bed and quietly watch TV - or regret his
life choices, whichever was easier. He was no good to anyone right now.

And Christ, he wanted this day to be over.

Surrendering to the miserable chaos of the last twenty-four hours, Greg locked his door, left his
clothes in a pile on the bedroom carpet, and got into bed. Has this mattress always been so bloody
lumpy? He wriggled until he found somewhere the springs weren't poking him in the back, trying
not to realise why his bed seemed suddenly inadequate.

And big.

No... no, don't think that. Don't think about him here.

Christ. Just don't.

Christ...

Mycroft had said he'd like to stay. And this would have been the first night, he realised with a lurch
- home after their trip - the long drive south together, then maybe a film and a takeaway - curling
up in the dark. Here. This bed.

His Myke.

God. Oh, God. You were meant to be here...

His beautiful Myke. Here, real - not a fairytale - proving to him that it wasn't just a holiday thing.
Proving it could be real here, too, back in the real world, and everything they'd found in the forest
had come home safe with them, and they could still be happy.

Greg pushed his face against the pillow, telling himself he needed to sleep - not lie here thinking.

To be loved is a strength. To love is a weakness.

It wouldn't go away.

Nor would some other words, either: 'I haven't the slightest sexual interest in Lestrade, and I do
not care for the accusation that I do.'

Nor, worse by far: 'I will make you happy.'

Whether Greg fell to sleep or not, he couldn't be sure. He might just have laid and worried for an
hour, drifting vaguely through the thoughts of what he might have just lost.

All he knew was the urgent buzzing from the bedside, suddenly dragging him from the sludge. He
grabbed for the phone.

He slashed his thumb across Answer.

"Myke?" he said, and held his breath.
"Err... DI Lestrade?"

*Jesus.* Work. "Yep - sorry... speaking."

"Surveillance team round in Kensington, sir. M'told you wanted all updates direct to you?"

Greg's heart turned to rock. "What's happened?"

"We're pretty sure the place is being monitored. Been a couple of people lurking over the course of the evening without much reason to be here - my boys just tried tailing one of them when he left, but he got jumpy and disappeared onto the tube... suspicious as hell though."

*Fucking hell.*

"Have you seen anyone entering the flat?" Greg asked, his heart thumping hard. "A tall guy - suit, umbrella - hair slicked back... probably dropped off in a black car. A Q7."

"No, sir. Nobody of that description."

"Right. Hold your position - don't tail anymore of them. Just get me descriptions and details."

"Yessir."

The surveillance squad leader hung up. Greg sat up in bed, his pulse racing in his throat as he scrolled quickly through his contacts, found Mycroft's name, and hit *Call.*

He held it to his ear, trying to breathe.

"Answer," he moaned, closing his eyes and covering them with a hand. "*Answer, Myke... don't bloody do this to me... don't fucking - ..."

There came a small click - a rustle, and a breath - and Greg's chest nearly caved in the answering silence.

"Hey," he said, staring across at his wardrobe. "It's - me."

There was a long, awkward pause.

"Hello," Mycroft said at last, his voice very small.

Greg shut his eyes, lost for a second in the rush of grief.

"L-Look, I - I know you don't want to speak to me right now. I know you need space. But it's important." The words were physically painful in his throat; his heart was beating itself out of rhythm. "I had surveillance put on your flat. They just rung me. Place is being monitored - a couple of guys." He hesitated. "Nick's - got people waiting for you. You're being watched."

Mycroft seemed to take a second to cope with this.

"Yes, I - I had a feeling that - ..." He didn't speak for a moment, then took a breath. "Th-thank you. For - ..."

Greg's chest strained. "S'alright. I... couldn't just - ..." He pushed his hand back through his hair, unsurprised to find his fingers shaking. "Where are you? You're not - heading home, are you?"

"No, I... I'm not there."
"'kay..." The silence was unbearable - worse than if Mycroft was biting at him, calling him 'inspector', driving him away. Greg gripped at his hair. "Are you - with Sherlock? Hospital?"

Mycroft's throat audibly tightened. "N-No. No, I am not."

Where are you? God, where are you? Please just tell me you're somewhere safe. Is that so much to ask?

"Have you - got somewhere to...?"

Mycroft said nothing. He was still there on the line, just locked into silence. Greg could hear him, feel him, as close as if he were just through the wall.

Christ. Christ, I can't do this. Greg's heart wrenched at his ribs. He couldn't sit here listening to that silence. He couldn't hear it a second longer.

"Darlin'," he said - his voice broke. Oh, fuck. Fuck, here we go. "Darlin', I - I don't - ... I don't know if you want anything to do with me any more - but - b-but I've got to - ..."

Mycroft made a noise Greg had never heard a human make - a pitched, frightened sob, gasped and bitten down on at once.

Greg's heart shattered into pieces.

"Myke..." he gasped. "S-Shit - Myke -"

Mycroft began to cry. His strangled breaths blurred into words.

"- ... Sh-Sherlock - ... j-jeering at me - ... couldn't - ... n-never, never meant to hurt - ... oh God - oh God, I'm so sorry -"

Greg threw back the sheets.

"Where the fuck are you?" He grabbed for his work trousers on the floor, shaking. "I'm coming to find you. You at work?"

Mycroft's voice cut into frightened silence once more, his breath stuttered and broken up with tears.

"Myke..." Greg swallowed, shutting his eyes. "I'm gonna pick you up in a taxi. Give me ten minutes, wherever you are, and I'll be there. And I'll bring you back here - you can come here, sweetheart. We'll talk. We'll sort this out."

Another gasped sob came down the phone - desperate, broken relief.

Greg paused, his trousers hitched halfway up one leg, the phone pinned against his shoulder.

A strange thought had occurred.

"Myke, where... are you?" he said.

Ten seconds later, half-dressed, Greg unlocked and opened the door of his flat.

At the sight of him, the dishevelled figure sitting huddled on his stairs broke down into tears.

Greg's heart cracked in half.
Shelter

Yet everything that touches us, me and you,
takes us together like a violin's bow,
which draws one voice out of two separate strings.
- Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Love Song'

Greg crossed the landing at once.

"Myke..."

He was wearing the same clothes he'd been wearing last night - white-pale, his hair still curled, his shoulders shaking with tears.

Greg knelt, wrapped his arms around Mycroft, and held him as he wept.

"How long have you been sitting here?" he breathed. "Christ, why didn't you - why didn't you just - ...

Mycroft sobbed, curling against his bare chest in utter misery.

Greg buried his fingers into Mycroft's hair. He could feel his heart ripping itself apart with every sob.

"Beautiful..." he whispered. Mycroft convulsed in his arms. "Shhh... it's alright... it's all alright..."

God almighty. I will never let you go again. Never. "You weren't at work, were you...?"

Mycroft shuddered, shaking his head against Greg's collarbones.

"You've not been home at all?"

Another desperate shake. " - ... s-so sorry - ..." Mycroft swallowed as if he were choking; his voice shrank into a whimper. "I - I d-didn't - m-mean to - ... and Sherlock, and I - ...

Greg shut his eyes tight.

"Forget about it," he breathed, his chest heaving. "Forget about it, beautiful. All of it. It's alright. Have you even eaten?"

"N-No - no, I - ... I've - ...

Greg gathered him up from the stairs, with an arm around his shoulders, and guided him into the flat.

He shut the door behind them, locked it at once, and placed the key on the side.

"I've not got proper food in," he said, drawing Mycroft back into his arms. He wrapped him up as
he spoke, rocking him, feeling him tremble with every gentle word. He'd never been so glad to hold someone in all his fucking life. "We'll ring for something for you, okay? Get something delivered. While we're waiting, we'll get you into the shower - get you clean and comfortable..."

Mycroft shook slowly, paralysed into silence.

Greg nuzzled at his ear, stroking his back as they rocked. "You're staying here tonight... with me. You'll be safe."

Mycroft let out a choked gasp. He began to cry again, struggling for breath. Within the panic, Greg caught a single word.

" - s-sorry - ..."

"Hey..." Greg closed his eyes, tightening his arms. "Put it out of your mind... you've got nothing to say sorry for, alright? Nothing. M'here, and you're safe. That's all that matters."

Mycroft wept into his shoulder, holding onto Greg as if he'd thought they'd never see each other again. Greg kissed his temple; he stroked the tangled hair on the back of Myke's head.

"Come and sit on the bed," he murmured. Myke wasn't in a state to make decisions. He needed to be guided. "I'll get you a Chinese menu and start the shower..."

As he led Mycroft into the bedroom, Greg thought to reach for the light switch - then realised the gentle darkness would help calm him down. He sat Mycroft carefully on the bed, and arms went around his waist at once - clinging to him, trembling.

Greg couldn't bring himself to move them away. Myke needed a shower - but he needed this more. He stepped close and let Mycroft nuzzle into his chest, carding his fingers back through the distressed auburn waves - stroking him, slowly, as his breathing began to loosen.

With his free hand, he reached across to the nightstand. Mycroft didn't move.

Greg held his phone to his ear as it rang, still petting Mycroft gently in the dark.

"Surveillance? It's DI Lestrade..."

Mycroft quivered wordlessly, his cheek pressed flat to Greg's heart.

"I've got Mycroft Holmes. He's safe for the night... yeah - completely safe. Can you keep an eye out for anybody watching the building? And - you know what? Tail the bastards. Let's see where they're going with their information. Thanks."

Greg hung up, one-handed, and tossed the phone gently onto the bed.

"Come here," he whispered, cupped Mycroft's face, and lifted his jaw. "Come right here."

As their lips met, Mycroft shook in desperation. His tears started afresh with a whimper - he touched Greg's face, his fingertips weak, and kissed Greg as if he'd never get another chance.

Greg held him, stroked the tears from his cheeks, and kissed him like they'd be doing this the rest of their lives.

Mycroft wasn't in a mind to care about what he ate. Greg ordered a few things he thought would
work, and got a text a minute later saying it'd arrive in an hour. He took Mycroft's hands, lifted him
from the bed, and brought him into the bathroom - the main light still out, the darkness soft as he
started up the shower.

"Does your assistant know where you are?" he asked, sitting Mycroft down on the closed lid of the
loo.

Mycroft shook his head, weak with misery and shock. He still couldn't look Greg in the eye.

Greg knelt down on the lino, reaching for his tie.

"We'll give her a call when you've eaten, alright?" He loosened the knot with care, slipping the
fabric free. "She can go get some of your clothes for you... things you need... bring them here.
You're staying 'til we've got Pritchard under lock and key. M'not hearing any argument."

Mycroft's expression crumpled. He covered his face, shoulders shaking.

" - ... k-kind - ..."

"Not kind," Greg said. "In love with you. Desperately. Want you to be safe, and happy." He took
Mycroft's hands, moving them gently aside so he could undo his collar. "C'mon, darlin'... let's get
these off you... d'you want me to come in the shower with you? Hold you a while?"

Mycroft nodded, mute and tearful.

Greg worked his way through waistcoat and shirt buttons as he spoke.

"S'fine, love. We'll get you all cleaned up... you've not even had a shower since yesterday morning,
have you?"

Mycroft shook his head, hiding his face with shaking hands.

"I'll wash your hair for you," Greg murmured. "Get you clean, and warm, and you can come lie in
bed with me... eat your food and rest with me... and nobody's going to bother us 'til tomorrow.
Nobody else exists until the morning. Just you and me, love. Just us in the world. And it's all
alright."

Mycroft wept in silence as Greg gently pulled his shirt off, then dropped it into the laundry hamper.
Greg shuffled forwards, gathered Mycroft close for a gentle kiss, and helped him to his feet.

"Is it okay if I undo these?" he asked, laying a hand on the belt of Mycroft's trousers. Mycroft
nodded, shivering. He leant against Greg as he carefully undid the buckle, sliding the leather apart.
"How long were you gonna sit out there, mm? All night?"

Mycroft shook, overwhelmed. He said nothing, burrowing tighter into Greg's arms. Greg opened
the clasp of his trousers, gently lowered the zip, and loosened the material with his hands. When
he'd seen Mycroft pull these on, they'd had a helicopter to get to. The world had been crumbling
around them. It felt like weeks ago.

Carefully Greg eased Myke's trousers down, pulling his underwear with them. He knelt and helped
Myke step from them, a nervous hand resting on his shoulder for balance. He kissed Mycroft's
wrist as he freed one ankle, then the other, loosened his own trousers, and let them fall as he stood.

Naked, he coaxed Myke down to kiss him again - a soft, gentle kiss of just lips, brushing Myke's
mouth with fondness until he wasn't shaking quite so much. Greg took his hands.
Without a word he pulled Mycroft gently into the shower, slid the glass door shut behind them, and reached for shampoo.

Myke's hair was dirty and knotted. How he'd coped in this state - normally so fastidious, so clean, so careful with his appearance - Greg didn't know. He worked the shampoo into a lather between his hands then stroked it through Mycroft's hair, going slowly to check for tangles, massaging around them gently as he found them. He kissed Myke's jaw as he worked the shampoo through each strand. There came the gentle snap of a bottle cap - and as Mycroft's hands tentatively touched his head, Greg realised Myke wanted to wash him too.

*That's fine, sweetheart. You can do that for me. That'll help you feel better.* He leant up, pressing their lips together - and as they rinsed shampoo from each other's hair, they kissed gently beneath the spray. Mycroft wasn't crying any more. His breathing had slowed, his chest rising and falling more steadily in Greg's arms. He was still quivering - still broken - but he seemed to be calming.

Little by little, safety was returning.

Greg washed every sud from his hair. He reached for shower gel and the bright blue sponge, suddenly glad of the 'Relax and Unwind' set his sister-in-law had got him for Christmas. He couldn't think of anything they needed more right now than 'unwind'. As he stroked the sponge along Mycroft's arms, spreading lavender and rosemary scented foam in its wake, Mycroft's eyes fluttered shut with relief. He swallowed, resting his head back against the tiles.

*God, you're bloody beautiful...* Greg had never loved him more. He washed slowly down one arm and then the other, and over Mycroft's chest, his heart thudding with a protective ache as Mycroft relaxed and rested and let him do this. He dropped to his knees again, and soaped every inch of Mycroft's legs from hip to ankle. As he rose, he found a nervous hand tentatively touching his wrist.

He transferred the sponge into Mycroft's grasp.

"There you go," he whispered, standing close enough to be heard under the spray. He kissed the tender skin just beneath Mycroft's ear. "I'll let you do there, shall I, sweetheart...? Don't want to make you uncomfortable..."

Mycroft shuddered, leaning into him with desperate gratitude.

Greg nuzzled at his cheek, closed his eyes, and breathed with Mycroft as he cleaned his groin - trembling a little, nervous. Greg kissed the curve of his jaw.

"Feeling any better?" he whispered.

Mycroft nodded, breathing slow.

"Good." Greg took the sponge as it was returned, shyly, to his hand. "Turn around for me, sweetheart? I'll wash your back for you..."

Mycroft turned in trusting obedience, resting his folded arms against the wall. He laid his head on them, quietly, and closed his eyes.

Greg leant up, kissed the back of his neck, and began to clean him. He took his time here, too - washing slowly from shoulders right down Mycroft's back, kneeling to stroke up and down his legs. Each foot lifted anxiously for him to wash the sole. Mycroft jerked gently as Greg's fingers slid between his toes - *ticklish*, Greg thought, with a flush of quiet fondness - *I never knew*. He got to his feet again, and gently washed Mycroft's backside, his touches calm and careful, then Myke
turned round in his arms.

As they embraced, lavender foam slid between them. Mycroft nervously reached for his mouth, trembling again; Greg gave it without hesitation. Kissing, stroking Mycroft's face, he felt the sponge begin to carefully clean his back for him. His eyes flickered shut.

Mycroft washed him with every speck of thoroughness he'd been shown - first Greg's back, and then round to his front - his chest, his arms, dropping quietly to his knees to wash Greg's feet and legs for him - and just the same, the shy transferral of the sponge - kissing, breathing, and Greg wondered if it was possible to feel any safer, any warmer, any calmer than he felt right now. They stepped under the spray together, and let their bodies rinse clean. Lavender foam swirled and melted away down the plughole.

For a long, long time after they were clean, Greg didn't let Mycroft go.

He just held him, stroked the back of his neck, and let him breathe under the spray. Mycroft's arms were looped around his waist - holding him as if he had no right, but couldn't bear to let Greg go. As he kissed Mycroft's earlobe, Mycroft shivered and squeezed him a little. Greg heard his breath catch - and then Mycroft whispered, barely audible,

"I am sorry. So sorry. Y-You are - everything. Everything to me."

Greg's heart thumped. He nuzzled into Mycroft's neck, drawing a slow breath.

"What're you sorry for? You've not done anything."

Mycroft swallowed, thickly. "L-Lied - ..."

"So?" Greg murmured. He kissed Mycroft's neck. "Sherlock was being - fucking unbearable, frankly. I lied, too. He doesn't deserve trusting with the truth, if he's gonna be like that. He was out of line."

Mycroft shuddered.

"Y-You meant - ... Sh-Sherlock - ... 'out of line'..."

"Mm?"

"Your - your t-text - ..."

Greg realised with a crushing breath. "You - thought I meant you? Beautiful, what - what the hell've you done that's - "

Mycroft broke down again.

" - ... N-Nicholas - " he wept, and began to shake. "Oh God, I'm sorry - "

"Hey... hey, shhh... shhh, darlin'..." Greg began to rock him, gently, letting the spray cascade down his back. "I don't care, love... doesn't matter... it's alright..."

"It's n-not alright - I don't deserve you - "

Greg's heart squeezed. "Oi," he breathed, and kissed the crook of Mycroft's neck. "I'll be the judge of that."

Mycroft shook into silence once more, clinging to him.
"M'not angry," Greg murmured. "Not at all. You should've come here, love - straight here. And even if I was angry, we'd still be doing this right now... you know that? Still love. Still love, even if I'm angry. Even if m'upset. Still here for you - always, darlin' - it's always still love."

Mycroft shivered, listening.

Greg closed his eyes. He lifted his mouth to Mycroft's ear, whispering to him.

"This is what proper love is. It can hold hurt inside it. It doesn't break. This is the real deal - and it makes you strong, beautiful. Not weak. This is bigger than just you and me. It's a shelter. And it's here for you, whenever you need it."

Mycroft was silent. After a moment, his arms tightened around Greg - understanding.

Greg held him back, breathing the feeling deep.

"Let's get towelled off, love... we need to get you fed."

When they were dry, he led Mycroft back to bed, still naked in the dark, and sat him down. He hummed as Mycroft's arms encircled his waist. He kissed Myke's head, and quietly began to dry his hair.

"Can I brush you?" he asked.

He didn't know why he wanted to. It seemed important - to look after these curls that he loved; these curls that had filled Sherlock's eyes with such vicious glee.

Mycroft hesitated, holding onto Greg's back. "- ... t-tangles - ..." he mumbled. "- ... can be - painful..."

"If I'm careful? Promise not to pull your tangles?"

Another moment's pause - then a nervous, single nod. Greg reached for the comb on the bedside table.

Mycroft nuzzled into his chest as he began. Greg kissed his forehead and held him, working his way from the nape of Mycroft's neck upwards, slowly and steadily combing as he dried. He moved the comb lightly on each initial stroke, and at the first hint of a knot, took the comb away - worked gently with his fingers instead, easing each one apart with patience.

The third time this happened, Mycroft shivered.

"You - y-you know how to - ..."

"Curly nieces," Greg murmured, half-smiling. He nuzzled the latest knot with his fingertips, slipping it apart. "Get it from their mum. Eldest brother's wife. Theirs's much longer than yours... takes her hours every morning before school..."

Mycroft swallowed. "Th-Thank you..."

"S'okay. I like looking after you."

Mycroft tentatively nestled a little closer. Greg took his time to finish, stalked the comb a few last times over Mycroft's head, then put it quietly aside.

He then wrapped his lover up in his arms.
"How're you feeling?" he asked, as Mycroft drew a long breath.

He took a while to answer. "Calm. G-Guilty."

Greg kissed his temple. "S'fine, darlin'. Nothing to feel guilty about."

Mycroft's fingers curled anxiously at his lower back. "L-Love you. So much. More than - ... G-
Greg, I - I can't begin to - -"

Greg's eyes eased shut. He stroked his nose gently through Mycroft's wet hair, enjoying the scent of his own shampoo and his lover's warmth.

"I love you, too... more than I thought I'd get to love someone again... you know that?" Greg breathed, squeezing him gently. "M'just glad you're here now. Glad I've got you. Glad I know where you are."

Mycroft quivered. "I - I didn't mean to cause - ... y-your messages were just - so f-functional - and I thought you were - ... a-angry, and I..."

*Christ... the pair of us...*

"M'sorry," Greg whispered. "Thought you needed it that way. Didn't want to send you my soul by text. Trying to... I don't know - beg you. Beg you not to clam up and vanish, and expect me just to walk away."

Mycroft's breath tightened sharply. "N-No. Don't leave."

"I won't, darlin'. M'not going anywhere."

"P-Please - please, don't -"

"Shhh..." Greg's heart hammered against the front of his chest. "Shhh, sweetheart... m'not leaving. M'not angry. It's all okay."

"- ... c-can't - ... w-what you mean to me... truly, Greg, you - ..." Mycroft began to shake again. "- ... b-best friend. Lover. Everything. *Everything.*"

Greg shut his eyes.

"I love you," he murmured. "More right now than ever. M'glad you're here, and I can keep watch over you. And we'll work the rest out in the morning."

His buzzer sounded through in the lounge.

"That's your food, love..." Greg kissed Mycroft's forehead. "Lie down and get comfy for me. M'just gonna go get it, and plate up."

Mycroft trembled. "C-Come back."

"I will, sweetheart. Promise. You get settled."

As Greg took his dressing gown from the back of the door, he could feel Mycroft watching him through the darkness. He knotted the sash loosely into place.

"Forgive my lumpy mattress," he said, with a half-smile over his shoulder. "I'll get a new one. Promise. 'Specially if you're going to be here more often."
Mycroft flushed, shyly pulling the sheets to his chest.

"It's - q-quite fine." He hesitated. "Thank you, Greg."

Greg gave him a gentle wink. "Two minutes," he said.

He paid the delivery driver for food, relocked the door, and plated it up with care in the kitchen.

He didn't know what time it was. It didn't matter. He didn't feel sleepy anymore, and he wouldn't until Mycroft was some sort of alright.

As he came back into the bedroom, carrying a tray full of food, Mycroft's eyes widened nervously from the bed. Greg realised with a twinge that he was starving.

"This is all yours," he said, resting the tray beside Mycroft on the bed. "I had pasta when I got in... eat as much or as little as you want. I guessed for you. If it's all crap, I'll order you something else."

Mycroft flushed desperately. "Y-You're - so kind. F-Far more than I - ..."

Greg kissed Myke's forehead.

"Not kind," he said. "Just in love... remember?"

Mycroft's eyes shone softly in the darkness.

"Greg..." he whispered.

"Eat, love. I know you're hungry. M'just gonna tuck in behind you, okay?"

As Mycroft began to eat, Greg eased his way into bed. He thought for a moment to offer to put his pyjamas on - then realised they were three hundred miles from here, screwed up at the bottom of the suitcase. Mycroft didn't seem to mind that they were naked. He cuddled back into Greg's arms as soon as they were offered, quietly eating, shivering a little as he discovered that he liked spring rolls. Greg tried not to smile. He didn't disturb Mycroft - just held him, gently stroked his hair, and watched him work his way through the food he sorely needed.

Nearly every plate was clean by the time he finished.

"Done?" Greg murmured. He lifted the tray, shifted it over to the bedside table, and brushed a few crumbs from the sheets. "That's better, is it?"

Mycroft shivered, settling back against his chest. "Y-Yes... yes, I... I do feel better..."

"Good." Greg kissed the side of his neck. "We'll ring your assistant in a few minutes. Get her to fetch all the things you need..."

Mycroft gave a wordless, shy nod.

Greg laid a hand on his stomach, stroking him fondly in the dark.

"Then sleep, maybe?" he murmured. "Put this day behind us?"

Mycroft exhaled. He wrapped his arm over Greg's. "That would be wonderful..." he whispered.

Greg kissed his shoulder, spooning into him gently. As they nestled together, their fingers wove into a ball over Mycroft's heart. Christ, what a day... at least they were together. At least they'd
"Make you breakfast in the morning," he whispered. He sealed it with a kiss to Mycroft's neck.

Mycroft shivered. There was a moment's pause - and then he said, "I'm sorry that I denied you. I - I couldn't bear to - ... h-hearing myself say it, I - ..."

Greg closed his eyes.

He took a moment to put it into words - knowing this was new, and he was teaching something. He nuzzled against Mycroft's neck as he spoke, stroking with the very tip of his nose.

"Hurt a bit," he admitted. "At first. But you were frightened. Sherlock knows how to get right into your head, and he was pushing every button you've got. And I know you love me, darlin'... we can talk more in the morning, if you like."

Mycroft took this in, nervously. His fingers tightened around Greg's. "I love you. Very much."

"I love you, too... I love you to pieces." Greg brushed his hair gently aside. "Beautiful?"

"Mm?"

"You okay sleeping like this? I can lend you clothes, if you want... or I can put boxers on. Want you to be comfy."

Mycroft thought for a moment. "I - q-quite want to - ..." He hesitated. "It's nice to - ..."

"Feel skin," Greg murmured. "Feel close."

Mycroft shivered. "Yes."


Just skin, and love - and the man who was teaching him both.

He splayed his hand over Mycroft's heart, and listened with his fingertips to the gentle drumming of his pulse.

He closed his eyes.

Half an hour later, he met Mycroft's assistant at the door.

She made no comment on his dressing gown, the state of his flat, or the closed door to the bedroom. She handed him the sizeable suitcase she'd brought, three suit-bags and three bags of groceries - and asked quietly after Mr Holmes, who from the sound of things had scared the living daylights out of MI5 by vanishing off the face of the planet for nearly eighteen hours. They'd tried to track him down without success. A category four emergency had been on the brink of declaration. Greg didn't know how many categories there were - but from the exhausted look in Anthea's eyes, category four was no laughing matter.

He told her she could go home, and rest easy.

Mr Holmes was now in the safest place in London. He needed nothing but a good night's sleep - and would be remaining under the protection of Scotland Yard until further notice.
Patience

Love is friendship that has caught fire. It is quiet understanding, mutual confidence, sharing and forgiving. It is loyalty through good and bad times. It settles for less than perfection and makes allowances for human weaknesses.

- Ann Landers

Greg awoke to soft grey eyes, watching him fearfully in the morning light.

As he found them there, he remembered - and smiled.

A little of the fear eased in Mycroft's gaze.

"Hi," Greg murmured, soft.

Mycroft visibly shivered. "H-Hello..."

Greg shifted across the bed.

As Mycroft nestled into his arms, he had the sensation of something being restored to him - some deeper, quieter level of calm, one he hadn't even realised was missing. He cuddled his lover against his chest, kissed the warm curve of his shoulder, and let his eyes close with the simple and happy rush of it. You and me, he thought. This is it. This is all I need, right here.

Mycroft trembled peacefully, lifting his chin to be kissed.

"D'you sleep alright?" Greg asked, nuzzling into his neck. Myke felt gorgeous like this - warm and sleepy, and gentle as a rose.

"Yes, thank you..." Mycroft hesitated, holding something in his mouth for a moment. "Far better than I expected."

Greg smiled. He let his words brush Mycroft's skin as kisses.

"Yesterday was rough... m'just glad you came to me in the end." Gently, he told himself. He's new to this. "I - wish you'd answered your phone earlier, love... could've sorted all this out. Saved you some worry."

Mycroft took a moment to answer, nervous. "I'm s-sorry."

"S'okay - you don't have to be sorry. I know you clam up a bit when you're scared..." Greg placed a gentle kiss against his pulse. "I'm always here, though. Even if it seems like I'm angry, or you think I'm upset... I'd never want you to be alone like that. Never. You can always reach for me, love... I'll always let you in. Alright?"

Mycroft's fingers stroked with caution at the back of his neck.
"I'm - sorry I - ..." He shuddered. "... - n-neglected to tell you that - ..."

Greg tightened his arms, gently. He kissed Mycroft's earlobe. "Why didn't you?"

"B-By the time I - ... it seemed somehow that I'd already deceived you... and I... I didn't know how to - ...

"S'okay, love... I can see that."

"You have e-every right to be angry."

"Do I?" Greg drew back, looking calmly into Mycroft's eyes. "Guess I'm choosing not to exercise that right."

Mycroft gazed back at him, overwhelmed.

"You're - you're not - ...

"No." Greg stroked his thumb beneath his lover's lips. "Cause this bastard clearly has you scared to shit... and Sherlock's made things a million times worse. Dunno how anger will help."

Mycroft's eyes flickered. "I - quite wished to disown Sherlock, when I - heard that he'd - ...

Greg could imagine. He brushed his fingers over Mycroft's cheek. "He knew about you and Nick?"

Distress flooded Mycroft's expression.

"There's - no need for you to - ... f-first names." He shivered, looking down. "N-Nicholas Pritchard and I were - ..." He shut his eyes, tight. "God help me. If I could erase time."

"We've all been there," Greg murmured. "You know that? Everyone in this world has at least one 'what was I thinking?' Everyone, sweetheart."

Mycroft shuddered.

"I presume they're not all still in professional contact," he said, "thirty years later..."

"Have you had to - ... over the years?"

"Infrequently." Mycroft took a slow breath. "Nicholas and I occupy - r-rather different spheres of life, but occasionally they cross... and the experience is always - very difficult for me." His eyes shuttered. "Especially when Sherlock decides to lash the two together in the name of social justice."

Greg's heart ached.

"So - when Pritchard found out that Sherlock was about to expose him...?"

Mycroft hesitated. He pulled the sheets a little higher. "He came to my office," he said. "Insisted with some vigor that I intervene. He - made threats."

The hairs rose on the back of Greg's neck. "What - kind of threats?" he asked.

Mycroft's eyes stayed in his, silent for a moment. Paleness rose in his cheeks.

"Violence," he replied. "Against - Sherlock. And myself."
He didn't breathe out with it - just kept looking at Greg, uneasy. *Something else*, Greg realised. He'd spent his professional life watching people not say things.

His brow contracted gently, wondering if he was seeing this right.

He leant close, kissed Mycroft between the eyes, and said,

"Has he got something else on you, beautiful?" Possibilities offered themselves to his mind. "Did he - threaten to out you? Expose your private life?"

Mycroft said nothing, no longer meeting Greg's eyes. His fingers shook on the back of Greg's neck. As his expression broke, he wrapped his arms tightly around Greg's neck and held onto him in silence. The shake from his fingers moved out along his arms, into his shoulders.

Greg laced his fingers into Mycroft's hair. He stroked him, slowly, steadily, bracing himself to hear something.

"Deep breath," he murmured. "Alright? Breathe in and tell me. Whatever it is, it's alright. We'll handle it."

Mycroft breathed in. His chest expanded in Greg's arms, fingers tightening on his back. Greg stroked him, waiting, his eyes closed.

"Photographs - "

Mycroft bit the word out.

"F-From - from when - ... p-promised me that they were destroyed. He - he *swore* - "

*Thank God.* Greg didn't even know what he'd been expecting to hear. He exhaled, calming.

"Okay," he murmured. "Okay, love... it's alright. I'm glad you told me. Has he shown you the photographs?"

"N-No, he - he simply - "

"Right. So no proof he's actually still got them?"

"I - I haven't - ..."

"Cause - ... breathe with me, darlin'? It'll be alright... - if all this has now kicked off, and he's still not released anything... you might be in the clear. If you'd turned up at the Yard to tell me this, I'd be advising you it looks like an empty threat."

Mycroft shook in desperation. "I-If he - if he *does* - ..."

"Then we'll deal with that, if it happens." Greg rumpled his fingers through Mycroft's hair, kissing his temple fiercely. *Both* of us will deal with it. Alright? You can stop worrying this second now what I'd think. Because if he does that, darlin', I'll just love you a hundred thousand times harder - and break his fucking jaw when I get hold of him."

Mycroft broke down, gasping. His grip on Greg's shoulders clenched.

"*Greg* - ... oh, God - *Greg* - "

Greg wrapped the sheets around Mycroft, held him tight, and for almost fifteen minutes let him
cry.

He had a feeling these last few days had been among the worst of Myke's life.

Usually, whenever Sherlock was causing trouble, kicking off and acting out, the armour all stayed in place - and Myke stayed safe behind it. Suffering, but safe. He could take his grief somewhere quiet, and deal with it in private.

But between Pritchard and Sherlock, they'd wrecked his inner security systems apart. They'd hauled out every scrap of shame and hope that Mycroft had, and were fighting over the feast like dogs. Every new development took another swipe at Mycroft's soul. He was taking wounds, and he was bleeding. He didn't know how to cope. It was coming out as tears, exhausted and bewildered - his frightened heart, calling out for help in the only language it had. *I am afraid. I am stressed.*

As he cried, Greg kept his arms securely in place - just held him, and breathed with him, and let it come.

*I'll cope for you, darlin'. Just hide yourself behind me. We'll get you through.*

When the worst had passed, and Myke's fractured breath began to settle, Greg uncurled himself a little from the protective cocoon he had formed - eased the sheet back, checking. He cupped Mycroft's cheek with gentle fingers.

"Okay?" he murmured. Frightened grey eyes flashed into his, red with tears. "Hey... there you are..."

Fresh tears arose, glittering.

"Is that a worry off your mind?" he asked, softly.

Mycroft nodded, mute. He pressed his face back against Greg's chest, and swallowed as he reached up to dry his eyes.

Greg brushed back his hair, holding him close within the sheets.

"We're going to be fine," he whispered. "I know he scares you. I know the arsehole put you through hell - and so help me, I'll put it right. He's not laying a hand on you. *Ever.* Not once. Not while I live."

Mycroft took in a rush of air.

"He's - ph-physically -"

"Yeah? Big bastard, is he?" *Christ... it's a miracle he never hit you, darlin'." Doesn't matter. His days are numbered."

Greg cradled the back of Mycroft's head, watching him gently.

"We'll see the bastard sent down," he murmured. "For what he did to you. What he did to Sherlock. He'll pay for it. I promise."

Mycroft's fingers curled against Greg's back.

Greg hugged him, kissed his head, and stroked back the soft mess of his hair.

On an odd, fond whim, he took a fingertip and placed it between Mycroft's eyes. Myke's gaze
fuzzed as he tried to focus on it. Gently, Greg drew the outline of a heart upon his forehead - slow,
careful, letting him feel what it was.

Delighted confusion softened Mycroft's eyes. As the end of the heart met its beginning point, he
blinked.

Greg smiled, admiring his invisible handiwork.

The colour rose in Mycroft's cheeks.

"I'm sorry Sherlock dragged you into all this," Greg said. "Really, I am."

Mycroft's shoulder sank. "I - don't know how to deal with him, Greg." He gazed down at Greg's
collarbones, lost. "I can't bear him when he's like this. I don't understand how you tolerate it."

Greg gave a huff.

"Not seen him this bad before," he admitted. "I've seen him on his obsessions, but... he's excelled
himself this time."

Mycroft huffed, nestling closer. He laid his cheek against Greg's shoulder.

"He's still a bloody child, when he wishes to be. Our mother indulged this... spoiled, vicious streak
he has. She found it amusing. Charming. He resents my every attempt to instill some restraint into
him - just as he resented our father. And he delights that I've now proven myself as human as all
the other people he scorns... this whole issue of my sexual orientation is an excuse, Greg. Nothing
more."

Greg listened, stroking his hair. "M'not surprised you didn't want to tell him, love."

The very thought seemed to take the breath from Mycroft's lungs.

"Mocking me," he whispered. "Jeering at me." His expression contracted with pain. "The very
concept of my - s-sexuality is laughable to Sherlock. The glee in his eyes, when he realised that we
- ... God almighty, I can't bear it. I will send a handwritten card to every person in this country
before I confide in him."

Greg took this in. "Darlin', you... know he knows, don't you? I mean... the second he saw us..."

"Of course he knows." Mycroft shivered, looking up at Greg. "My - r-reaction probably gave him
more conclusive proof than if we'd admitted it freely. I'm - sorry. Truly. I just couldn't - "

"Hey... why're you saying sorry to me? Nothing to be sorry about." Greg leant down, quietly
kissing the tip of his nose. "'Specially not to me."

Mycroft flushed, distressed. "I - denied you," he said. "Brutally."

"And?" said Greg, searching his eyes. "We'd just had an emergency flight to London. Thought
we'd get there to find him maimed. Instead, we arrive and he starts demonstrating exactly why
someone might want to kick his head in. It's fine, darlin'. I mean it."

Mycroft's expression creased with guilt.

"Nonetheless," he said, lowering his eyes, "it - it wasn't something I - ... to end our weekend, with
that..."
Greg took his chin in one hand.

"Oi," he said, softly. "I'm up here."

Mycroft nervously lifted his gaze.

Greg smiled, brushing his thumb along Myke's jaw - a little stubble there - the first hint of red.

"We were making love," he said. He watched Mycroft's pupils swell to twice their size. "We were close, and we were safe. We'd been talking about coming home, trying to keep things the same, and you were worried that we couldn't... then suddenly we were standing in a hospital, Sherlock battered to a pulp - and me and all my promises must've looked like fairytales."

Mycroft hesitated, his eyes anxious - but still in Greg's.

"You were already beating yourself up," Greg said. "Then Sherlock was pulling out all the things you try to keep quiet, just for yourself - all your happiness - showing you it all. Showing you what you thought you could have. A few days' peace. Someone to make love with. Someone to look after you for once, not expect you to look after them. Might even've felt like Sherlock got attacked because you were in the Lakes with me... and it was tearing you to bits. I know it was. I'm not surprised you needed control. I'm not surprised you went into lock-down."

Mycroft flushed, distressed. "I'm sorry - "

Greg's heart gripped. "You can stop saying that to me... I'm serious."

"I - wish to say it." Mycroft's voice broke. "I hurt you. I said unbearable things to you."

"Sherlock was playing you like his bloody violin, Myke. I don't blame you for saying it."

"I blame myself."

"Well," Greg said, his chest heaving, "don't... please."

He looked into Mycroft's eyes, holding his face in his hands.

"There's no need... alright?" He bit his lip, watching Myke struggle. "D'you want me to talk to Sherlock? Tell him the situation?"

Mycroft's pupils shrunk. He made a tight sound.

"Please," he said at once. "Please - do not do that."

"It might get him off your back with this 'hypocrisy' crap, love..."

Mycroft's arms tightened around his waist. "No," he said, in desperation. "Please. This is - my shelter, Greg. My quiet, perfect shelter. Please... do not ask me to bring Sherlock into that."

He gazed into Greg's eyes, halfway to terrified.

"I can't trust him to be kind," he said. "Not at all. And I can't handle his bullish bloody mockery. Not now. Not when I'm - ... n-not when we are trying to - ..."

Greg pulled him close.

"Hey... hey, it's okay... I understand. I won't say a thing."
Mycroft curled against his shoulder, shaking. "Promise me."

Greg's heart was thudding. He kissed his lover's forehead. "I promise, darlin'. He'll hear nothing about it from me."

"Th-Thank you..." Mycroft inhaled with a shudder. "That is - greatly reassuring..."

Quiet folded itself back around them. Greg rubbed between his shoulders, slowly, listening to Myke's pulse through his skin. He felt it settle more and more with each passing minute, and Myke's shy stroking of his back resumed.

*There you go, sweetheart... all safe.*

Proud, loving, Greg kissed along his shoulder. As he did, he remembered something - and gave a small huff.

"What?" Mycroft murmured.

"I... told your brother he's a tosser. Just before I came running after you."

Mycroft's snort was a delight.

"Disgraceful," he said. "My flesh and blood."

Greg grinned, petting the curve of his spine. "Think he'll expect a written apology from me, too?"

Mycroft sighed, leaning into the touch.

"I suppose he can expect what he likes," he murmured. "Whether he receives it is another matter..."

Chuckling, Greg stroked his nose back along Mycroft's shoulder. He gave its trickle of freckles a gentle kiss.

"Your assistant knows about me now," he said. "Is that okay?"

Mycroft made a small sound of distress.

"Mm... I'm - not quite sure how I'll look her in the eye."

"She was nothing but worried about you last night. Only wanted to know you were okay."

"Anthea is - very competent. Very dependable." Mycroft hesitated. "I'd like to hope she'll take this development in her stride. Her support would be invaluable. I can hardly demand it, but... i-if she chooses to give it..."

Greg smiled slightly.

"I bet PAs have been asked to keep worse secrets than 'I have a boyfriend'," he said. "On the grand scheme of things, she's still one of the lucky ones."

Mycroft huffed. "Yes... put that way, I... suppose she rather is."

More gentle quiet fell.

Greg realised, with a rush, that this had gone well. They'd never had to talk like this before. He suddenly felt like he knew Mycroft more - another layer deeper - another shadow drawn back,
another secret put to rest. On the way back from the hospital, he'd feared the whole thing might be over. He'd worried Myke wouldn't be able to cope - would just cut him off, and that'd be it - like it had never been.

As he held his lover close, and felt him breathe, Greg realised what he'd not understood.

He spent so much time worrying that Myke was about to turn tail on him - dash away, take for the trees, and be gone.

He'd never contemplated that Mycroft would come back.

Opening the door last night - finding him there on the stairs, cold and frightened, dirty and distressed... something had changed.

Mycroft might not have made the phone call - but he'd answered it. He'd come here to be safe. He'd had MI5 reaching out for him, Anthea reaching out for him, security experts hunting the capital for him, all trying to find him.

He hadn't wanted them to find him, so they hadn't.

He'd wanted Greg.

This wasn't something fragile. Myke wasn't about to vanish. The first thing he'd said last night was sorry, and he'd not left Greg's arms since they'd woken up. All he seemed to want was to know things were okay.

Maybe it was okay to share in return. To offer a worry. To ask, and hope Myke understood.

Greg's heart filled with a breath.

"Hey..." He brushed back a wave of Myke's hair, telling himself to be brave. "Can I ask something?"

His lover's eyes softened, watching him. "Of course..."

"It's... maybe an emotional subject," said Greg. "Just seems like we've had an emotional couple of days, and... well, it means I'll know. And I can make my peace, either way."

Mycroft waited, a little nervous.

Greg quietly kissed his forehead.

"We might not agree," he murmured. "And that's alright. I'm not asking you to find a solution. It just... matters to me that you know how I feel. Is that fine?"

Mycroft hesitated, gently kissing his jaw. "I - understand."

Greg was suddenly glad they were doing this in bed, naked in the half-dark. It made it easier to be honest.

It made it easier to ask for honesty, too.

He took a breath. Christ, here goes...

"Will this... always need to be a secret for you? What we have, I mean. You and me."
He said no more, not wanting to fill the space with things for the truth to fit itself around. He wanted to hear it as it was, whole and unaltered - and painful, if it had to be.

Mycroft was quiet for some time. He looked down at Greg's chest - taking in his hair, his collarbones.

A flush rose up in his cheeks.

"Talk to me?" Greg said at last, feeling his pulse tighten.

Mycroft lifted his eyes - anxious, and uneasy.

"You - knew, Greg. From the outset." He swallowed, pale. "You knew that I occupy a... a position of power. You knew what restrictions that would place upon me. You chose to engage me, all the same."

Greg held his eyes. He willed himself to stay calm.

"I don't know power like you do," he said. "I don't know the subtleties - but I want to understand, love. Help me get my head round it. What would change, if people knew?"

Fear tightened Mycroft's face.

"I would be subject to widespread mockery," he said.

"What - makes you think that?"

Mycroft's gaze flashed. It dropped back down between their chests, his shoulders stiffening.

"I know the climate of power," he replied. "I know the things that are said. My - reputation is such that - ... I operate as a machine of governance, Greg. The work is my purpose. A widely-shared personal life would not be conducive to - ...

He shuttered into silence, distressed.

Greg stroked between his shoulders; he spoke in gentle tones.

"I get that a softer side isn't good in politics," he said. "I can see that. And I'd rather kick myself in the teeth than cause you problems - but... are - all of your colleagues single, sweetheart?"

Mycroft said nothing, his eyes locked into place on Greg's collarbones.

Greg proceeded with care.

"So, I mean... if work contacts knew you had a partner... no details, just that you're not single - and your partner's called Greg - would that honestly cause you difficulties?"

Mycroft's expression pulled. Without hesitation, he said, "Yes."

Greg's heart tensed. "What makes you sure?"

"Y-You are - ..." The word stuck in Mycroft's throat.

Greg made an awful guess. "Male."

Mycroft said nothing, shaking.
"Is politics *that* homophobic?" Greg asked him, pained. "I mean... even just knowing that you're gay, would people *really*...?"

Mycroft said nothing, paler than ever. He laid his head, mute, upon Greg's shoulder.

Greg trailed a hand through his hair, taking a quiet breath.

"D'you not have *any* gay colleagues?" he asked.

Mycroft took a moment to answer. "A - very small number."

"Are they treated badly?"

"They're - subject to - ... behind closed doors."

*Easy. Gently.* "And... everyone else gets off scot-free, do they?"

Mycroft lifted his head, a small frown forming between his eyebrows. "What - do you mean?"


Mycroft's gaze darkened. "Politics is not a kind profession," he said.

*Easy.* "Do people say stuff about you?" Greg asked.

Mycroft his tongue. "Some of it more creative than the rest."

Greg held his eyes. "Myke... why do - gay slurs scare you more than what you get already?"

Mycroft's forehead contracted; he looked down.

For a long time he was silent, searching Greg's collarbones in silence as he tried to find an answer.

At last he said, bewildered,

"I - do not know..."

Greg inhaled. "Did Pritchard make you keep things quiet, love?"

Mycroft fell into silence again, his eyes shutting briefly.

"Yes," he said. He sounded far away. "He - said it would impact our reputations. Prospects. Future careers. I agreed with him. It very likely would have. I've risen to my position on a reputation of... r-rather cold-blooded focus - and I doubt that I would have done, if it had been commonly known that - ... and now to start - testing that - ... Greg, I..."

He shifted, and looked up into Greg's eyes. Greg saw him take a second to prepare himself.

"You... wish to...?" Mycroft said.

Greg looked back at him, his heart suddenly pounding. They couldn't afford to risk misunderstanding right now. They'd come too close - and they'd come too far.

"I'm not asking you to do anything," he said. "Right now, I'm happy. Happy as we are. Just - i-in the future. Yeah, I... I guess I'm - ..."

Mycroft read his eyes as he spoke - watching, processing in silence.
Greg carried on, feeling his throat squeeze.

"I liked it," he said. "In the Lakes... what we had, for a while. I liked the feeling you were - ... I don't know. Proud to be with me. Felt safe with me. It felt good. And I... I maybe didn't like the feeling in the hospital."

Pain scattered across Mycroft's face.

"I know it was Sherlock," Greg added, his chest tight. "And I know you were panicking - and I know that if it'd happened in better circumstances, we'd both have told Sherlock we're just good friends, and to bugger off out of other people's business - and it wouldn't be a problem - just..."

*Christ, please don't freak out. Please. Not now."

*Please just take this as it is.*

"I'm maybe worried this'll be it," he said. "You know? No matter how long we're - ... no matter how close we get, and no matter what I mean to you... I'll always be a secret. Something that you hide. Something you don't want the world to ever see. And I'll - I'll never be - ..."

He couldn't say it. He couldn't say the words.

He swallowed, looking down.

Mycroft's gaze wracked with despair. "Greg..." he whispered. His voice shook in the quiet. "Greg, I - I work in politics. Strength is everything."

Greg's heart twisted.

"Hurts," he managed. "Knowing I'm your weakness."

Mycroft paled.

"There is no greater honour," he breathed.

Greg gazed back at him, feeling his chest heave. *This is where you come when the world falls apart, but somehow I'm your weakness? And somehow it's an honour?*

"I'd... rather be your strength, Myke," he said.

Mycroft's gaze faded. Greg watched him, lost.

"You - could be both," Mycroft whispered. He swallowed, laying his hands on Greg's shoulders. "I-If you wished..."

Greg looked down between them, saying nothing.

He told himself this wasn't a conversation he'd expected to finish happy. At least it had been said. It was there now - and they'd live with it, and cope with it.

As he glanced back into Mycroft's eyes, and saw them start to shine, his heart strained.

"Don't cry, darlin'..." He reached up, brushed his fingers around Mycroft's jaw, and pulled him close. "Love, I... I don't want you to cry..."

As their lips met, Mycroft stiffened - with discomfort, guilt or pain, Greg didn't know. He couldn't
tell. The moments wore on, and Greg stroked through his hair, gently kissing his mouth and not letting him go - and as each nervous breath passed, he felt Myke slowly begin to soften. He began to kiss Greg back, the first cautious stir of his lips, then seemed to rediscover his hands on Greg's shoulders. He quietly took hold.

As Mycroft's tongue appeared to stroke his own, Greg drew a deep breath through his nose. He tilted Mycroft over onto his back, still cradling his jaw, and eased on top of him. Mycroft quivered, gripping his shoulders in both hands.

When they finally came apart, Myke was distressed - flushed pink, his eyes glossy, his mouth shaking with words he couldn't say. He gazed up at Greg, afraid.

Greg gazed back at him through the darkness.

He was starting to understand what he wanted to be to Mycroft Holmes.

It felt like this realisation should have come suddenly - fireworks and starlight and soaring strings, one glorious burst of light that made everything alright in an instant.

Instead, it had come slowly - day-by-day, moment-by-moment - and in many ways, it didn't make things alright. It made them far more complicated. It made everything fragile, and fraught, and for now it left him feeling heavy - not light - and though peaceful, he was nervous too.

Even now, he couldn't be certain.

He didn't want to name it. It felt too vulnerable to put a name to it - too new, even after all this time. He wanted the chance too much. He wanted memories. Benches on hillsides, quiet weekends away, birthday gifts and passing years. He realised with a lurch that he'd cope somehow - there was no other option. If the first that anyone knew was when a will got read out in a solicitor's office, and horrified minor relatives discovered a grieving widower in their midst, then so be it.

He didn't care if it was secret.

Just so long as it was real.

It was too perfect to risk looking at it properly yet - too much like wishful thinking. But it was there at the edge of his sight. He could feel it.

Real love wasn't just roses and fireworks and bursts of light.

Real love had thorns, and ghosts, and grief. There were things it couldn't change. There were things it had to grow around.

It was still love.

It was still beautiful.

Greg swallowed, realising suddenly what he had to say.

"I'm in love with you," he whispered - he watched Mycroft's pupils blow. "This is big for me," he went on, starting to shake. "This is - huge. And - a-and I know you want to keep us private, and make me your shelter - and I know you feel like secret keeps it safe - and I get it, beautiful. I do. Please, please understand that I get it. And if we talk all this through, and you decide in the end that it's a deal-breaker - that this has to be private for good - forever - or you - you just can't?"
As Greg's voice tightened, Mycroft's expression cracked. He pushed his fingers in desperation through Greg's hair, silent tears erupting in his eyes.

"I'll find a way to deal with it," Greg breathed. "I like you. I - really like you. I want to be with you, even if nobody knows. If I never get to own a single photo of us, I want to be with you. If I get sad bachelor jokes from my brothers for the rest of my days, I want to be with you. You're right - I knew who you were, when we - ... and I fell in love with you anyway. And I'm glad I did. And I get that you don't want anyone to know about me, and I'll do it, darlin'. Just - p-please understand - please understand it'll hurt me."

A sudden weight began to give way in his chest. The words left him in a rush, falling and cracking and crumbling, as Mycroft cried in silence.

"And don't make me hear it, Myke... not like that. Not vicious like that. And I'll need - ... w-when we're alone - please. Please make it real for me. If nobody knows you belong to me, then I need to know. Please. Because - b-because - ..."

Oh, shit. Shit, no. Stop. Stop...

"Because I've been there - I've b-been the dumb bastard sat at home while she's out, wedding ring in her purse - t-telling the world she's single - a-and if you're going to make me live all that again, I will - you know I will - because I love you - just - please - "

Pain wrenched through Greg's chest. Something broke.

It broke for good.

As he felt his face twist with the first desperate sob, Mycroft's fingers drove into his hair.

They scrunched, tight - and as the two of them kissed, Mycroft's tears became Greg's. It didn't matter which one of them was crying. Greg's heart hauled itself into his throat as he sobbed, cradling his Mycroft's face in his hands. You. You, for good. You, even if.

You.

He saw Mycroft off at the door.

An ordinary taxi - navy suit, red eyes and slicked-back hair - Greg barefoot on the step in his dressing gown, pale.

It didn't feel quite real.

"Hey," he whispered, as the taxi pulled up. Just a minute more. One last minute, before I have to give you back.

Mycroft reached for him at once. He stepped into Greg's arms without a pause, and wrapped him up tightly in the doorway.

Greg lowered his voice, swallowing. His heart thudded between them.
"Love you." He held onto Mycroft's shoulders. "Love you, darlin'. Mean it."

Mycroft's hands buried in the back of his dressing gown.

"I adore you." He gripped Greg, inhaling deeply. "You are my world. My entire world. I will prove it."

Greg's throat contracted. "Talk more tonight?"

"Yes. Yes, of course. As long as you need."

"'kay." Christ, don't go. Stay here and cry with me. Make the world wait for me. "L-Leave early, will you? Come home safe."

Greg shut his eyes.

"Bastard'll know you tend to work late," he muttered. "If he's watching your flat, he'll be watching your office. Take a different door. Get a taxi. Get out of there by five - come home to me."

Mycroft's lips pressed to his temple. It was a promise.

"I will." He paused, still holding Greg in his arms. "Your - car should be here this evening. I asked Anthea to go herself. To pack our things."

Greg reached instinctively to stroke his hair - found the slick, straightened tips at the nape of his neck, and faltered. He kissed Mycroft's shoulder instead. "I - s'pose if she knows now... might as well be her."

Mycroft paused. He stirred, took Greg's face in both hands, and looked him in the eye.

"I love you," he whispered.

Greg's heart wretched. He couldn't bear it.

His eyes closed, throat squeezing around the words. "Go," he said, his voice thick. "Get off to work. You're gonna be late."

Mycroft's hands shook. "Yes, I am..." he breathed - and leant in close.

They kissed until Greg's bare feet burned on the cold tiles of the entrance hall. His hands shook on Mycroft's coat collar.

He pulled himself together, and pulled himself away.

"Go," he said. "Go, Myke. Before I make you stay."

Mycroft kissed him one last time. "I'll come home early," he said. "To be with you."

Greg's heart strained. Christ almighty, this is it. This is for good. There'll be nobody else. He dragged his face into a smile, his eyes bright and aching.

"See that you bloody do," he said.

Humour scattered through Mycroft's expression. He steeled himself, and finally stepped away.

As he opened the taxi door, Greg called after him,
"Text me."

Mycroft nodded, gripping the top of the door. "I shall."

Greg hesitated. A taxi driver, the open street. "Love you."

Mycroft's face opened. His hand tightened on the door; his shoulders raised with a breath. "I love you, too. Very much. Have a good day." He got into the car.

He shut the door, and it set off.

Greg watched the taxi all the way down the street.

As it turned a distant corner, he pushed both hands back through his hair, pressed his palms to his eyes, and shut them tight.

*God help me... I'm all in here...*

This time last year, he'd been a boring forty-something divorcee. He was now a political mistress. *Life's full of surprises.* He had to go to work somehow - shower, get dressed and get some breakfast, and act like this was just a normal day.

A normal day hunting down a rogue millionaire, who was planning to maim his lover at any moment.

*At least I'm never bored...*

Greg shut the front door, swallowed it all away and headed back upstairs - to find a suit that hid four days of stubble.
Cloak

Chapter Notes

For those who'd like the authentic experience for the scene with Mycroft, a recording of Mascagni's Cavalleria rusticana - Intermezzo.

Only the soul that loves is happy.
- Johann Goethe, 'Egmont'

It was visiting hours - just after one. No need for the badge today.

Greg made his way along the corridor with his hands in his pockets, suspecting this wouldn't be easy.

No, it's alright... I understand.
I appreciate that you told me.
And an update on his progress would be a reassurance. M xxx
Received 12:49

Though if you could add 'do not resuscitate' to his chart as you take your leave. M xxx
Received 12:50

you dont mean that... xxx
Sent 12:51

Part of me does. M xxx
Received 12:51

I know beautiful. Gonna try my best not to strangle him with his drip for you. xxx
Sent 12:52

"Tried my best" will do.
Received 12:53
I'm sure you remember. But for my peace of mind... what you promised this morning was very important to me.

Received 12:54

Please do keep it. M xxx
Received 12:54

I remember xxx
Sent 12:54

if he gets too much I'll get up and just walk out xxx
Sent 12:55

Don't have to thank me for loving you... anything you want me to cook tonight? Name it and its yours xxx
Sent 12:56

Gregory Lestrade. M xxx
Received 12:57

christ... xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
Sent 12:57

Just heading in. talk when I'm out? xxx
Sent 12:58

Until then. M xxx
Received 12:58

As Greg opened the door, the patient glanced up from his phone.

As was usual with Sherlock, no surprise crossed his face - no real outward sign of recognition - but the sudden disinterest in his text message was telling enough. He moved the phone to the bedside cabinet without a word, his eyes fixed on Greg.

Greg closed the door. He pulled a chair across to the bed, and sat down.

"I'm about to take a risk," he said.

Sherlock's gaze flickered.

"What risk?" he asked.

Greg held his eyes, very seriously.
"That you're a good man," he said. "And if you let me down on this, I'm not gonna be able to forgive you."

He kept his expression neutral, and his voice calm.

"We won't be friends, Sherlock - and I won't think you're a good man anymore. Okay?"

Sherlock considered this, making no reply.

"All I want is you to listen," Greg said, "and try to see things how your brother sees them. Promise me you'll give it a shot."

Sherlock's eyebrow gave a fractional quirk.

"I promise..." he said - with reluctance, but no sign of insincerity.

Greg rewarded him with a half-smile.

"Good... 'cause I want this sorted. I want things to be easy, for everyone. And I need you to know that I'm on a promise, too - so I'm not telling you a thing. Mainly because there's nothing to tell. Right?"

Sherlock processed this, studying him. "I see..."

"But I'm going to try and help you understand some stuff - so you can let go of it," Greg said, raising an eyebrow. "And move on."

Sherlock said nothing, guarded. Christ... the two of you are so bloody alike... and you don't even see it...

"Why d'you think your brother's a hypocrite?" Greg asked, to begin with.

Sherlock answered at once.

"He attempted to subvert my exposure of Nicholas Pritchard, even though he himself is engaged in a homosexual relationship with you."

"Okay," said Greg. "Firstly, he's not - "

" - noted..."

" - and secondly, he didn't stop it. Your brother leaked it to The Guardian. He hung Pritchard out to dry, mate - even with Pritchard threatening him."

"Only because you changed his mind," Sherlock muttered.

"As a friend," Greg said - and spotted the pleased flash in Sherlock's eyes that he'd gotten it right. "A friend who's LGBT, yeah. And he's now making Pritchard reap what he's sown. So why all the nastiness?"

Sherlock said nothing for a moment.

He then lifted his chin, with one delicate flicker of an eyebrow, and asked,

"Why are you happy with the situation?"
"What situation?" said Greg.

Sherlock turned his eyes to the ceiling.

Greg reached into his pocket for gum.

"Your brother and I are friends," he said, unwrapping the packet. "Have been since last time you got yourself hospitalised. Myke and I meet up for drinks quite often. Your brother's got a demanding job - so I'm happy to fit meeting up for drinks around him. 'Cause I like getting a drink together, and it doesn't bother me to work around Myke's needs. That's why."

Sherlock followed this, his eyes slightly narrowed.

"You're talking in metaphor..." he said. "But - it isn't comparable, Lestrade. You're not helpfully shifting a schedule around Mycroft's work hours. You're allowing him to treat you the way Nicholas Pritchard treated six separate male escorts. You're complicit in your own denigration. A rich man's dirty secret, by agreement."

Greg took a moment, placing the gum quietly in his mouth.

"I'm not," he said. "Because there's nothing going on between me and your brother. And even if there was, Sherlock... you wouldn't really know how your brother treats me. 'Cause you're not there. You don't know what we've decided works for us."

Sherlock's brow wrinkled.

"I have plentiful evidence of how my brother treats people," he said. "The gaps are easily filled."

"Ah," said Greg - holding up a hand. "No. They're not."

Sherlock blinked, disarmed.

"Because you're missing an entire set of data," Greg went on. "You've seen how your brother treats strangers. You've seen how your brother treats colleagues. You've seen how he treats you, especially when you're going out of your way to piss him off. You've not seen how he treats people who're friends - lovers - and, just to remind you, I don't know how he treats a lover either. But you're assuming that your brother's like Pritchard. Some cruel and hypocritical arsehole. And he's not."

Sherlock searched his eyes, struggling to understand something.

"He was vile to you," he murmured. "In front of me. I heard it, Lestrade. You're... bewildering me."

Greg took a moment to get this right, chewing his gum.

"Mycroft was worried to hell about you... you know that?" He sat back in his chair. "He didn't speak the whole way to London in the helicopter. He was scared out of his head. People react badly when they're frightened."

Sherlock snorted.

"My brother finds me tiresome and irresponsible," he said, "by his own frequent admission. I doubt his care extends far beyond what our mother would say, if I came to harm."

Greg shook his head, slowly.
"Sorry, mate," he said. "You need to hear this. You're choosing what you want to see. You remember the drug den I hauled you out of? Back in January? Your brother didn't sleep for days. He just sat and watched you sleep. And I know it because I sat and watched him, watching you."

Sherlock said nothing, unmoved.

"You never learned how to be good brothers," Greg said, pained. "You've never given it a try. So he thinks you're an idiot who does things just to wind him up - and you think he's a prick who just wants to lord it over everyone. And neither of you are right."

Sherlock's silence continued. Greg could see him thinking, trying, considering past evidence, predicting possibilities, running patterns of behaviour through his head for analysis.

"D'you understand why Myke reacted so badly?"

Sherlock frowned. "He fears exposure."

Greg thought about it.

"In a way," he said. "But not rightful exposure, Sherlock. Not like Pritchard. Your brother's not cashing in on some anti-gay, right-wing family-man reputation, telling the papers that gay men shouldn't be allowed in the army then secretly getting into bed with me. Which, I'll add, he's never done."

Sherlock rolled his eyes, wordless.

"Your brother's just trying to keep his privacy private," Greg said. "It's not a crime. And you're getting way too much."

"'Too much'?"

"Poking around," said Greg. "Goading him. People get uneasy about this stuff, you know? It's personal. And your brother's pretty horrified with you marching across his sex life - which, once again, I'm not a part of."

Sherlock was silent for some time, watching him chew.

He then shook his head, lost. "You baffle me, Lestrade. Truly."

"Why?" said Greg, crossing one leg over the other. "What needs clearing up?"

"You don't seem to comprehend that my brother has manipulated you."

Greg raised an eyebrow. "How d'you mean?"

"He has engaged you in a sexual relationship which he has no intention of ever publicly acknowledging. He will continue to benefit from the presumption of heterosexuality - even if heartless heterosexuality - while reaping the benefits of your company. He's successfully bullied you into keeping this one-sided arrangement quiet for him, hiding his shame - and now into coming here, to persuade me to join you in this venture."

Greg snorted, soft.

"Your brother didn't ask me to come, mate. He'd probably have preferred me not to. But I wanted to, because I like you both - and I'd like to see you like each other, someday. That's why I'm here."
He hesitated, rolling his chewing gum around his mouth.

"And your brother's got good reason to worry about the world. I mean... Christ, Sherlock... look how you reacted! And you're surprised Myke doesn't want anybody to know?"

Sherlock held his gaze, quiet.

"Why does his privacy command a higher price than your pride, Lestrade?" he asked.

Greg almost smiled.

"Because I'm proud to be patient," he said. He watched Sherlock trying to understand, eyes narrowed, struggling to make this make sense. "Because he's growing right now, and he needs privacy to grow. Because this is a long game - and I'm on a team of two. That's why, mate."

Sherlock came to a conclusion.

"You hope it will change some day," he said. Before Greg could answer, he added, "It will not."

Greg's stomach tightened; he ignored it. "Thanks, Mystic Meg... and the lottery numbers?"

Pity flashed in Sherlock's eyes. "It will not change," he said, "because Mycroft has no reason to change. Why can you not see it? You are impossible to help, Lestrade."

Greg held in a sigh. Jesus, I can't sit here all afternoon.

"Okay," he said, weary. "Okay, look... you're talking like you're bravely protecting me from some mistreatment - and I never asked you to, Sherlock. I'll choose what I want. I'll make my peace with what I want. And - ultimately? What people do behind a bedroom door isn't your business."

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. "Hypocrisy is my business."

"Yeah, when a charity hires you," said Greg, despairing. "Pays you, to investigate some douche who thinks giving women the vote was a mistake. They didn't ask you to then work your way around the rest of the planet, did they? And where's my right to privacy in all this, mate? What've I ever done?"

Sherlock visibly bit his tongue.

"Can I put something to you?" Greg said, with every possible attempt at kindness.

Sherlock said nothing.

"I think you've gotten fixated on this," said Greg. "I know you do get fixated on things... and you know it too, Sherlock. So don't give me that look. Just... this is getting out of hand now."

Sherlock looked down at his knees, triangled against his chest beneath the hospital sheets. He took a moment to process.

"My brother is a hypocrite," he replied at last, quietly. "I will drop my 'fixation', as you so term it, when I hear from his own mouth that he too is gay. And that he is sorry."

Greg paused. He wondered if he'd really just heard what he'd heard.

He decided to carry on, with care.
"How long've you wondered if Myke's gay?" he asked.

Sherlock's gaze flickered. "I've known he is gay for some years."

"Five?" said Greg. "Ten?" He already knew the answer.

Sure enough, and without a pause, Sherlock said, "Twenty-five."

"So you'd be... fourteen?"

Sherlock's eyes remained fixed on his knees. He didn't reply.

If this was Mycroft, Greg would have taken a longer lead - settled him more, softened him more - taken time to set out a safe space in which something could be voiced.

But this was Sherlock, and he lived in facts.

"How long've you known that you're gay, mate?" Greg asked.

Sherlock didn't move. Several moments passed.

"The phrase 'to know'..." he said, at length.

Greg understood. He watched Sherlock with care, his heart squeezing.

"Does Mycroft know?"

Sherlock snorted, saying nothing.

Greg sat back in his chair, folding his arms. "There's a story, isn't there?" He fished his gum from behind his teeth. "Go on."

"Ask your darling 'Myke' for details," Sherlock said, coldly. "Then you can have yet another round of seeing him lie furiously to protect his own interests." His eyes flickered to Greg. "Is he forgiven yet, by the way?"

Greg frowned. "For?"

"'Andrew' Pritchard."

Greg searched Sherlock's face, his frown deepening.

"What's to forgive?" he said. "People do stupid things when they're scared. You're still a tosser, by the way. You knew you were going to cause trouble with all this. You knew he was your brother's ex. You did it anyway. When's Mycroft getting an apology?"

Sherlock snorted again, looking away.

"You should have 'welcome' tattooed on your forehead, Lestrade..."

It took Greg a second.

"Ah..." he said. "Doormat, am I?" He smiled, lifting one eyebrow. "It's called 'patience and understanding', Sherlock. It explains why I get on so well with you. And it's a fairly handy thing to have in a relationship." He dipped his head. "... that, as I've made clear, I am not having with your brother."
Sherlock tutted. His eyes searched dully across the opposite wall.

"Go on then," said Greg. "Tell me. Does your brother know?" At the continuing silence, he added, "Don't you want me to hear your version first?"

Sherlock's mouth flattened. "Mycroft is aware of the matter," he intoned.

"Is that what this 'hypocrite' thing is about?"

Sherlock said nothing for a second more - then finally moved.

He turned away from Greg, and curled up onto his side without a sound. The sheet drew up with him; it tucked itself tightly beneath his chin.

"I am tired, Lestrade." The voice came from somewhere within the mess of dark curls. "Please leave."

Greg bit the inside of his cheek.

"You know we're friends, Sherlock?" he said. "I want you both to be happy."

No response came.

"Have the doctors said when you'll be allowed out?" Greg asked.

There came a quiet snort from the pillow. "Several days," Sherlock said, vaguely. "Something about my spleen nearly rupturing."

*At least you're somewhere safe,* Greg thought, suppressing a sigh. *One less thing to worry about.* "How about I come see you at lunch tomorrow?"

Sherlock was silent for a second. "Why?"

"So I can check you're alright," said Greg. "See how you're feeling."

"So that Mycroft can continue to pressure me," Sherlock murmured, tired. "Through his puppet."

Greg took a moment.

He placed a hand gently on Sherlock's shoulder.

"M'not your brother's puppet," he said. Sherlock didn't move. "I'm trying to do you both a favour. He's not the person you think he is."

There was a long, uneasy pause.

"I know precisely who he is." Sherlock's voice came from somewhere painful - somewhere low in his mouth. "You will never have his acknowledgement, Lestrade. And I will never have his apology. Why should we expect them? Mycroft has all that he could ever want. The power, the privacy... and now you, too. Why should he relinquish his comfort for the sake of our 'feelings'?"

Greg said nothing, his heart thudding uneasily in the quiet.

Sherlock pulled the sheets higher around his throat.

"You've thrown your dignity around my brother like a cloak," he said. "To keep him safe. To keep
him warm... forgive me, Lestrade. But it's now my dearest wish to tear it off him with both hands. Do shut the door as you go."

---

Greg caught the smell of roasting garlic from halfway up the stairs.

It grew stronger as he reached his floor. He approached the door of his flat, wondering, turning his key in his hand. As he opened the door, his nose was overwhelmed with the scent of tomato and herbs - and his eyes were filled with candlelight.

The table by the window was set for two - napkins, cutlery, glasses. Soft music played from the stereo. It was *Intermezzo*, Greg realised with a jolt. *Cavalleria Rusticana*. They'd seen it together in June. He'd listened to it a hundred times since, sitting here alone in an evening - texting Mycroft - talking about everything and nothing. The lights were all out, and in their place, tealights fluttered on every surface - thirty tiny candles, at least, glittering in quiet pools of light within the darkness. The place was tidy, and beautiful, and warm.

As Greg gazed at his transformed flat, overwhelmed, a voice spoke from the kitchen doorway.

"You're... a little early."

Greg looked around.

Mycroft - candlelit - the blue-grey jumper Greg loved; the blue-grey eyes he loved more. His hair was loose and soft, and he was standing on Greg's faded kitchen lino in his socks. He had a bottle of red wine and a corkscrew in his hands.

His nervous gaze shone in hope of approval.

Greg's heart heaved behind his ribs.

*Make it real for me*, he'd said.

He closed the front door, feeling the lump thicken in his throat. He locked it, put his work-bag down, and crossed the lounge in silence to the doorway.

As he gently took the wine and the corkscrew, Mycroft flushed. Greg put them aside; he gathered Mycroft's face into his hands.

A voice spoke in the back of his mind.

*You will never have his acknowledgement, Lestrade.*

As Mycroft's arms slid around his waist, Greg's entire world seemed to breathe. Myke trembled as they kissed, responding shyly to the stroke of Greg's lips. His hands came to rest on Greg's chest; they curled around the lapels of his coat, and pulled it off for him, stroking his shoulders as they came free, easing it down his arms. He shivered as Greg let the coat drop without a care to the floor. Greg wrapped his arms around Mycroft, and kissed him ever more deeply.

"I said I'd cook..." he murmured, between kisses.

At the sound of his voice, Mycroft's hands tightened in his shirt.
"So you did." His grey eyes glittered in the candlelight. "And then I got here first."

Greg felt his heart squeeze.

"You didn't need to do all this," he said.

"I assure you, I did." Mycroft stroked his nose against Greg's. "The very least I could do."

Christ, beautiful... if you just let the world see you like this... even for a second...

"I've spent the day thinking," Mycroft said, as his eyes trailed across Greg's face. "Considering my priorities. And I've realised I need you to know, Greg... what you are to me."

He glanced down at his hands, resting on Greg's chest.

"I never thanked you for my birthday," he said. "For your kindness. Your patience. The more distress and inconvenience I cause you, the more patient you seem to become... and I suspect, very deeply, that I do not deserve you."

"Beautiful..." Greg's heart pounded beneath Mycroft's hands, his breath tight. "Love, don't... don't say that..."

Mycroft lowered his gaze once more.

"I'd be alone if it weren't for you." He swallowed, closing his eyes. "I would have lived and grown old and died, believing that love is not real - that I am not worth someone's patience - that there is no such thing as making love..."

He hesitated, glancing into Greg's eyes. Fear softened his face.

"Thank you, Greg. You are... rather the light of my life - and you are wonderful, and I... the thought that perhaps you and I can share each other's company for some time to come makes me happier than... than I could ever, ever have..."

God almighty.

It crossed Greg's heart, with a lurch, that if he'd been in possession of a ring, this would be a moment in which to do something momentous.

Instead, he pulled Mycroft into his arms.

They swayed together, slowly. Greg stroked his fingers through Mycroft's hair, as strings played and the darkness of his flat glimmered all around them.

Let it be me, he thought. He kissed Mycroft's jaw, sealing it - a silent prayer. His heart beat with every word of it. Please. I'll give you time, beautiful. Just please, let it be me.

It was a long time before either of them spoke.

"What did Sherlock say," Mycroft asked, "to make you quiet this afternoon?"

Greg couldn't help a smile.

"Tried not to be," he said. "Sorry you picked up on that, love."

"Something on your mind?"
Greg sighed. He'd thought of little else.

"Not sure if he's just... being dramatic, but..." He looked into Myke's eyes, pained. "Did you -

know he's gay?"

Mycroft hesitated.

"I - assumed he'd fallen into adopted asexuality... as I had." He held the question in his mouth for a moment. "Is - Watson - ?"

"I don't know," Greg replied. *God help us, I hope so.* "Sherlock - said you knew. Clamped up about it. Wouldn't tell me any more."

Mycroft looked uncomfortable.

"I'd... hardly say I 'knew'..." he muttered. "There was an ugly incident with our father when he was a teenager, but... once the dust had all settled, nothing more was said on the matter..."

"An - 'incident'?"

Mycroft's expression flickered. "That word," he said. "Forgive me... a disagreement. Sherlock chose to declare his burgeoning sense of identity to our parents one summer. It was rather poorly received."

Something was starting to make awful sense.

"When exactly was this?" Greg asked. "Did Sherlock know about you, at the time?"

Mycroft's eyes fogged in the candlelight.

"He was - perhaps fourteen? It was before he'd acquired himself definitive proof, but... I suppose he was as observant then as he is now..."

Greg bit his lip. "Were you nearby? When your dad...?"

"Yes," Mycroft said. He searched Greg's gaze, concerned. "Yes, I was granted a front row seat to the whole spectacle. Sherlock announced it at dinner. Our mother nearly collapsed. Our father almost choked himself shouting. It was horrendous."

Greg's heart ached. "And what did you do? During the argument, I mean."

"Very little." Mycroft hesitated."Except wish myself out of existence on the spot. And do my best not to catch the attention of our father... why?"

*Christ.* Greg breathed out, slowly.

"Love, I - think this 'hypocrisy' thing might go back further than we thought...

Mycroft seemed to brace himself. "What do you mean?"

"Sherlock's... pretty determined to hear you admit you're gay," Greg said. He continued with care. "*And* that you're sorry... I don't think this is recent. It's been aggravated by this whole Pritchard thing, but... he's been rejecting your help all of his adult life, hasn't he? Just... doesn't seem to want to know you?"

Mycroft paled. "Are you suggesting - "
Greg bit his lip. "I - might be, beautiful."

"That my failure to dramatically reveal myself," Mycroft breathed, "and take my fair share of our father's wrath - "

"Myke, your - brother doesn't seem to see it that way... maybe he feels like you didn't defend him."

"Then he has clearly forgotten everything he knew of our father." Mycroft began to shake. "The man was - not to be challenged. In anything. The discovery over dinner that both his sons were engaging in perversion would hardly have somehow assuaged his - "

Greg intervened.

He reached up, and took Mycroft's jaw back into his hands.

"Hey," he said. Mycroft faltered into silence. "Is that your dad's voice I'm hearing? 'Cause I'm taking that word off you. Right now."

Mycroft gazed at him, wide-eyed.

"Neither you nor Sherlock are perverts," Greg said. "Nor am I. Nor is anybody. You've internalised a lot of crap - m'afraid I'm not letting it fly."

Mycroft shuddered, covering his face.

"Dear God..." he whispered into his palms. "Greg, I... I'm sorry..."

"S'fine, love... these things take time to wash clean. We'll get you there." Greg bit his lip. "In the meantime... what do we do about your brother?"

Mycroft took a moment to think, breathing into his hands.

"I appreciate that he was - hurt," he said at last, uneasily, "by our father's - ... but I fail to see how my sharing in his suffering would have helped." He looked up at Greg, weary. "Sherlock's right to horrify our father was no more valid than my right to share only what I wish."

Greg listened, his heart heavy.

"And," Mycroft added, with discomfort, "I'll point out that Sherlock's current actions deride your right to privacy. He shows no hesitation in treating you as collateral damage... nor a shred of remorse for it."

Greg supposed it was true. He rubbed Myke's arms, giving him the space to speak.

"This is... point-scoring, Greg. No more." Mycroft regarded Greg very seriously, pale. "It enrages Sherlock to have information denied to him. All the information in the world belongs to Sherlock. He can't cope to be lied to. Tell me it isn't true."

Greg couldn't fight a smile. He glanced down, pulling in a breath.

"I can't tell you that," he admitted. "I wouldn't even try..." He readied himself. "Myke?"

"Mm?"

"If - this is 'just point-scoring'..."
Mycroft's eyes shuttered. "Don't you dare."

"Noted," Greg said. "With a condition... that I'm allowed to point out you're the bigger person here."

"My life," Mycroft said, "in a sentence."

He stared into Greg's eyes, his expression set with pain.

"Always the bigger person," he said. "Always the responsible child. The older one. The sensible one. Uncomplaining, and therefore forgotten. The one whose needs and preferences can quite comfortably be put aside. When is it my turn to be the smaller person, Greg?"

Greg stroked down Mycroft's arms. He took his hands, and lifted them to his mouth.

"Right now," he said. "To me, your feelings come first on this." He held Mycroft's eyes, kissing his fingers. "And that's the end of it."

Mycroft hesitated, clearly expecting another conditional clause.

Greg simply squeezed his hands.

"I mean it, beautiful. If you're done with your brother, you're done. I won't say another word about it."

Mycroft's expression tensed.

"I - never said I was 'done' with - ..." He shifted uneasily. "Merely exhausted. As usual. As ever."

He looked down at their hands, still joined.

His fingers curled with Greg's.

"Sherlock's interference causes friction," he mumbled, "in places I'd much rather there be none. I wish it wouldn't."

Greg huffed.

"What places are these?" he asked, softly. "No friction here..." He brought Mycroft's hands back to his mouth. "I know Sherlock's stressing you out. I hate it. Honestly I'd want to sit you both down in a room, and talk about this... but," he added, seeing the frightened flash of Mycroft's eyes, "you've told me how you feel. And that's the final word for me - yours. We're done talking about it, darlin'. Sherlock can just make his peace."

Mycroft said nothing. He looked as if he were unhappy, but unsure why. He gripped Greg's hands, glanced downwards, and seemed to release a held breath.

His thoughts were interrupted by a quiet beeping from the kitchen.

"That - ..." He hesitated. "I should - ..."

Greg smiled, letting go of his fingers.

"Sure, love," he said. "Don't let your hard work go to waste."

"Are you ready to...?"
Greg's eyes shone. "Starving."

Mycroft gave him a small smile. He moved over to the oven, reached for gloves, and pulled them on.

Greg leant in the kitchen doorway to watch.

"Have you had any progress with...?" Mycroft asked, leaning down.

"Nothing worth bringing home. M'sorry." Greg folded his arms, withholding a sigh. "All Pritchard's friends say they've not seen him in months. Weird, isn't it?"

Mycroft huffed, pulling a tray of garlic bread carefully from the oven. "Mm. How curious."

"Have your lot heard anything?"

"'My lot'..." Mycroft placed the tray on the oven top. "Nothing of significance. I'm loathe to divert too many official resources towards locating him. I - don't wish to give my superiors the impression that I'm losing control of an unruly private life, and neglecting the needs of the nation to attend to it."

"But - he's made threats against you, hasn't he?"

"Copious," Mycroft said, now lifting a glass casserole dish of chicken cacciatore from the oven. Greg's stomach growled; it looked amazing.

"Surely that's important enough for work to intervene," he said. "I mean... if you're in danger, darlin'..."

"Copious threats," Mycroft said, uneasily, "and all of them laced with copious personal detail... detail that I'm disinclined to share with my colleagues."

Understanding dawned. "Ah."

Mycroft removed the lid of the casserole dish, unleashing a fresh wave of tomato and garlic into the air. "You see my predicament."

"I do." Greg slid his hands into his pockets, biting his cheek. "Looks like it's down to Scotland Yard to save the day, huh? God help us."

Mycroft shot him a half-smile, reaching for tongs.

"Scotland Yard happen to be doing a wonderful job of my protection," he said, arranging each meal identically - chicken at the same angle, exact amount of sauce, a precise little pile of potatoes. Greg watched from the doorway, his heart tugging. "I have every faith in the dedication of Her Majesty's Constabulary..."

Mycroft began to divide the garlic bread into slices for each plate, concentrating on making them even.

Arms slipped around his waist from behind.

As Greg nuzzled into the side of his neck, he surrendered to his smile, biting into his lip.

"This looks amazing," Greg hummed. He kissed behind Mycroft's ear, revelling in the brief shiver that it caused. "Thank you. Means a lot to me."
Mycroft took a moment to speak.

"Rather comforting," he remarked at last. "Domesticity." He reached over, sliding the knife carefully into the sink. As he brushed crumbs from the counter-top into his hand, he added, "Slakes my unbearable need for control..."

Greg placed a kiss against his shoulder.

"Whatever helps right now," he said. He tightened his arms around Mycroft's middle. "M'not going to complain. Especially when I get to come home to the proceeds."

Mycroft smiled, wrapping an arm over Greg's.

"The way to a man's heart?" he said, quietly amused.

Greg huffed. "Think you've found your way there already, gorgeous."

"For heaven's sake... 'gorgeous'..." Mycroft tilted his head, pressing his cheek to Greg's - a quiet nuzzle. Like animals, Greg thought, in the wild. Two foxes, two stags. "You are insane, Gregory Lestrade... I hope you're well aware."

Greg smiled.

"M'glad to have you here," he murmured. "That's all. Makes the rest of everything else seem not so bad..."

He shut his eyes, breathing in the scent of Mycroft's jumper.

"I like this," he mumbled. "That okay? I - like it a lot..."

Mycroft's chest expanded in his arms.

"I like it, too..." The confession was soft; it made Greg's heart give a little flip. "Very, very much."

Greg tucked his nose against Mycroft's neck. Everything I need, right here. Right now. And we'll make it.

"Shall I carry these plates for you, darlin'?" he said.
Greg didn't want to hear a word of Myke washing up.

"My turn to be domestic," he said, kissing him - garlic, wine and red pepper on his lips. "Go relax, sweetheart. Put your feet up."

"If you're certain," Mycroft said, amused. "I'm happy to dry..."

Greg passed him the bottle of wine with a grin.

"Relax," he said. "Get cosy. I won't be long."

As he washed up, the background noise of the television made him smile. It was normal to have the TV on when he was home - nothing new - but something about the sound of it tonight filled his chest with quiet warmth. As he scrubbed the casserole dish, he found himself thinking about Mycroft through in the lounge, relaxing on the sofa, drinking a glass of wine... waiting for him.

It made him realise he'd missed this - daily life with someone.

He didn't miss Karen. God knew those final months had been the worst of his life. He didn't miss the fights, the drama, the wild swinging between feeling worthless and feeling like a hero for giving her another chance.

All his favourite times had been like this - quiet, easy moments, in the middle of quiet and easy weeks. Looking back, they were all soured by something Greg hadn't realised at the time. For her, those times had been the most boring. Those had been the nights that tempted her to go looking for excitement. While he'd been contentedly washing up, thinking how glad he was that things had settled down again, she'd been quietly texting someone from work - someone from the pub - someone from the gym. Someone who made her grin to herself, and feel wanted.

It was nice not to fear that any more.

Being someone's second relationship in forty-six years was pretty reassuring, in that regard. For all the problems he and Mycroft were facing, they were facing them together.

It felt good, Greg realised.

It felt really good.

He smiled to himself, reaching for more washing up liquid.

_Maybe things are perfect like this_, he thought. _Secret... all the closeness, all the love, and the world couldn't interfere. What he had with Mycroft was easy, and it was safe._ _Jesus... am I a complete_
idiot for hoping this'll change some day?

Surely there could be some middle-ground, though - some space between the two.

This didn't have to be a case of extremes. He could have Myke listed as his work emergency contact, but didn't need to bring him to the Christmas party. Myke could tell Sherlock they were together, but it wasn't any of his bloody business. Privacy wasn't on or off.

It was a custom-build, Greg thought, soaking a stubborn chunk of tomato sauce beneath the hot tap - tell these people a few things, tell these people a bit more, tell these people the bare minimum and nothing else...

He almost liked the idea of letting the world see what it saw. Picking Myke up from work in the car every Friday, then out to dinner - a gardenia bouquet to Myke's office on February 14th every year - a quiet black-and-white photo on Greg's desk, Myke and his weekend curls.

Maybe a shared address.

And let the world work it out, and keep their thoughts to themselves.

God almighty, let this be real. I know it's mad. I still want it. Please, please let it be real...

For tonight, it didn't matter. The door was locked. The world was safe, and it could all wait outside until the morning.

Greg rinsed the final pan, placed it upside down on the draining rack with a smile, and dried off his hands.

As he came back into the lounge, Mycroft looked up from the TV. He was settled sideways on the couch, his socked feet up on a cushion, Greg's Arsenal print fleece blanket gathered across his shoulders.

His gaze held nothing but love.

As Greg knelt between his legs on the sofa, Mycroft broke into a smile - and then a grin, as Greg took the wine glass from his hand. Bright-eyed, Greg moved it to a solid surface out of harm's way.

As they kissed, Mycroft's hands roamed his back - grasping, stroking, tugging at his work shirt. There was something endlessly satisfying about having Mycroft beneath him. Hidden away, Greg thought, as he coaxed his tongue between Mycroft's lips, and his lover trembled with enjoyment. Safe. They sank further and further into the sofa cushions as the minutes passed. Mycroft snuck his hands into Greg's back pockets, and his toes stroked Greg's calves. Greg could barely hear the TV. It was a gentle, flickering nonsense, somewhere far outside of the real world.

When they finally surfaced for air, Mycroft had blushed to his ears. His pupils were huge, and he gazed up at Greg with a mixture of shyness and hope.

Greg looked back at him with a smile. Christ... you're bloody beautiful. Just look at you. He lifted a hand, and stroked Mycroft's cheek with the back of his fingers.

Enjoyment warmed his lover's eyes.

"You seem very tender tonight," Mycroft whispered. "Very protective..."

Greg raised an eyebrow, still smiling. "S'cause I am."
Mycroft's eyes shone. He shivered slightly, glancing at Greg's mouth. "It's - rather evocative..."

Greg felt his heart thump in response.

"You know I'd fight armed men off you?" he murmured. "They wouldn't stand a chance."

Mycroft's chest expanded beneath him. "Heaven help me..."

"You don't need heaven, sweetheart. I'm here now."

"Greg..." As Greg leant down, nuzzling beneath his chin, Mycroft's breath caught in the back of his throat. "God... Greg..."

Greg closed his eyes, gentling his mouth across this endless neck that he loved. Myke was sensitive to every single stroke of his lips tonight - gripping at his shoulder blades, shivering, stretching behind him with little sounds. It was glorious. Greg could feel his trousers beginning to ache.

"Before I get too cosy," he murmured, trailing the tip of his nose up to Mycroft's ear, "I think I need a shower... I smell like Scotland Yard. You okay here by yourself a while?"

Mycroft chuckled, softly, and gave his arse a last sly squeeze. "Mmhm... I'm fine. Go and purge yourself."

"Pick a film while I'm gone?" Greg grinned. "Kinda want to cuddle up..."

"I shall." Mycroft reached for his jaw. His gentle fingertips stroked across Greg's stubble; he leant up, and pressed his mouth to Greg's. "I love you..." he hummed as they parted. His eyes shimmered in the low light.

Greg smiled, committing this sight quietly to memory. He wanted to have it forever. "I love you, too... don't go anywhere."

The words were still swirling in his mind as he stepped into the shower.

It was good to get clean - it had been a long day at work, with little progress. After years on the job, Greg had learnt that you had to approach these big investigations with patience. All the same, it was frustrating. With Mycroft now safely under guard, things had become easier - just a case of waiting for Pritchard to get bored lying low, make a mistake, and be spotted somewhere. It was only a matter of time now.

Humming, Greg washed his hair.

As he rinsed, spitting suds, the swish of the shower door made him jump.

Gentle hands touched his back. They slipped beneath his arms, onto his chest, and came to rest over his heart.

"Forgive me..." Mycroft's voice at his ear settled his pulse at once. "I didn't mean to startle you."

Greg smiled. He laced his soapy fingers with Mycroft's, closing his eyes. "Decided against a film, have you?"

There was a shy pause.

"Mm." Mycroft kissed the slope of his shoulder - a single, gentle press of lips, checking this was okay - that he was allowed this casual access to skin. "I... decided that I'd rather be with you."
Greg felt his heart flutter beneath Mycroft's hands. He eased his head to the side, offering more shoulder, more neck, and hummed with enjoyment as Mycroft took it - little kisses, careful on his wet skin. The slightest tremor passed through Myke's fingers.

Greg breathed in the steam of the shower, happy.

"Thank you for making dinner, darlin'... spoiling me."

Mycroft shivered against his back.

"Quite alright..." He paused as he reached Greg's ear, and kissed it. Even the stroke of his voice across the sensitive skin made Greg's heart skip. "I owe you a great deal of kindness. I'd... rather like to repay you..."

As Mycroft's hand stroked cautiously down his stomach, Greg felt the muscles there tighten in eager response. He swallowed, about to say there wasn't anything owed - that love wasn't about keeping a tab - but then he realised Mycroft knew it.

This wasn't about debts of affection.

It was about Mycroft initiating - finding a way into this - into intimacy - asking, in the only nervous way he could think to.

Greg breathed, his stomach rising slowly beneath Mycroft's hand. He reached down, slid his wet fingers though Mycroft's, and eased them lower.

The wrap of shy fingers around his cock sent a shudder rippling up his chest. He bit down into a groan, his head resting back, as Mycroft trembled against him and nuzzled into his neck.

"Make me hard?" he whispered. He heard Mycroft's breath cut. "Then come to bed with me. I want you, too... want to be close..."

Mycroft shivered, tightening his free arm around Greg's chest. "I - I'd like that..."

His touches were careful and exploratory - Christ, Christ... - just brushing, feeling Greg's shape. His kisses grew restless as Greg hardened, tasting his neck, progressing from just lips to strokes of his mouth. As he found his way back to Greg's earlobe, Greg bit down into his lip again.

"Darlin'," he groaned. His stomach jumped. "Darlin'... oh f-fuck..."

Mycroft toyed with his earlobe - licking, teasing, little wet sounds that made Greg ache. All through it, there was the light sweep of loving fingers, slow and steady up and down his cock, just how he liked. Myke had remembered. Fuck, fuck...

"May I wash you?" Mycroft asked, softly in his ear.

Greg quivered. Every inch of his skin suddenly wanted to be stroked. "S-Sure..."

Mycroft kissed his ear, and slowly turned him around.

It was like last night - resting back against the shower wall, trying to breathe as Mycroft washed him gently from head to foot. Greg suspected the scent of lavender would be turning him on for the rest of his life. He couldn't stop himself from shaking as Mycroft blanketed his skin in foam and suds, sweeping slowly along his arms, over his chest, his stomach - almost, almost there - then kneeling before him to soak up and down his legs. He lifted Greg's feet, washing each sole in turn.
As he stood up again, a little nervousness crossed his face. He kissed Greg, tentatively touching Greg's hand.

"Do you - w-wish to...?"

Greg swallowed, shivering. He guided Mycroft's fingers to his rigid cock. "Please..."

Mycroft kissed him again - Greg caught his mouth, pleading without words. As Mycroft pressed him back against the shower wall, he felt his heart begin to rupture, and could only whimper and pant as the touching began again. Mycroft cleaned him, gently and slowly and carefully, massaging the soft white foam around his cock, palming his balls, shily washing behind them as Greg's pulse raced faster and faster. He couldn't breathe. It was fine - he didn't want air anymore. He didn't need it. He just wanted to be kissed, and stroked, and feel his lover clean him.

"Come here," he gasped, pulling Myke against his body. They slid together, thrusting a little, skin slippery and wet with foam. Greg's stomach twisted. A cry broke from his mouth. "F-Fuck...!"

Mycroft began to pant in his ear. "Oh - oh, God..."

Fuck... oh fuck, this feels like sex... slowly, over and over, Myke's cock nuzzling into his groin. Greg wrapped his arms around Myke tighter, writhing, dragging his hands in desperation down his lover's wet back. His gasp was caught by Mycroft's mouth - a sudden soft strike of a kiss, pinning him back against the wall, and as their tongues coiled Greg felt his head reel. He'd never needed something so much in his life.

Mycroft's fingers pushed through his hair - held him there, kissed him.

Fuck, beautiful... oh fuck, you need me too...

Desperate, Greg wriggled and reached a hand down between them, slipping his fingers through foam and water. The ragged moan it earned shook its way through his soul. Greg fondled him, stroking, massaging, working suds around Myke's cock as it thrust through his fingers, restlessly seeking friction. Myke broke the kiss just to breathe, His forehead rested against Greg's, and they panted together - eyes closed, shivering, sharing each groan.

"N-Need to go to bed soon." Greg flushed, shaking. "I - I need to lie down with you. I need to touch you. Everywhere. Is that okay?"

Mycroft let out a plaintive whimper. "E-Everywhere - please - "

"Mm hmm?" Greg's heart began to pound even harder. "Shall we get close, sweetheart?"

Mycroft sank his teeth into his lip. "Yes - oh fuck, yes...

They washed Mycroft's hair; dried each other as they stumbled, kissing, to the bedroom; then fell into bed with a wild squeak of springs. Before Greg could think, he found himself tipped over onto his back. Mycroft crawled on top of him, raked his hands over Greg's jaw, and pulled his mouth up for a kiss.

Greg's chest heaved.

Myke had never kissed him this way - touched him this way - reached for his body with longing like this. He'd never run his hands down Greg's chest with this kind of urgency, nor coaxed his tongue into Greg's mouth so needly - never moaned for him like this.
He wasn't nervous.

He knew it was okay - okay to be restless - to show Greg, want Greg - to want his lover and his body, and want sounds of excitement in return.

Greg gave them, panting, dragging his hands over Mycroft's skin.

With each touch Mycroft arched and squirmed and whimpered for more. They kissed until moans of excitement weren't enough, and Greg couldn't bear it any longer. He wanted moans of pleasure. He pushed up beneath Myke, shaking, and caught him in his arms.

They rolled together, tumbling - ended up sprawled across the bed, with no regard for pillows or covers. Mycroft was flushed and warm, and his skin was soft, and he tasted clean - and as Greg began to kiss his way downwards, urgently stroking his mouth over collarbones and neck and nipples, Mycroft's panting peaked into frantic gasps.

"Greg -"

Greg splayed his hands at Mycroft's sides, dragging downwards, curling at his hips. Mycroft arched with a moan, his hips rising into the hold.

"Greg -"

"I want to make you come." Greg shivered as he nosed at Mycroft's ribs, following them down to his navel - kissing there, mouthing, breathing the words against his skin. "Please. Please let me do that for you. I just want you to lie there, and let me work for you, and make it good for you. Please."

Mycroft's fingers shook as they laced into his hair.

"I - ..." He gave a shaky breath. "I-If you're sure..."

Greg's soul burned.

"I want to go down on you," he whispered. Mycroft's fingers tightened in immediate response. "And - if you want me to - I'll use my fingers for you, too. Inside you. Let you feel me there, while I use my mouth. Would you like that?"

"Oh. Fuck." Mycroft's voice cracked; he swallowed. "Yes. Y-Yes, I - I want -"

"Promise me you'll say if you don't like it. Promise."

"I promise..."

"If you never want me inside you, ever - if you don't like it, and you don't want that - it's okay. This is for you. This is all for you."

Mycroft huffed with frustration, stretching.

"Greg -" he whined. "Please... f-fingers. Please."

Christ... Christ, let me feel you squeeze me as you come... come with me in you...

"Can you reach the drawer for me, beautiful? Lube in there..."

As Greg nuzzled beneath Mycroft's navel, a shaking hand passed him the familiar bottle. He'd only
ever used this on himself. An old favourite - silicone - it would last better. They could play longer.

"You comfortable, gorgeous?" he murmured. "D'you want a pillow?"

Mycroft keened in the back of his throat - shifting, pushing his legs apart.

"Greg," he gasped.

No more stalling. This was meant to happen two nights ago, in the Lakes. Myke was meant to come with Greg inside him for the first time. It was instead happening now - and as Greg slid his lips around the head of Myke's cock, closing his eyes in contentment, he felt the fingers in his hair take a nervous grip.

Mouth, first - mouth to settle - small, steady movements. He could feel Myke watching him down the bed. He lifted his eyes often, meeting his lover's gaze with soft hums of reassurance, enjoying the anxious scruff of fingers through his hair.

The quiet was odd.

From all that he'd discovered so far, Mycroft liked this - and he liked Greg to know that he liked it.

He then realised Myke was waiting.

He was breathing tight, nervous, not knowing when the touch would come.

Greg moved a hand to Mycroft's thigh. Here I am, sweetheart. Just here. He stroked, petting, just taking in the feel of the skin beneath his fingertips. He felt Mycroft shiver, and start to breathe a little slower - start to respond to his mouth.

Soft, hopeful sounds soon arose in the darkness.

Myke's fingers quietly rubbed the back of Greg's neck, as Greg rolled his mouth back and forth - gentle, and loving, and easy. He waited until Myke's thighs had begun to tremble, and then stirred, letting his fingertips soothe inwards. Myke let out a shaky moan and shifted too, opening his legs. Nervously his fingers scrunched in Greg's hair.

Greg uncapped the lubricant with his thumb, squeezed plenty into his palm, and put the tube aside.

The lightest strokes, at first - barely there - barely anything. Just feel me, sweetheart. Just let me be here. Mycroft squirmed and lifted his hips into Greg's mouth, huffing with nerves and frustration. Glancing up, Greg watched him tip his head back against the covers and drag his lower lip between his teeth, his face tight.

"Greg..." came the whisper.

It's okay, beautiful... still me. Still right here. Greg began to circle with a fingertip, slowly, circling his tongue around the head of Mycroft's cock at the same time. Mycroft twisted a little and hissed, gasping. His chest rose and fell with force.

Greg slid his lips free, licked them, and murmured,

"Breathe in, love. Slow..."

Mycroft swallowed, shook, and breathed in.
As his stomach rose, Greg breached the tight ring of muscle and pushed in - smoothly, slowly - a single gentle press that didn't break Mycroft's breath. By the time Mycroft exhaled again, Greg had begun careful swirls. Mycroft shivered, settling - quietly gathering a fistful of sheets in one hand.

"Okay?" Greg whispered, gazing the length of his torso.

Mycroft lifted his head, anxiously looking down. His pupils swelled as they found Greg's eyes. "I-I think so..."

Greg held his gaze, lowered his mouth to Mycroft's cock, and soothed his tongue over the exposed head - a gentle, lazy curl that made Mycroft's gaze flicker. He kept his finger stirring steadily in his lover's body, just spreading the slickness for now, letting the motion grow easier.

"You're doing so well for me, love," he murmured. "So, so well... m'so proud of you..."

Mycroft quivered in desperation; pink flashed across his cheeks.

"You - y-you - ..." He shook as Greg began to lap very slowly beneath the head of his cock, little steady strokes that nudged him each time. "Oh m-my God... you look - ...

Greg lowered his eyes beneath his lashes, kissing Mycroft's cock. A little moisture welled up against his lips, given with a whimper - he swept it up with a brush of his tongue.

He could feel Mycroft relaxing around his finger, softening.

"M'all yours, beautiful... you know that?" he whispered. "Your lover. Your Greg. And m'gonna look after you."

Mycroft trembled, his eyelashes fluttering. "M-Mine..."

"Mm hmm. If you want this every night of your life, I'll do this for you. Come to your bed, make you feel good. Let you watch me licking you. Let you rake my hair on end. Go down on you, and take care of you."

Mycroft shuddered, his breath snapping. His muscles gripped around Greg's finger. "A-And inside me..."

Greg's heart tightened. "Mmhmm, sweetheart. If you want that."

Mycroft shuddered and his hips rocked; his head dropped back against the bed.

"Please," he gasped. "Please."

Greg knew what he was being asked.

He eased his finger out, slowly, and back in just the same, watching Mycroft as he did. Mycroft breathed with it, working his lip between his teeth. On the third careful ingress, his breath at last lulled into a fretful moan, tight in the back of his throat. He squirmed, his body stretched, and he whispered,


Greg combined his next withdrawal with a gentle swirl, and pushed in a little quicker. Mycroft's thighs twitched either side of him. Before he could ask, a pitched moan of enjoyment answered his question and Mycroft squirmed again and shivered, trying to push his legs wider - shifting in frustration as he whined. Greg wet his lips, easing into a rhythm now.
"You want to try pulling your knees up for me, love?" he soothed. "Holding them?"

Mycroft looked down the bed, nervous. His lower lip was red and soft where he’d bitten it. "W-Will that...?"

"You'll feel more open," Greg murmured, "but it'll be easier."

Mycroft shivered, considering this. He then stirred, carefully pulled his knees back, and slid his shaking hands beneath his thighs to hold them in place. Greg heard him swallow and whisper, "Oh, God..."

There, beautiful... just like that for me... Greg reapplied his tongue to its task, soothing long and gentle licks from base to tip of Mycroft's cock, as he felt Mycroft's body adjust around the slide of his finger - widening for him.

"You okay?" he said, as Mycroft unleashed a shaky sigh.

"I - I want more..."

Fuck, darlin'... d'you know what it does to me, hearing you say that? D'you know how hard I am right now?

"Mm? Shall I try two?"

"Fuck..." Mycroft's breath thickened. "Yes. Yes, two."

"Might ache a little, beautiful... takes a minute or so to feel good. Is that okay?"

"I-I understand." Mycroft hesitated, fighting with something. "C-Can you - ... w-while you - ...?"

"Suck you, darlin'? Take you back in my mouth?"

"Oh, God - oh, God, please -"

"'Course I can..." Greg nuzzled against his thigh, a tender rasp of stubble. "Tell me if you want me to wait - tell me if you want me to stop. Rest your legs on me, love..." Greg lowered his head again. "Don't get tired."

As he painted Mycroft's cock with a few slow and soothing licks, Mycroft's legs rested tentatively over his shoulders. Greg gathered his mouth back around Myke, slid all the way down and began to rub with his tongue, massaging the underside in the way he knew his lover liked.

No sounds came - just soft, fractured breath.

Mycroft was waiting again, anxious. He needed to know. He wouldn't relax until he knew.

Greg gently pressed his ring finger into place. He paused a moment, listening for 'stop' - waiting, just in case. They'd reached this point before, and been interrupted. This was the closest they'd ever come. This was it.

"Please," Mycroft whimpered, weak. A quiver coursed through his body. "Please, Greg... p-please don't stop..."

Greg closed his eyes.

With infinite care, he edged his way inside.
Tiny, tiny pushes - nuzzling, softening, carefully coaxing just so far and then withdrawing - then, on the next gentle push, the tiniest bit further.

Mycroft made no sound until both fingers were gripped tightly inside him. He just breathed, and stroked Greg's hair, and waited.

He then let out a sigh, and shook. "I-Is that...?"

Greg drew his mouth back, brushing his lips against the head of Myke's cock. "That's two," he said, his voice soft - a little hoarse from having Myke in his throat. "How's it feel?"

"N-Not - ..." Mycroft exhaled, relieved. "Not as bad as I thought..."

Greg smiled. He stirred his fingers together inside Myke - just agitating them gently, encouraging the muscles to ease.

"That's good," he whispered. He began to brush slow licks across the tip of Myke's cock. "M'glad it's alright for you, darlin'... glad you're okay... you're doing beautifully, baby. You're doing gorgeously for me."

Mycroft shivered. His fingers threaded through Greg's hair, his stomach rising as he breathed in time with the licks. "A-Are you - ... n-nearly two?"

Greg felt his pulse swoop at the thought. He clamped down on it, calming himself.

"I'm - closer to three, maybe."

Mycroft shook. "I - I m-might need - ..."

"S'okay, beautiful... this is all for now. Not taking you any bigger tonight."

"O-Okay..." Mycroft suddenly began to pant, trembling. "G-Greg?"

"D'you want me to stop, love?"

"No - no, I - I need you to move." Mycroft's breath hitched. "I-In and out of me."

Greg watched for reaction as he slid his fingers free. Mycroft's face contracted, and he quivered.


*Christ. Christ almighty. Please don't let me come just kneeling here. Don't let me come just hearing that...*

"D-Darlin' - ... darlin', if I go too quick - "

"You're not," Mycroft begged. His voice contracted into a whimper. "You're not. I need it. I need it, please."

Greg braced himself, and tested a first gentle thrust - out, in, smooth.

Mycroft's entire body wracked.

"Fuck...!" he gasped, arching his back. "Fuck, fuck - "
Greg's heart nearly stopped. "Have I hurt -"

"No - oh God, please, again - " Mycroft begged, heaving. "Please, please - "

Greg forced himself to breathe. He thrust again, easing through the tight hug of resistance - a third time, fourth time, and Mycroft let out a cry that scattered through his soul.

"Oh - God - ..." His thighs clenched around Greg. "Oh - fuck, fuck..."

Greg swallowed, pushing his cheek against the soft pale skin. "Myke... beautiful..."

Mycroft fisted both hands into the sheets. "More..." he sobbed. "More, more...!"

Greg watched him, barely breathing, working his fingers rhythmically in and out. He could feel Myke's body softening, taking, resistance opening into enjoyment. Myke began to rock. He gripped at the sheets, lost, desperate pleasure flooding his face, as his hips chased a sensation he didn't yet understand.

Greg shifted, leaning down for his cock. He caught the head with his tongue, guided it into his mouth, and splayed his free hand over Mycroft's stomach - pressing him gently to the bed.

He began to push his fingers deeper.

The sound Mycroft made lit his every nerve on fire. Hands carded through his hair, gripping him - holding him there, needing him not to stop, not to falter, not to wait, and he kept the thrusts of his fingers steady. Each one edged a fraction deeper. Greg concentrated, feeling, reading Mycroft's fretful cries and the tremors in his stomach, the urgency of his moans, letting them guide him closer and closer.

At last, as Mycroft's fevered whimpers shaped themselves once again into the word 'please', Greg pushed deep, sought his fingers through slick and gripping muscles, feeling - and at the first firm press, Mycroft bucked into his mouth. He unleashed a stream of sound that Greg would remember forever. He gasped as Greg began a rhythm of stroking nearby, circling and massaging, timing each firmer rub with deeper slides of Mycroft's cock into the top of his throat - and within a few minutes, Mycroft's entire body began to tremble.

"Oh, God... oh God - oh God..." The whisper was almost a prayer. It came with contractions of his muscles - involuntary, tight, sharpening his breath each time.

Greg eased the movements of his mouth. He wanted Myke to feel this - deeper - the building warmth and fullness and trembling.

He wondered if Myke had ever found his prostate before - ever even gone looking for it.

Judging by the sounds, the answer was no.

Toys, he thought, as his cock throbbed in desperation. Fill a drawer with them... listen to Mycroft make these noises every night. Share things. Things that felt good.

And if Myke wanted... if he liked this, and he wanted to...

Christ.

Slow together - close together. Making these sounds for Greg's cock instead. Watch him pant and blush and plead, just like this - feel the contractions of his body, tight - the tremble deepening -
watch restless pleasure rising in his face, feeling each other, inside of each other. Gentle sex. The
two of them.

*Oh, God... oh God, I want to...*

He wouldn't push. He wouldn't ask.

Just be there, if Mycroft wanted.

Myke had started to go quiet.

It wasn't the nervous, hesitant quiet of when he was thinking - this was a quiet Greg had never
heard before, a quiet that said he wasn't thinking at all. He was simply feeling, lost in it, rolling on
a sensation too intense for him to form into sound. His hips stirred in tight, desperate little circles,
and Greg wondered if he even knew he was mirroring the motion of his lover's fingers inside him -
tiny restless circles, over and over.

He didn't need Myke to beg him to keep going. He knew it was enough, just like this - not a single
change - not a thing. He could see it in Myke's face, in the biting of his lip, his tightly-closed eyes,
the flush now sitting high in his cheeks. Greg's mouth barely moved - just the gentlest rub of his
tongue, just beneath the head. The small familiar pleasure was a path. It would lead Mycroft safely
through. *M'here, beautiful... fall apart for me... I've got you...*

His only warning was Myke suddenly grabbing for his free hand.

As Myke gripped him, hard, Greg slid down his cock and took him deep, nuzzling into his groin.
Myke's muscles heaved around his fingers. The intense silence ruptured with a cry into sudden sobs
and pleas. Myke called out as it wracked through his body, stretching; heat and fluid hit the back of
Greg's throat in a rush. He swallowed the flood with a shiver, squeezing Mycroft's hand. He
counted the waves of tightness that passed - wave after wave, his heart thundering with happiness
as they came. With each one, he let his massage soften into petting - into tiny, gentle strokes, just
guiding his lover through.

He listened as Mycroft's cries quietened into moans - then broke with a shudder into gasps.

Smiling, Greg closed his eyes.

He eased his mouth away, with a final gentle kiss to Mycroft's cock. As he pressed his cheek to his
lover's thigh, he carefully withdrew his fingers.

Mycroft twitched at their loss.

"G-Greg..." The weakened whisper made his heart squeeze. "Ohh..."

"You okay?" Greg kissed his thigh, a tender stroke of mouth. "Was that alright?"

Mycroft swallowed, shaking. "Oh, *fuck*..."

Greg smiled, still brushing the trembling skin with his lips. "Yeah? M'glad, baby."

Mycroft twitched; his breath suddenly thickened. "Can you come here, please?"

As Greg settled on the bed beside him, Mycroft nestled at once into his arms. Greg wrapped him
up, and ran his fingers through his hair.

The trembling deepened.
Glowing with love, Greg kissed his cheek.

"Shhh... shhh, s'alright... this is normal..." He petted between Mycroft's shoulders with his fingertips, murmuring. "I know it's intense... m'here. Just hold onto me."

"H-Holy God..."

"Mm hmm..." Greg brushed back his hair. "D'you know what that was?"

Mycroft said nothing, shaking quietly against his shoulder.

"S'your prostate," Greg murmured. "Feel different to normal?"

Mycroft drew in a long, shaking breath. "Oh, fuck."

Greg smiled, pressing his lips to Mycroft's eyebrow.

"Takes a little longer," he said, softly. "But it's worth it..." He realised the warmth now flooding behind his ribs was pride. He breathed it deep, holding Mycroft tighter in his arms. "If that was nice... if you liked it... there's other things we can try. Toys. Things to play with."

Mycroft shuddered.

He lifted his head, exhausted; he nuzzled at Greg's stubble.

"Darling?" No more than a whisper.

Greg closed his eyes. God, you mean the world to me. The whole bloody world. "Mm?"

Mycroft shivered in his arms.

"I - want sex," he whispered. "I want that. With you. I - w-want to try, Greg."

The man who'd once panicked because they touched hands playing billiards; the man now naked in Greg's arms, safe against his chest, asking him softly for sex.

They'd come a hell of a long way.

Greg stirred, kissing Mycroft's temple. "It - means a lot that you'd trust me. A whole lot."

Mycroft's cheek brushed his own. "I n-need to know..."

Greg shut his eyes. He cupped the back of Mycroft's head, holding him close.

"We'll work our way there, love. If you're certain you're ready."

Mycroft hesitated, quietly stroking his shoulder. "N-Not tonight?"

Greg's heart squeezed.

"Not tonight," he whispered. "I just want to hold you, tonight... make sure you're okay. Make sure you know what you mean to me."

"Don't you - ... w-wouldn't you like to...?" Mycroft stirred. "You h-haven't come..."

Greg had been ready to rub himself against the bed for relief, come across his sheets like a teenager.
All he wanted now was to stroke Mycroft's hair, and feel him breathe.

"Maybe in a while," he hummed. "Let me love you a little bit first."

Mycroft flushed, shivering. "What did I do, Greg?"

"Mm?"

He kissed Greg's jaw. "To deserve you."

Greg grinned, biting into his lip. He twined their bare legs together as they cuddled.

"You let me in, love. And you let me stay. S'all I could ever ask of you."
He was beautiful in the early morning darkness.

And he was Mycroft's.

The slope of his nose - the curve of his mouth - the ease in his expression as he slept. Greg was all shoulders and arms, and just a scattering of hair across his chest - just enough to stroke - enough for Mycroft to imagine feeling with his hands steadied there, Greg's heart beating for him in rhythm as they moved.

It felt almost like an intrusion, to be awake and witnessing this.

Mycroft couldn't tear his eyes away. His lover was quite simply too miraculous not to gaze at. The rest that sleep might bring was nothing compared to the peace of watching Greg. Traffic had only just begun outside; even birdsong was distant yet.

These moments belonged to Mycroft - quiet, unclouded moments - and he spent them looking at his lover.

He wished he was a virgin.

Stirring, slipping a hand beneath the pillow, Mycroft felt his chest ache around the thought. He'd had it before - many times - but never quite this keenly.

He wished he simply... hadn't.

Hadn't responded to those first sly pick-up lines. Hadn't found them flattering. Hadn't agreed to come for a drink that evening, and hadn't been excited at the prospect. Hadn't then accepted the chivalrous offer of an escort home.

*God almighty.*

Having to explain, on the doorstep.

Nicholas's look of startled disbelief. *"Really?"* As if he'd admitted he had some contagious skin condition - as if it were rather embarrassing even to hear that confession, even to stand in the presence of a virgin - as if Mycroft were now glowing slightly, a radiant and fragile being, liable to swoon at the next passing breath of wind.

As if he were not quite grown up yet.

And Nicholas was now questioning if this was worth his time. Mycroft had seen it in his face - and all he'd wanted in the world was to prove that he was. That it didn't matter - that he could overcome
this egregious shortcoming of his, this terrible handicap, if Nicholas offered him but a chance to try.

And less than two weeks later, it had happened - and it was over.

And there was no restoring it now.

As Mycroft gazed down at Greg in the half-light, heat rising quietly in his face, he wished he still had it. He wished he'd carried it all these lonely years, shining softly whenever he entered low light, attracting unicorns and small mammals to every woodland glade he entered.

Just so he could give it to Greg.

Greg wouldn't have been appalled.

Mycroft remembered him asking. A text message, of all things. 'Are you a virgin?' Four small words, and somehow they'd conveyed a gentleness and an understanding that had soothed thirty years of distress. The question had been asked as if Greg expected him completely to say yes - and as if 'yes' would have been alright - and Mycroft knew, beyond any doubt, that Greg would have treated him with just the same patience and care that he had. Little would have been different.

How wonderful it would have felt, though.

Almost sacred. Forty-six - his secret kept safe all this time, shared only with Greg - then his body, shared only with Greg.

Hushing him softly through pain.

Stroking his hair.

Holding him, after. Letting him feel what it was like to feel changed.

Mycroft reached up in the half-darkness, pressing a fingertip quietly to each eye.

He'd wept more this week than he had in thirty years. He rather hoped he was now finished weeping. Every text from Greg made his heart jump, hoping it was news - Nicholas, located; Nicholas in custody. All the danger, passed.

As it was, he could be standing outside the building at this very moment.

It was hard not to feel afraid.

Sherlock had been punished - asking questions of the unquestionable. Sticking his nose into Nicholas's business. 'Do-gooding'. He'd been battered black and blue for it.

Mycroft had a horrible feeling his crime was held in far greater severity.

Betrayal. Disloyalty.

It had been thirty years - but Mycroft still belonged to Nicholas Pritchard.

One of his investments. Expected to support his cause and protect his interests, to act whenever called upon, and not challenge the truth of things. Three decades, and Nicholas still kept a small piece of Mycroft's soul, thrown into a cluttered box of past conquests. He expected full use of it when he wanted it.
And now Mycroft had had the gall to try taking it back.

*My crime is theft,* Mycroft thought, gazing down at his lover in the darkness. He'd stolen his own agency back from its rightful owner. Sherlock had never belonged to Nicholas, and so a beating was enough - a brute show of force - *"I dominate you."* Nicholas probably hadn't given Sherlock a moment's thought since. Sherlock was done with, after all. Dealt with.

Mycroft had the awful feeling he wasn't just going to be dominated.

He was going to be reminded.

He shifted with discomfort in the darkness, wishing the thought didn't take the very breath from his lungs. *Nicholas cannot hide forever. Someone will catch sight of him, soon. This horror will end, soon.*

"How long've you been awake?" came the murmur.

Mycroft opened his eyes.

He hadn't even realised he'd closed them.

He found Greg watching him from the other pillow, one brown eye cracked open, a sleepy smile curving his mouth.

Mycroft's heart gave a shy, hopeful hop.

"Forgive me," he whispered. "I - I didn't meant to wake you..."

Greg's eyes shone. "You didn't, darlin'."

*Darlin'. God help me. "It's - s-still rather early."*

Greg held out an arm. "Best c'mere, then," he murmured.

As Mycroft cuddled into his lover's chest, he wondered if it were normal to feel so happy just to touch someone's skin. Greg's body exuded a warmth that seemed to surpass normal sensations of heat. It was deeper, somehow - softer. It warmed Mycroft in a way he hadn't realised he was cold.

"S'on your mind?" Greg hummed, kissing his head.

Mycroft shivered, nuzzling into his neck.

"Nothing significant," he whispered. He let his eyes fall shut. "You... should sleep, if you're tired..."

Greg's soft, rumbling laugh was the most evocative thing Mycroft had ever heard.

"Lying awake over 'nothing significant'?" He began to stroke Mycroft's back - light, comforting trails of his fingertips. "Tell your white knight, beautiful."

Mycroft's heart quietly doubled in size.

"I was - fretting," he confessed. "Silly worries. Nothing that can be solved."

"Worries always seem much worse at night." Greg kissed his head again, gently. "And they're much better shared."
Mycroft smiled a little.
"In truth, they're already fading." He pressed the tip of his nose to Greg's pulse. "You rather have that effect on me. You're - very settling, Greg."

"Yeah? S'good to hear..." Greg's gentle touch felt like heaven on his naked back - light as air, fond, slow. "Sure it's nothing I can share?"

_Not fix, Mycroft thought. Not solve. Just share._

It was enough to make him want to.

"To whom did you - lose your virginity?" he asked.

Greg gave a soft, awkward laugh. "Erm... a girl I knew from school. I was - sixteen, I think."

"What was her name?"

"I'm - pretty sure she was 'Mel', but..." Greg shifted, giving Mycroft a slightly pained smile. "I - wasn't a very happy kid. I did stuff I'm not proud of. Dad left when I was twelve, and Mum sort of -... gave up, I guess. Let us get on with raising ourselves. I used to drink with my friends in the park every night. Then one night, there was a girl there with her friends, and... she was looking at me a lot, so... erm... it - seemed a good idea at the time."

Mycroft didn't know why he found himself smiling. "Did you see her again?"

"Occasionally at school." Greg cringed. "Used to hide so she wouldn't spot me... m'pretty sure she told all her friends. Strange girls used to grin at me in the corridors. God, I hated school..."

He looked into Mycroft's eyes, quietly curious.

"What's brought this to mind?" he asked.

Mycroft hesitated - then opted for honesty. "Contemplating the follies of bygone days."

Greg smiled. His eyes glittered in the dim light. "Thought we agreed those can stay in the bygone days."

_They so rarely do, Mycroft thought to himself._

"It - distresses me a little. That's all. I should have never - with Nicholas... and then, perhaps, you and I -... and it might have been more momentous. In the event, I - rather wasted something significant on someone unworthy. It pains me."

Greg stroked his cheek as he listened, bemused by something.

"Never understood why we make such a big deal about who was first," he admitted. "Specially considering how crap it usually is."

Mycroft frowned, gently.

"It's - surely an important milestone," he said. "The first time experiencing intimacy with someone."

"Maybe. Not sure I experienced that much intimacy with her." Greg's eyes warmed. "I'd rather be someone's last time than their first time."
Mycroft's pulse skittered.

Greg brushed his thumb across Mycroft's mouth, gently. "Have you been thinking about us?"

Mycroft nodded, lost for words. He just couldn't stop looking at the man. He was magnificent, and he was lying here naked at Mycroft's side. These gentle, quiet touches - they were all Mycroft's. They were his. It was unfathomable.

"It'll be special. First time." Greg gazed back at him, his expression soft. "It'll be... gentle, more than anything. Slow. I'm not going to promise you that anybody's going to come. But we'll take it easy, and we'll look after you. And you'll be alright."

Mycroft listened, his heart thudding.

A quiet smile brightened Greg's gaze.

"Then the second time will be **fantastic,**" he said.

Mycroft flushed, suddenly smiling.

"The - second time?" he said.

"Mm hmm... when we know what it's like - and there's not the pressure of the first time." Greg's fingers stroked into his hair, gently brushing it back. "And you can just feel, and relax... and there'll be a moment you realise you can have me this way, whenever you like, as long as you like... you can reach for me every single night. And we're just beginning to discover each other. And it'll feel amazing."

A shiver coursed its way through Mycroft's body.

"Perhaps we should skip the first time," he whispered, searching Greg's gaze. "Proceed straight to the second... it - sounds rather marvellous."

Greg's eyes glittered.

"If you think the **second** time sounds fun," he said, "wait until you hear about the **third** time."

Mycroft grinned. He couldn't bring himself to stop.

"Feeling better?" Greg asked, mirroring his smile.

Mycroft's heart thundered happily behind his ribs. "Yes," he said. "Profoundly."

"Good..." Greg pulled him closer, dotting gentle kisses over his face. "Don't ever lie awake. Not while I'm lying beside you."

*God preserve me. A lifetime of love, all saved up for one man.*

"D'you want me to rub your back?" Greg asked, softly. "Settle you back to sleep for an hour?"

"I - I don't know if I'll - ... once I'm awake, I tend to - ..."

"S'fine, beautiful... let me look after you anyway?" Greg kissed his jaw. "Start the day right, mm?"

He pulled Mycroft to lie on top of him, and began to rub his back.

Within ten minutes, Mycroft was asleep.
Greg kissed his hair, smiled, and stroked him as he slept.

Anthea noted the new tie immediately. Mycroft saw her eyes flicker to it as soon as he entered the office; they then caught on the matching pocket square, and visibly made a log of both.

 Later, as he produced his keys to unlock the safe, she noted the tiny square of steel now attached to them - and he knew it would only be a matter of time before she found some discreet opportunity to examine them, and discovered the date etched upon the keyring.

As she brought him his lunch - a plated salad, and a pot of tea - she took a moment to collect up the letters in his out-tray. As she leant down, she gave a fractional pause.

Mycroft quietly poured his tea, watching the level rise in his cup.

"Frédéric Malle," he said.

Anthea - who, from what he'd observed, owned at least ten separate high-end fragrances - gave a careful lack of reaction. "An unusual choice for you, sir. Very nice."

Mycroft set the teapot down. It was the first time they'd discussed this; he found it much easier without eye contact.

"A gift," he said. He reached for the milk jug. "I'm told that it suits me."

"Indeed it does." Anthea aligned the edges of his letters, neatly. Her manicured fingers pressed them into pristine alignment. "Shall I bring you the forms, sir?"

Mycroft lifted his tea to his mouth. He wished there were some way to thank her for the casual tone, and all it meant - some way to indicate that he understood what she was telling him, and that he appreciated it.

Desperately.

"In my tray, please. I - may not return them for some time."

"Understandable, Mr Holmes. I'll make sure you have them, nonetheless."

Mycroft's heart squeezed. "Thank you."

A quiet vibration passed through the wood of his desk. It was followed by a second, then a third. He frowned, reaching for his top drawer.

"Do excuse me," he said.

Anthea left the room, closing the door gently behind her.
Odd. Greg was far more likely to text. They'd been doing so all morning; the first had arrived barely a minute after Mycroft left the flat.

He answered the call as he took a sip of tea, trying not to hope.

"Yes?"

"Hey," said Greg. "It's... me." - and from his tone, Mycroft knew at once that this was not good news.

He maintained his quiet hold on the tea cup.

"Is everything alright?" he asked.

"Erm - not really," said Greg. "Have you heard from Sherlock?"

Oh... dear lord, tell me no... "I haven't," Mycroft said. "I've been persona non grata since the incident at the hospital. Why? What has happened?"

Greg sounded as if he dearly wished not to say this.

"He's - discharged himself. Early this morning. Packed up and left. Nurse says the doctor tried to get him to stay, but he was adamant he was off... just walked himself out the door and was gone. Left before seven."

Mycroft closed his eyes. For heaven's sake. "Have you contacted John Watson?"

"Yeah... and - listen, this is where I'm getting worried. John's not heard from him. He's not gone home to Baker Street, and he's not answering his bloody phone to either of us. John didn't have a clue he was out of hospital. I'm trying to get CCTV looked at, find out where he went, but... we're already stretched to the limits here with Pritchard. Can you - try giving him a ring?"

"Heaven help us," Mycroft said. "Yes - yes, of course. Will you please keep me updated?"

"Course I will." Greg hesitated. "You alone?"

Mycroft glanced at his office door. The sight of it shut softened his heartbeat. "Yes."

"'Kay..." Greg audibly shivered. "You alright? Sorry to - ... I know this is crap. I just walked in and found his room empty. The nurse said he made the bed and everything."

"Hardly your fault..." Mycroft found himself suddenly unmoved by the prospect of lunch. God on high, Sherlock... you do nothing to help yourself... "I - hope he doesn't intend to go to my apartment."

"Me too," said Greg. "It's - still being watched."

Ice cascaded down the back of Mycroft's neck.

"Still?" he said.

"Someone last night, apparently... hung around until nearly two AM. They finally made a move to nab him, and he pegged it."

God almighty. "Have you had any news of - Nicholas?"
"No, love. Nobody's talking to us. Spent yet another morning being politely told to fuck off by people's snotty PAs. One massive wall of silence. No way of knowing which bit of silence is suspicious, and which is just 'silly policeman, go away.'"

Mycroft set his jaw. This had gone on long enough.

"I will make inquiries," he said, pushing his lunch to one side. He reached for a leather-bound address book. "I'd hoped to avoid this, but if Sherlock has once again vanished... I will contact Sherlock first, and then see if I can shrink your pool of possible candidates. You might have to hound them, but I will try to narrow the field for you."

"Thanks, beautiful. Anything you can do will help."

"Not at all. As you're working for my safety, it seems only fair..."

"When're you leaving work tonight?" Greg said. "Want me to come pick you up?"

Mycroft hesitated, glancing at the clock above the door. It would negate the need for a taxi - and the thought of leaving the building straight into Greg's protection was enormously comforting.

"Yes, I... I can finish whenever's convenient."

"How's four sound?" said Greg. "Work from home this evening, maybe?"

"O-Of course. You're - certain it's not a problem?"

"No, darlin'," Greg said, his voice soft. "Not at all. Send me a text where to park, and I'll let you know when I'm there. Don't leave the building before I've got to you, okay? Better safe than sorry."

"I shan't." Greg realised his heart was fluttering. "I - will try to call Sherlock."

"Okay. I'll let you know if we get hold of him first."

"Th-thank you." Mycroft hesitated, gazing at the door. "Greg?"

"Mm, love?"

Mycroft's stomach flipped. "I - love you."

Greg's smile filled his voice.

"Love you too, beautiful. See you at four. Have some lunch for me? Spotted you skipping breakfast."

Greg hung up.

Mycroft gazed at his phone for a few moments, overwhelmed.

He then pulled the plate of salad back across his desk.

He ate a forkful of it while scrolling through his phone, looking for Sherlock's number. He couldn't remember the last time Sherlock had actually answered a phone call from him, even before this ridiculous mess - but there was nothing for it.

His brother had now taken his own safety to brand new heights of recklessness. All avenues of possibility must be followed.
As the phone rang in his ear Mycroft had another mouthful of salad, swearing to himself that if Sherlock came to further harm because of this, he would not be moved. He would not rush to his side. He would not waste so much as a moment of distress or concern over him - because the simple and inescapable truth at this stage was that Sherlock had invited every single scrap of... 

_Click._

A rustle, as the call was answered.

Mycroft froze, his mouth full of rocket. He swallowed it at once.

"Sherlock?" His hand tensed around the phone. "Sherlock, where in God's name are you? Are you safe?"

There was no response on the line. Mycroft listened intently - he could hear breath.

"Sherlock," he said, his heart pounding. "Is that you?"

There was a pause.

"Yes..." said a voice.

It _was_ Sherlock.

And he sounded amused.

Mycroft took a long breath, rescripted a number of initial responses, and said, "I - understand that you've discharged yourself from the hospital. Your treatment wasn't complete."

Sherlock said nothing. Mycroft thought he could hear traffic.

"Where are you?" he demanded, as he realised he was gripping the edge of his desk.

Again, Sherlock gave no response.

Mycroft's chest tensed as he inhaled. "Sherlock, I am _worried_ about you. _John_ is worried about you." He hesitated, his mouth working around the name. "Inspector Lestrade is worried about you. _Where the devil are you?_"

Sherlock clucked his tongue.

"You know what I'm waiting for, Mycroft... let's not drag this out."

Every hair on Mycroft's arms rose to a point.

He gripped his desk white-knuckled, took a moment to unlock his jaw, and reminded himself that Sherlock's safety was at risk.

"You and I have a number of issues to discuss," he said, with care. "Some of them more recent than others. I'm willing to discuss them, Sherlock. Name a place, and I will meet you there. And we will talk."

Sherlock's chuckle crept down the back of Mycroft's neck, stiffening every muscle in his shoulders.

"Close, dear brother, but no cigar. I suggest you reformulate that response to include the words 'gay' and 'sorry', both applicable to you, and _then_ we'll talk."
Mycroft bit into the side of his cheek, shutting his eyes. He tried to think of Greg.

"What happened," he said, "with our father, many years ago, was regrettable. Entirely. I understand that you are still hurt. And I understand why - though not why you think a scene involving both of us would have been preferable. Suffice to say, Sherlock, there is no need for you now to start punishing me by - "

There came a loud click.

Mycroft froze. He looked at his phone.

Sherlock had hung up.

Furious, Mycroft called back at once.

After the third call rung off unanswered, he threw his phone back into the drawer, slammed it shut, and put his head into his hands.

Two minutes past four; the signal came.

"Yes?" Mycroft said, pinning his phone at once between his ear and his shoulder.

The voice on the line made his heart beat its wings.

"Let's go, gorgeous. M'here."

Mycroft pushed through the fire exit, crossed the pavement in three steps, and ducked inside the waiting car. The door slammed, locked, and Greg released the brake.

As they pulled away from the kerb, Mycroft did his best to seem inconspicuous in the passenger seat - while studying every face that they passed.

"Anything more from Sherlock?" Greg said, glancing in the rear view mirror over his sunglasses.

Mycroft suppressed a sigh. "No..." he said, wearily. "He simply won't answer. Have you heard anything?"

"Nope. Won't even answer to John. Checked all his usual haunts, no sign. Got his description out to street teams and homeless shelters... he'll know I've done it, though... he'll be two steps ahead, as ever..."

Mycroft's chest tightened.

"To have isolated himself even from Watson..." he said.

"I've spoken to John about six times," Greg replied. "He's as shocked as we are. I'd put my pension on it. John's a crap liar, and he's not lying."

There was a moment's uneasy pause.

"Darlin'..."
Mycroft covered his face. "God help me... I don't know. Possibly."

"Darlin', if he has gone after Pritchard - "

"But why would he?" Mycroft said, distraught. "He's hardly the type to suddenly crave bloody vengeance... unless it's against me..."

He exhaled, rubbing his temples slowly.

"I just don't know," he muttered. "I don't have the faintest idea where he is. I don't have the faintest idea where Nicholas is. If the two of them are shortly to be in the same place - ... but how would he even contact Nicholas? It - it makes no sense..."

"Unless Sherlock's trying to keep you safe?" Greg suggested, glancing sideways over his glasses. "Find Pritchard, bring him in? Show up Scotland Yard for the thousandth time?"

Mycroft shook his head, lost.

"I do not believe Sherlock currently wishes me well," he managed. "And my instincts say he would have taken Watson, if that were the case... though, I suppose it isn't beyond the bounds of possibility."

Greg huffed.

"This is a mess," he concluded.

Mycroft's heart sank; he'd never agreed with something more. He pushed his hands over his forehead, breathed against his wrists, and asked,

"Where does my responsibility end, Greg? At what point do I take a decision for the sake of my sanity?"

Greg smiled, casting him a quiet smile. "Can't answer that for you, love. I wish I could."

"I'm just - so weary. So tired with - trying desperately to keep him safe from himself. I am exhausted with it, Greg. For every step I take towards Sherlock's welfare, he takes two away from me. This incident with Nicholas has left the grounds of recklessness and stampeded into wanton self-destruction. He's no longer just compromising his own safety. He's compromising Watson's safety. Your safety - my safety. I can't comprehend why he thinks this is acceptable."

"Yeah..." Greg said, with a sigh. "He's definitely surpassed himself with this one..."

"I don't know how much more I can tolerate. This entire situation has been caused by Sherlock. And yet he remains the only person breezily unaffected by it."

"Okay," he said, gripping the wheel. "Let's take a step back... we can only change so much. No use spinning our wheels if we're not moving."

As they pulled up at traffic lights, he leant across to the glovebox for a mint.

"Sherlock's playing silly buggers," he said, handing Mycroft one, and unwrapping his own. "He's up to something, and I'm sure it makes sense in his own head. But we can't change that. He's had the three of us calling him all day, and he's not answering. We've given him all the chances we can. So... to the best of our ability, let's put that aside. Sherlock does what Sherlock does. I'm sure he'll
Mycroft rubbed between his eyes with two fingertips, trying to make his peace with it. He doubted he was going to sleep well. The thought of Sherlock heading off alone to a confrontation with Nicholas made him feel physically ill, and more helpless than he ever had in his life.

"I've got people on those leads you gave me," Greg said. "One of them's hiding Pritchard, and they could crack at any moment. I've got surveillance out on their addresses, too. We can't pull him out of thin air - but the more days that go by, the more twitchy he'll get. He's angry. We're patient. He only needs to be unlucky once, and we'll have him."

Mycroft let this sink into his soul.

"Yes..." he managed. "Yes, you're right... of course you are. His natural supply of patience is limited anyway."

The lights finally changed; Greg shunted the gearstick forwards.

"I know it's tense, love. And I know Sherlock's making things worse like he's being paid for it. But you've made it through another work day... that's that for the night."

Mycroft's heart tugged.

He couldn't resist - they were alone, and it had been a long day. To have dealt with this by himself would have been the end of him.

He reached across, and laid a hand gently on Greg's knee.

"Thank you," he said. "For - being my strength, Greg. You're becoming indispensable."

Greg smiled, glancing into his wing mirror.

"Not a problem, love. I'll do dinner tonight, okay? You can sit and work if you like - or you can relax with me - maybe a bit of both. And by this time tomorrow, we'll have a better idea of what the hell's going on. I promise."
Let your love be like the misty rain: coming softly, but flooding the river.

- Liberian Proverb

In disagreement with the task force (and with concession given to the infeasible constraints imposed upon their original analysis by the manner in which it was conducted) I would recommend a more simplistic set of criteria as a priority. A successful transition will also require a more robust method of evaluation, a longer time-frame to cover initial set-up, and a wider awareness of the intrinsic problems that will arise with any integration of the two departments. In my opinion, a rushed imposition of the changes will be unwise, leading to a number of potential economic consequences as detailed in 4.3.1.

Mycroft could always tell when his productive window for the day was closing.

Full-stops became satisfying to strike. His eyes began to dry out behind their glasses, and he started fantasising about submitting the reports he actually wanted to. They would be blissfully short to type, and almost all of them would read: "For the love of God, do not do that. Kindly just do it the way I suggested a month ago."

As he rubbed beneath his glasses, wondering how many more pages would give him sufficient grounds for the inevitable 'I told you so', Mycroft felt the cushion stir beneath his ankles.

Gentle hands appeared, rubbing his feet through his socks.

He smiled into his palms. He blinked the tiredness from his eyes as he let his glasses settle back into place, and looked up to find his lover smiling at him along the couch.

Greg's gaze was sleepy and soft, his eyes dark in the low light.

"You alright?" he said, fond. "Want another cuppa?"

Mycroft's heart squeezed in his chest.

"I'm - fine, thank you." He gave Greg a small smile, suddenly shy. The rubbing of his feet was rather nice. "Tend to avoid caffeine after nine. My attempt at a sleep cycle..."

"Yeah?" Greg smiled, his eyes sparking. "I've got camomile somewhere, if you like."

He was terribly easy to work near, Mycroft realised. They'd spent the entire evening on the couch in happy quiet - Mycroft typing, Greg contentedly watching a film.

It had been both restful and productive. Such nights were rare.

And the realisation was rather monumental.
"I - ... What was the question? Mycroft couldn't quite bring it to mind. Greg's eyes had caught the lamplight; it turned the very edge of his iris from espresso black to the rich almost-orange of bonfire toffee.

As Mycroft tried desperately to remember, he watched his lover's smile curve.

*Camomile.*

*He offered me camomile.*

"No - no, thank you..." Mycroft knew he was blushing now. "But you're very kind."

"No worries, darlin'..." Greg raised an eyebrow. "We heading to bed soon? Up early..."

Mycroft's toes curled quietly in Greg's hands. 'We'.

"If that suits," he said. "I - think my supply of professional patience for the night has run dry."

"Suits me fine, love..." Greg squeezed his feet, rubbing a slow circle with his thumbs against each arch. "Some party animals we are, huh?"

Mycroft smiled, lowering his eyes coyly to his report.

"So it seems," he said, and watched his lover grin.

*Is domestic life with another person always this comfortable?* It surely couldn't be, or the divorce rate would be negligible. Perhaps it was simply Greg - his easy nature, his restful presence. It was no great stretch of the imagination to suppose that Greg was uniquely suited to cohabitation.

Mycroft already knew that his apartment would seem very large and very quiet when he returned

The thought of going back made him feel oddly sad.

Greg transferred his feet gently to the middle seat of the couch.

"M'going to use the bathroom then, darlin'... won't be long." He stood up, leant over, and kissed Mycroft's forehead. "Door's locked."

Mycroft smiled, glancing up at him fondly. "Thank you."

While Greg was in the bathroom, he typed the title *Section 4.3.1*, saved the report, and shut the laptop down. In lieu of an armed safe, it would be spending the night beneath Greg's mattress. Mycroft could think of no safer place in the world.

He had a drink of water, checked the door, and sat down on Greg's bed in the dark for his final attempt of the day.

The phone rang eight times, clean and clear.

The call then failed, unanswered.

Mycroft's heart sank slowly into the quiet.

He knew it had been only the slightest chance - something about the late hour had made him hopeful. He wasn't even sure what he'd have said, if Sherlock answered. Something conciliatory. "I am sorry you were hurt. I am sorry I opted not to disclose the full truth. My attachment to Lestrade
is by necessity private. It would mean a great deal to me if you understood that."

But would that really be the end of it?

Mycroft struggled to believe so. The suggestion that Sherlock was still injured from that traumatic evening, nearly three decades ago, made psychological sense to an outside observer - but theirs was not a normal family.

And Sherlock's was not a normal mind.

His casual mistreatment of Watson - of Greg - of anyone foolish enough to be human - it all suggested his ability to form and nurture bonds was simply damaged. It did not function as it should. Sherlock's overriding commitment was to the siren-call of a solution - to answers and facts and explanations. People were merely an inconvenience. They were talking impediments, who withheld information from him.

Mycroft had thought he was damaged, too.

He'd thought it for years - even as he repeatedly brought his career close to shipwreck in protection of Sherlock - even as he kept on seeing their mother every month, tending to her ludicrous wishes, while Sherlock had not been in nearly a year - even as he sat in cafés and coffee shops with Inspector Lestrade, watching the man laugh and realising he would happily sit there all day. Only recently had the realisation taken form.

Mycroft sacrificed solutions in favour of people.

Sherlock sacrificed people in favour of solutions.

Mycroft could only hope there wouldn't be a sacrifice this time. He feared Sherlock had returned himself to the hunt. The more time that passed, the more he wondered if laying hands on Nicholas would be the final flourish of this matter for his brother - to be able to command gratitude as well as confession and apology. A triumvirate of victory.

And it could get him killed.

Perhaps even tonight.

Mycroft brushed his thumb across the blank screen, holding in a sigh. *I have tried*, he told himself. *Repeatedly. Desperately.*

*But have you tried enough?* asked a voice in the back of his mind.

Mycroft realised, brokenly, that the answer would always be no.

It was not in his nature where Sherlock was concerned.

*Because I did not try when it mattered?* He could at least have reasoned with Father. Attempted to plead some mercy for Sherlock.

But he remembered that day - he remembered the horror of it as keenly as if they were all still sitting there, three decades later. Even a single word would have signed his own death warrant. It could perhaps have signed their father's, too. For all his dominion and dominance, the old man's heart had never been strong. One sodomite of a son had sent him apoplectic. Two would have finished him off.
Mycroft put a hand quietly across his eyes in the darkness.

*This cannot be changed,* he thought. *Thought will not advance the situation.* He reminded himself that worries always seemed much worse at night; that there was nothing to be gained from spinning his wheels, if he was not moving; and that you could only ever lead a horse to water, not make it drink.

He removed his glasses, laid them on the bedside, and loosened his cuffs.

As the bathroom door opened, and Greg reappeared, Mycroft couldn't fight a smile. His lover grinned in the darkness, leaning against the doorframe.

"For purposes of evocative removal?" Mycroft joked, trying to suppress the flutter in his stomach.

Greg dropped him a wink.

"Or chivalry," he said. "Letting you get a proper night's sleep. Whichever works for you."

Mycroft's chances of a proper night's sleep had already been rather low. The addition of the fabled white t-shirt to the situation had just divided his chances in half again - though for rather alternative reasons.

As he smiled slightly, gazing at Greg in the bathroom door, backlit and gentle-eyed and gorgeous, Mycroft realised with a rush of nervous warmth.

If he wished to, he could have sex with Greg tonight.

The white t-shirt and the navy bottoms could be removed. He could place himself and all his fragility safe into Greg's gentle hands. Last night - pleasure that made his whole body tremble, enjoyment that burned every worry from his mind - it could all be recreated, and more. It would be a single gentle push to the summit. His thighs around Greg's waist - Greg's mouth on his, Greg's hands in his hair, Greg's cock slowly and steadily building for him that feeling of fullness, that warmth, that need... *God alive.*

And it could be tonight.

Mycroft swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry - and his stomach rather warm.

"Might I - use the bathroom before bed?" he said.

Greg smiled, gently. Mycroft wondered if he knew.

"'Course," he murmured. "Take your time. M'just going to text John."

Mycroft nodded - suddenly nervous. He rose to his feet, and the bed gave a gentle creak without his weight.

"Tell John that he shouldn't worry," he said, hoping he sounded more assured than he felt. "My brother's whims... it - will all be fine, I'm sure."

Greg nodded. "It will," he said. "All of it."

As Mycroft passed, Greg reached out - catching him gently.

He drew Mycroft into a hug, and kissed the shoulder of his jumper.

Greg then let him go, and went to turn out the lights.

In the bathroom, Mycroft did his best not to think.

He brushed his teeth, undressed and washed, and took his time. God help me - this is happening. The distinction of wanting and needing was suddenly blurred into nothing. Only what you want. Only what you feel ready for. Then it was happening tonight; this quiet night and its protective darkness, unfolding around them with care. The evening spent with his feet in Greg's lap, the night now to be spent in his arms.

It was happening.

Naked before the mirror, Mycroft reached for the bottle of cologne. He tried not to notice the shake in his wrist as he unscrewed the cap.

He dabbed a little scent on his fingertips, and applied it to his neck - for my lover's benefit - a quiet touch to his pulse on either side, and then the hollow of his throat.

He closed his eyes as he let the fragrance dry. He didn't dare meet his own gaze in the mirror.

What was Greg doing in this moment?

Relaxing in bed - texting Dr Watson. Unafraid. Mycroft shivered as he capped the cologne, returning it to its space amongst Greg's toiletries.

Courage, he thought. Courage, and calm - and most importantly trust.

He had the curious conviction he was about to be changed, in ways he couldn't yet understand. He was ready for it to happen.

He was ready to know.

He left his clothing folded on the bathroom chair. He switched out the light, took a final moment to himself in the darkness, and then reached for the door.

Greg was resting on top of the covers, using his phone by the light of the bedside lamp. The room was quiet, the door closed, and the curtains drawn. He looked up with a smile as Mycroft left the bathroom; a gentle sweep of his eyes registered his state of undress. He locked his phone at once, and put it away.

As Mycroft knelt on the edge of the mattress, his lover turned onto his side.

He drew Mycroft gently into his arms.

The brushed cotton felt good against his skin - light, comforting, all of Greg's warmth and muscle promised beneath. Tender hands began to stroke Mycroft's back at once. Greg's mouth was soft, and as they kissed deeply in the quiet, Mycroft let himself relax into this pleasure that he knew. Even the lamplight was settling. Its loving glow warmed Mycroft's skin from white to honeyed gold; it made him feel safe. As contentment and anxiety coursed through his veins, Greg's hands brushed his skin over and over - as gentle as the stroke of grass.

Mycroft realised he wouldn't sleep; he couldn't end this day until he knew.
"Greg..." he whispered into the kiss, suddenly overwhelmed. His heart broke with it. *Twenty-eight years.*

"Mm, beautiful...?"

*Oh God. Oh, dear God. "I - w-want you to take care of me." Please understand. Please know what I need. "A-All of me."

He felt Greg breathe in.

"I adore you..." Greg whispered, cupping his face. "You know that? I will always take care of you. All of you." Mycroft's heart leapt. They kissed - slower, deeper - and with utter gentleness, Greg soothed him over onto his back.

As his lover's hands moved across his skin, Mycroft's pulse began to climb. He stirred beneath Greg, settling into the pillows and trying to breathe the careful stroking beneath his skin - slow, soft-palmed sweeps over his stomach and his chest and his thighs, easy and familiar, all heightened with his lover's tender kiss. Greg's touch was caring; his hands were warm. His mouth tasted of toothpaste, and it hummed with gentle enjoyment as Mycroft moaned for him, his loving hands rewarding the timid arching of his body with firmer strokes.

Quivering, Mycroft reached for the hem of Greg's t-shirt.

He slipped his very fingertips beneath it, touching with shyness Greg's bare stomach and his waist. He felt Greg shiver against him, groan softly into his mouth, and as his lover pushed closer, Mycroft's inner thighs tightened of their own volition. He wanted more - more reactions, more sound, more of Greg's enjoyment. Last night, Greg had worshipped him. He wanted Greg to feel the same. He wanted everything. *Oh, God... oh God, oh God...* he let his fingers steal up beneath Greg's t-shirt, wandering his stomach and chest, playing through the soft trails of his hair. Greg was a beautiful man; the planes of his body were firm, not hard, and the warmth of his skin had an almost magnetic quality. At the lightest touch, Mycroft wanted to be closer - closer even than skin would permit - chest-to-chest, lips-to-lips, fingers in each other's hair, just moving slowly to feel the contact over and over. Shivering, he pushed his hands around to Greg's back and grasped with longing at his shoulder blades, gasping out a moan as Greg's tongue slid its way inside his mouth.

Greg was aroused. His hardness nuzzled between Mycroft's legs as they kissed. Mycroft's palms ached to grasp and to stroke - to take Greg in his hands, grip him, guide him inside his body. Greg would be gentle; he'd give Mycroft time to let it feel good. He'd kiss him as they tried. And by the morning, Mycroft would know if this was something they could have.

He wondered how many nights Greg had wanted this, and yet waited.

He wondered how many people Greg had ever waited for.

As Greg rocked against him, shaking with enjoyment, Mycroft realised in a rush he didn't care.

It didn't matter. Other people had been and gone. It didn't mean a thing if there were scores of them, legions of senseless people who'd somehow known Greg Lestrade, fallen in love with him, grown close to him and then walked away - or mistreated him so poorly he had no choice but to go.

Mycroft wouldn't walk away.

Mycroft wouldn't make him go.

*Always, he thought, shivering with excitement and rocking back in time. Always, you...*
They rucked Greg's t-shirt up over his shoulders, mouths parting with a gasp to get it off, then sank into kissing again - moving together in rhythm, hardening and breathing. Mycroft shook, lifted his ankles, and in instinct wrapped his bare legs around Greg. The noise Greg made into his mouth made his heart jounce. Greg ground against him, panting, and as they pushed together in the rhythm that Greg was going to take him, Mycroft felt himself begin to shake. He buried his fingers into Greg's hair with a helpless moan, tightening his legs. Greg shuddered, released his lips, and leant down to Mycroft's neck.

As he kissed there, licking and lathing and with perfect gentleness softly biting, Mycroft fought not to grip at his hair. *Oh, please... please be inside me like this. Please make it feel like this...*

"You want me," he heard his mouth whimper. "*Oh, God.* You want me like this."

Greg groaned against his neck. His cock was straining against the fabric of his pyjamas.

"C-Course I want you..." he gasped. "*Christ, I... I've wanted you for - ... y-you don't know what this is doing to me. I want you so much. Please - please tell me this is okay."

Waves of longing rippled through Mycroft's heart. "Yes," he whispered, curling tighter around Greg. "Yes, yes - "

Greg shuddered, breath cutting. His shoulders shook.

"Darlin'," he whispered. "D-Darlin' - please, I - really need - ..." His fingers caught Mycroft's hand.

Mycroft didn't need the gentle pull. He reached for Greg's waistband at once, pushed it down, and wrapped his hands around Greg's heavy cock - squeezing, stroking, joy burning through his soul as Greg's face twisted with enjoyment and he moaned.

"*Fuck...*" Greg whispered, shutting his eyes tight. His head dropped forwards to rest on Mycroft's shoulder. "*Oh, Christ...*"

He began to push nervously into Mycroft's hands. *F*uck my grip. *Oh, God.* The desperate panting flipped Mycroft's stomach. "*Fuck, Myke... fuck, fuck...*"

Mycroft's soul writhed with longing as he listened. Greg in pleasure was a more affecting sound than any in the world. He wanted to hear Greg sound like this as they made love. He wanted to watch Greg enjoy their first time - wanted to listen to him come.

He twisted, trembling, and reached a hand for the bottle on the bedside.

Lubricant - wet, dripping over their hands. It felt like the first night they'd ever shared, just pushing together, shaking, a ball of hands and fingers, panting as they kissed, their erections nuzzling and the hot, sleek stroke of skin for long, delicious minutes. Mycroft could hear rain against the window, pattering beyond the curtains. Within the whirl of sensation and soft sounds, it felt somehow like it was raining for them.

Greg's touch shifted so gradually that he barely noticed - stroking his cock, gently massaging his testes, easing just behind them with the slick brush of fingers, tenderly coaxing against the most intimate skin that he had. Mycroft let his head fall back, moaning for continuation. He wanted that feeling - the gentle pushing. He wanted to be filled.

Greg swallowed, hard, and shifted on top of him.

"Beautiful...?" he whispered. His voice broke. "*C'mere, sweetheart. Come sit across my lap for*
Mycroft trembled, watching round-eyed as Greg pushed pillows against the headboard, sat back against them, and reached for Mycroft's hands. Mycroft moved to him, willingly.

As he climbed into Greg's lap, settling nervously astride him, Greg's arms wrapped around his waist.

He whispered the words against Mycroft's neck - stroking them with his mouth.

"If we - ... l-like this, darlin'... for your first time?"

_Oh - oh, God..._

"You can have control, like this." Greg's voice rumbled against his skin. His hands palmed Mycroft's back, gently stroking down his thighs. "How deep you want me... how much you want to move... and I can hold you, and we can kiss... is that okay?"

Mycroft's heart heaved. He could only whimper, nodding urgently as one gentle hand cupped his arse.

Greg's fingers nuzzled inwards - parting him, finding him. Mycroft rested his head on Greg's shoulder, braced his thighs apart, and begged in anxious moans.

Slowly - what felt like half the night. Just gently, easing from one to two fingers, until steady thrusts with two felt like heaven and Mycroft began to tremble from neck to ankle. He found Greg's ear; he found that Greg could be brought to the brink of climax just from sucking and gently biting at the lobe - stroking a slow tongue around the shell - flicking softly, and sharing his sounds, and letting Greg hear what every tender push of his fingers caused. He wanted to come; he wanted to be full. His cock ached between their stomachs, Greg just as hard, and Mycroft discovered that rocking gently caused a friction so tiny and so good that he wanted to pass out.

"Y-You okay?" Greg whispered at last, reaching a shaking hand for more lubricant.

Mycroft arched, gasping against his shoulder and nodding.

"Three, beautiful... is that alright? It - m-might hurt. Bear down for me, if it does. Bear down and breathe. Tell me if it's too much. We don't have to do this."

_Yes, we do._

_I need to know._

Mycroft nodded again, bracing, parting his thighs wider. He breathed in as he tightened his grip on Greg's shoulder.

He calmed himself through the first gentle press - filling his lungs with Greg's scent, concentrating on the stroke of Greg's other hand - soft slow, circles on his lower back. _This is the most_, he thought, shaking. _This is the worst it would be._

The worst didn't seem to be coming.

Three felt much like two - fuller, stretched - slick and comforting. He rocked against the fullness, timid, and Greg gently pushed for him. _Fuck. Fuck - good._ He felt a moan melt from his lips, muffled into Greg's neck, and nudged his hips back for more.
He felt open. He felt ready.

*Because I want,* he thought.

*Because him.*

Greg was kissing his neck - murmuring to him, soothing him, whispering praise and love. Telling him he was doing well. Telling him he was beautiful. Telling him he sounded like heaven, and crooning soft questions - asking him if it felt good - if it was too much - *there, darlin'? Just there?* - asking if he needed to come, if he was okay.

Mycroft shut his eyes, shaking.

*Oh, God. Now.*

_Not another moment. Twenty-eight years.*

_Not one moment more.* He stirred, pushing his cheek against Greg's, and begged in a voice that didn't sound like his own.

"I need you." His body convulsed. "Greg. Now. I need you."

Greg's breath tightened. "Now, beautiful?"

_Fuck. Fuck.* Mycroft inhaled, sharply. "Now."

Greg's fingers withdrew; Mycroft's heart began to pound. As Greg took his hips in both hands, Mycroft let them pull him closer. _Oh, God. Oh, fuck.* He looked downwards, forehead pressed to Greg's as he panted, and shaking took hold of Greg's cock - gripping it, feeling Greg's pulse thundering below the hot slick skin. Greg helped his hips to tilt - _fuck, fuck*_ - and at the first press Mycroft's heart lurched into his mouth. *Yes. Now. Oh fuck, now.* He bit down into his lip, shut his eyes tight, and pressed. _Fuck. Fuck, this is happening.* As Greg's sheer size became clear, a flutter of panic skittered through his heart.

He gasped with it. Greg's arms tightened around him; the voice came at once in his ear.

"Slow, beautiful... slow - "

_Oh God. Oh God, you're -"

Mycroft sunk his teeth harder into his lip, trying to take - just a little more.

_Fuck, fuck. I want this. I want this.*

"M'here," Greg breathed, holding him, shaking with him. "M'right here, sweetheart... go slow..."

Mycroft's pulse was panicking in his chest and his fingers and his throat. He breathed to try and calm it, begging his heart to let this happen. Greg's voice broke.

"D'you need to stop, love?"

Mycroft shook his head in desperation, digging his fingers into Greg's shoulders.

"N-No - no, no - ..." He wanted to fuck. _Oh, God. Oh, holy God.* He wanted all of Greg inside him. He wanted to feel Greg move, to feel the slick in-and-out that felt good. He wanted that part. He bore down, breathed as deeply as he could, and with a hard swallow and a tightening of his face he
let Greg slide into his body - one motion, slick and slow, and all the way.

*Oh.*

*Fuck.*

Mycroft's head fell back; his mouth opened.

Greg's chest heaved. He shook, breathing hard against Mycroft's collarbones.

"Darlin' - ..." A desperate kiss. A stroke of stubble. "Darlin', I love you... m'here..."

Mycroft's every nerve rippled with it. Here. You're here. You love me. As he squeezed around the thickness inside him, he heard his own mouth moan - weak, overwhelmed, a sound that aroused him just to hear it. He could feel Greg staying as still as he could, letting him feel safe, letting him have these moments how he needed them.

As shock began to ease, the urge to move arose.

Mycroft leant back, swallowing. He found he could brace his hands upon Greg's thighs behind him - and he could stretch like this, and pant, and the air felt brand new in his throat and his lungs. Nervously, he tested a first movement: the gentlest, slowest lift and fall - barely an inch - just once, just feeling. Greg couldn't possibly fill him any further. He was enormous. He filled Mycroft like quiet filled a forest. *Oh fuck... oh fuck...* Greg was watching him, letting him, stroking his sides.

He rocked again. Easier - smoother.

He could feel himself breathing in.

"Myke..." Greg's hands shook. "Christ - M-Myke..."

Mycroft immediately wanted more of that. He shivered, and rocked the third time a little firmer, a little deeper, a timid grind against the fullness inside him. *Oh God. Oh my God.* He felt Greg's thigh muscles clench gently beneath him in response.

"Christ - s-sweetheart..." Greg's hands slid around to his back, fingers trembling. "M-Myke - come here - "

As their lips met, something broke in the depths of Mycroft's heart.

He felt it crack like old and rusted iron, fall free without a sound, and wash away at once in a rush of realisation.

Greg was inside him.

They were making love. The ache was easing with every moment, and the worst was over.

It was over.

A whimper left his mouth; he found himself suddenly trembling.

"Tell me you're alright," Greg breathed, cupping his face - stroking kisses against his lips, adoring him. "Tell me you're okay..."

Mycroft's heart reeled.
"I-I'm alright..." The fingers of his right hand shook, threading themselves through his lover's hair. He kept his left braced on Greg's thigh behind him. "Greg... oh God, Greg... I like it. It feels good."


Mycroft bit down into his lip, overcome. He braced his thighs.

"Please - p-please, can you - ...?"

As Greg lifted his hips, pressing up inside him, Mycroft's breath cut into a whimper.

"Oh, fuck," he sobbed. He dug his fingers into Greg's thigh, rocking downwards in response, every inch of his skin burning with enjoyment. "Oh fuck, oh fuck..."

"Christ - ..." Greg's eyes searched his face, dark and round and worried. "Am I hurting - "

"No - no, I-I'm fine..." Mycroft raked his fingers through Greg's hair, trembling. "I'm fine," he breathed, and swallowed. "Oh lord god, this is glorious. Closing his eyes, he began to rock in rhythm. "Greg..."

Enjoyment rolled in waves through his lower back with every movement, hot and soft and shivering.

"Oh, fuck..." Twenty-eight years. "Oh, God - Greg - "

Greg shivered, reaching for his mouth.

As they moved, Mycroft's cock rubbed between them - a faint, maddening brush of friction against Greg's stomach. He'd never been so hard. He'd never been so aware of his own body, breathing, trembling, heat pouring from his skin as he rolled his hips in search of pleasure and Greg kissed him, held his hips in protective hands, and helped him build this feeling. Greg's cock seemed to be nuzzling inside him - not thrusting, just moving, rubbing against somewhere that made him want to cry out. It took the breath from his lungs with its intensity. He felt at once as weak as a fawn and as glorious as a stag.

Slow minutes, and Greg began to breathe hard into the kiss.

His fingers padded where he held Mycroft's hips. Mycroft could feel him trembling as he fought to restrain himself - fought to keep himself still, raise himself only gently to meet Mycroft's movements. Letting me take from him.


His heart heaved with every moan Greg couldn't hide.

As the need to breathe became pressing, their mouths came apart. Their eyes locked instead, forehead-to-forehead - and the contact felt somehow just as intimate as having Greg inside him. Greg was gazing at him with a restlessness and a fragility that Mycroft had never seen in his eyes: his pupils blown, faint sweat on his forehead and his chest, his expression almost pained. Pleasure and shock and love had flooded his face.

He was looking at Mycroft as if he was everything - as if he was beautiful - as if Greg had never felt this feeling before in his life.

As Mycroft realised it was his own expression, mirrored back to him, his heart fell to pieces at
"Oh, God..." he whimpered. He scrunched his fingers in Greg's hair. *Oh God, I need to be with you. I need to live with you. I need it to be you. It has to be you, only you, always you."Oh, God - th-this - this feels - ..."

Greg's eyes burned. His hands tensed gently at Mycroft's waist. With a thick swallow, he breathed in and began to lift his hips, slow and steadying presses. Mycroft's stomach swooped.

"Tell me," Greg breathed, as he moaned. "Tell me how it feels."

Mycroft's heart pounded in response. *How can I express this? How can I find you words?* He trembled, his breath stuttering - and whispered,


Greg's expression tightened.

"You mean the world to me." As Mycroft tested a little deeper, a little further with each gentle push, he stiffened. A groan cracked its way from Greg's throat; urgent pleasure wracked his beautiful face. "F-Fuck - darlin', you - ... oh, God - "

Mycroft's pulse lurched.

"What - w-what does it feel like?" he gasped.

"Perfect." It was breathed without hesitation against his mouth. "F-Fuck, just - ... perfect - " Greg's breath roughened. "Warm. You're - s-squeezing - ... fuck, you're - ... oh. fuck..."

Mycroft's stomach gripped. As he watched his lover panting, and felt the involuntary shudders rolling through Greg's body, he suddenly needed something more than he needed air. "Oh, God... oh, God. I want you to come."

Greg's eyes flashed in panic; his face grew taut.

"N-No... no, baby - ..." His voice tightened as he begged. "Not yet - n-not this quick for you - "

"Please..." Mycroft drove both hands through Greg's hair, gazing fiercely into his eyes as they moved. "Please, please. Please come. I need to watch you. Please."

Greg jerked. He pulled Mycroft tighter against his chest, panting, and broke into hoarse moans as his hips began to lift - seeking, needing.

Mycroft ground down against him, meeting each desperate arch.

"Oh fuck, Myke - ... Myke - " As Mycroft kissed him, cradling his jaw, Greg shuddered and cried out against his mouth. His entire body tensed. His hips bucked up as his hands pulled down. "F-Fuck, fuck, Myke...!"

*Mine. Oh, God. Mine - mine, mine...*

As he came, Mycroft watched every moment of it - every gasp, every contraction of his face. He drank in every moan, and felt them healing something he hadn't even realised was in pain. Even now, even in his throes, Greg's hands were protective and he was resisting the instinct to thrust. Mycroft could feel him writhing with it, fighting not to push up, not to hurt, not to force, even as every atom of his body wanted to be deeper inside his lover's body.
Heart buckling, Mycroft took him as deep as he could. He ground gently in time with Greg's moans. Greg jerked and gripped him, panting against his mouth as Mycroft rode him through.

As he began to subside, his gasps grew longer. They seemed to fill and empty his lungs on every breath. Mycroft slowed his movements, shaking, and felt the very moment that Greg's muscles began to release. His gorgeous shoulders stretched; his fingers flexed. His head hit the headboard with a soft thump, and he groaned.

As boneless relief flooded his face, his chest heaved beneath Mycroft's hands.

"Are you alright?" he gasped at once, gazing up at Mycroft. His eyes shone, soft and wild and desperate with love.

Something in the answer - a final, whispered, "Yes..." - tugged too far into Mycroft's heart.

A wave of emotion came rolling in its wake. He felt it well up like rain from beneath a loosened paving stone - one moment fine, and the next suddenly drenched in something far too profound to withstand. It surged through him, shocking him to the core.

And startled, he started to cry.

Greg's arms went around him at once.

"Myke..."

Greg had never held him so tightly - never hushed him so gently, cradled him with this care. No-one in the world had ever held him like this.

"Beautiful, I'm here... I'm right here..."

You must always be here. Always. Please don't go.

"It's okay, sweetheart... it's okay to cry..." Greg's voice wrapped him up like a blanket. As he nuzzled into Mycroft's neck, the brush of quiet answering tears only made Mycroft cry more. God help me, why are we crying? What possible reason is there to cry? This is perfection. Greg was stroking his back, hushing him as they cried together. He could still feel Greg inside him. "I've got you, beautiful... it's all alright..."

"... - h-haven't the - faintest idea w-why - ..."

"It's relief, darlin'... it's relief, and it's okay..." Greg kissed his shoulder, breathing deep into his lungs. "D'you want to come, sweetheart?" he soothed. "Want me to take care of you?"

Mycroft trembled, sweeping his fingers through Greg's hair.

Greg laid him on his back against the covers. He kissed down Mycroft's body, glowing with sweat, every movement slow and easy and post-coital, and the wet heat of his mouth around Mycroft's cock was sublime. His hand slid gently between Mycroft's thighs, his fingers nuzzling and stroking through slickness, and as Mycroft gripped his shoulders and panted and begged, Greg filled him with three fingers.

They fucked him, slowly, in the rhythm they'd made love.

Mycroft realised the new wetness he could feel there was Greg.

His entire body heaved with it. He'd felt Greg come. Watched him lose control, lose himself, moan
and pant and come - and now his fingers and his tongue and his mouth were devoted to him, worshipping him slowly, and he would do this until Mycroft came too.

He whimpered until Greg found his prostate - and then what sounds Mycroft made were beyond his cognition. There was only pleasure. There was only Greg's mouth, sliding lazily around him, and the fingers driving between his thighs, and his lover's free hand stroking gentle circles just above the base of his cock. Every time he glanced down, brown eyes gazed back at him - eyes that he'd just looked into, making love.

He felt orgasm beginning to break long moments before it did. The rising and searing and tightening drowned him in sensation, and left him trembling too hard to hold back. He cried out, digging his fingers into Greg's sweat-slick shoulders - he felt Greg's fingers speed in response, and his mouth slide low, and as pressure ruptured in his stomach Mycroft writhed and pleaded and sobbed Greg's name. Heat bloomed in his face; his every muscle clenched and groaned and released. He could feel Greg swallowing him, moaning softly to him - stroking his stomach - comforting him as he came.

As he returned to himself, Mycroft discovered tears tracking gently towards his temples.

A tiny smile lifted the corner of his mouth.

*Mm. No wonder.*

He let the feelings be. He let the tears run clean.

He could feel his body contracting, Greg's fingers still gentle inside him. His stomach rose and fell as he breathed. It felt good even to fill his lungs.

"Greg?" he whispered, closing his eyes.

His voice sounded brand new. As if he'd never used it before; as if he'd never quite heard it properly until this moment.

A kiss - as gentle as a blessing - was placed beneath his navel.

"Mm, darlin'?"

It didn't seem frightening to ask. "Can you hold me, please?"

Greg kissed up his body. Every brush of his lips felt like a promise - like a butterfly landing, gentle as air. Mycroft's skin sang with enjoyment; shivers connected each kiss in a trail.

"M'gonna hold you the whole night, you know that?" Greg murmured against his collarbones. "M'not letting you go for a single minute. Not for anything..."

Mycroft shuddered, drowning in it. He stroked his hands up Greg's back - sweat, skin, muscles still stirring under his touch.

He realised in a whirl.

"Oh, God..." he whispered. "Oh, God. You were inside me..."

Greg's mouth stroked at his neck. "Mm, baby... I was..."

Mycroft's heart strained against the front of his chest. It wanted to get close to Greg again - to be pressed tight against his own, one body for a while. *Still panting from the first time... and I am*
"longing for the second time.

"Lie here a second, sweetheart?" Greg whispered against his jaw. "M'just gonna get something..."

Mycroft shivered. Must you? "A-Alright..."

When Greg returned from the bathroom, he had a warm flannel with him. He eased back onto the bed, rested himself at Mycroft's side, and drew him into a protective cuddle. The kiss to Mycroft's forehead made him glow.

"Here," Greg whispered - gently parting Mycroft's legs, easing one to bend forwards and rest on him. "Let me, darlin'..."

As the soft cloth sought between his thighs, Mycroft bit down into his lip.

He blushed, cuddled into his lover's arms, and let Greg clean him. Shivers of sensation flickered through his stomach with each stroke. Greg held him as safe as a ship in a harbour - resting, sharing this moment with him - this gentle intimacy after sex.

"I love you..." he whispered in Mycroft's ear.

Mycroft's heart heaved at its seams. He tightened his arms around Greg's back, swallowing. "I love you, too..."

Greg kissed his temple, hugged him, and tossed the cloth quietly through the open bathroom door. For the morning. He settled back down beside Mycroft, wrapped him at once within the sheets, and gently lifted his face with a hand.

Their eyes closed as they kissed.

It felt good to stroke Greg's jaw - stubble, soft - male - a masculinity that Greg seemed to be exuding in waves, a scent that only he had in the world - a scent that now left Mycroft reeling. It washed him clean, rippling through him as powerfully and breathlessly as orgasm.

My lover. It was primal - almost pagan.

It was perfect.

"How d'you feel?" Greg murmured at last, in his voice of smoke and love.

How can I possibly ever show you? Mycroft tightened his arms. "Wonderful."

He felt Greg smile against his temple; loving arms drew him closer.

"That - can usually last a bit longer," Greg murmured, and the note of embarrassment caused Mycroft's heart to give a dizzy squeeze.

"I enjoyed it... very, very much."

Greg kissed Mycroft's cheek. "First time nerves," he said, softly abashed. "I - liked you on top of me, darlin'. You felt just right."

Shivering, Mycroft kissed him in response.

"I liked watching you," he whispered. The honesty came easily, and it felt magnificent. "It was perfect. I wouldn't change it. It - felt good to - ... afterwards. Your fingers."
Greg smiled, his eyes soft - vulnerable, Mycroft realised - full of nervous hope. "Promise me I didn't hurt you."

Mycroft's soul glowed.

He cupped his lover's perfect face.

"I promise. You were wonderful. I feel very happy... very comfortable." A small shiver tickled over the back of his neck. "Very - hopeful."

"Yeah?" Greg's eyes warmed softly. "Would you - want that again?"

Mycroft imagined taking up his phone, this very moment. 'Sherlock? I am gay. Tell whoever the hell you like.' Ending the call, throwing the pointless thing across the room - pulling Greg on top of him, and remaining that way until the morning light.

"Yes," he whispered, gloriing in his lover's gaze. "I would. Very much."

Greg's eyes shone.

"I adore you," he said. "You know that?"

Mycroft bit down into his smile. "I confess I had an inkling..."

As Greg began to stroke his back, he closed his eyes. The gentle sweeps were divine. Every nerve ending he possessed seemed to have been blown open, and all he wanted was to lie here and be touched - stroked like a cat and soothed. He wanted it to be Greg - Greg, without end - Greg, closer than his skin. He felt glorious. He felt like he was aflame.

"God help me," he whispered. The whole world was basking in joy with him. "Greg... you... you make me - ..."

His lover smiled quietly, reaching for his lips.

"I love you, beautiful..." Greg's fingers skinned across his back - playing, stroking, following paths of pleasure Mycroft hadn't even known were there. His voice was as protective as castle walls. "I love you so, so much..."

Mycroft shuddered with relief.

Their mouths slowly met; he let Greg's hands melt him into bliss.
Cosy darkness - quiet and warm - no hint of light yet on the curtains.

As Greg became aware of himself, he became aware of Mycroft too - just stirring, sleepy inside his arms. The stroke of their bare skin bloomed at once into memory, flooding him with the events of last night.

A quiet glow filled his chest.

He pressed a kiss to Mycroft's forehead; he felt the shiver that it caused.

"Hello..." Mycroft murmured, soft against his shoulder.

Greg smiled.

"Hi..." He ran his fingers through Mycroft's hair, stroking through his curls. "Go back to sleep, sweetheart... not morning yet."

Mycroft nestled closer, stifling a little yawn. "What time is it?"

Greg wasn't sure - hours until sunrise, at least. It didn't feel like it mattered.

He ran a hand down Mycroft's side, soothing him. "Early o'clock," he murmured. "Close your eyes."

"Mmhm." Mycroft stirred beneath the stroke of his hand - another shiver tightened his breath. "I love you..."

*God, let me hear those words forever. Don't ever, ever leave me. Please.*

"I love you too, darlin'..." Mycroft's fingers brushed his bare chest - exploring him, shy - just smoothing his hair. They slipped up onto his shoulders, and held.

As Mycroft began to kiss along his law, a quiet possibility fluttered through Greg's stomach. "Are you - sleepy, love?"

Mycroft paused.

"No," he whispered, and took Greg's earlobe between his lips.

*Christ. Oh Christ, please.* Greg tried to bite back his moan - but the sounds at his ear were too much. The little curls of pleasure made him want to squirm. He felt his cock filling with every nip and flash of tongue, and as Mycroft eased closer to him, his erection grazed across Myke's bare
The stroke of velvety friction was so good it took his breath. He groaned, his hands twitching on Mycroft's back.

Mycroft stirred against him.

"I want you," he breathed in Greg's ear, soft. Greg's heart rate immediately doubled. "I want to make love again..."

_Holy hell._ Greg had been planning to take a few days, and then ask - sit Mycroft down on the couch with a cup of tea, put an arm around him, and see how he felt about things - if sex had been alright for him - if it felt like something he'd want to have again in the future.

Now it looked like a very good week had just started.

Inhaling, Greg reached out a hand to the mattress - and tipped Mycroft onto his back.

Mycroft's moan rippled through his senses. He stretched beneath Greg, eagerly, and wrapped his legs around Greg's waist.

"Like this," he whispered, gazing up, fingers raking through Greg's hair. "Like this... please..."

Greg shuddered in a rush. Even the thought made him want to come. _Let's see if I last more than five bloody minutes this time._

He pressed his mouth to Mycroft's, and closed his eyes - then reached for the bedside.

Myke relaxed around his fingers like a dream - still wet from last night, blushing, begging anxiously for more. _Wet with me, darlin'... oh, God... take for me, sweetheart..._ he seemed just to enjoy Greg inside him. He moaned frantically as Greg began a gentle rhythm of in-and-out, his body soft and his face tight. The whimpered, "Please - please, I want your cock..." would never quite leave Greg's memory.

As he eased inside Myke for the second time, breathing hard into his neck, Mycroft trembled beneath his weight. His hands grasped tight at Greg's shoulders; his knees hugged Greg on either side.

"You okay?" Greg gasped to him, shaking.

He felt Mycroft swallow - felt the muscles in his neck work against his lips. Mycroft's out-breath quivered into a moan. "Yes... y-yes, I'm fine..."

He stirred, adjusting; his body contracted around Greg's cock.

Greg shut his eyes at once.

_God. Don't let me come. Let me make this good. Please, please let me make this good._

"Take me..." Mycroft gasped in his ear. His fingers rumpled and scrunched through Greg's hair; he curled around his lover in desperation. "Take me - take me, please - "

_Christ... oh, Christ..._ 

Gently Greg began to move.

Pleasure burned through his body at once, melting his mind away. There was only Myke - his hands gripping Greg's back, his gentle sounds of excitement, the slow stroke of their skin over and
over. Myke was warm, and he was peaceful, his movements soft with sleep. He rocked back against Greg in time, whimpering, pink flushing high in his cheeks as he enjoyed it. Greg's heart pounded with relief.

He liked it.

He liked sex.

He liked being taken gently - he liked Greg moving in him.

And he liked to kiss, while they did this. Greg liked to kiss, too. He let the soft join of their mouths calm his own frantic heart, concentrating on the control of his lips - on kissing Mycroft slowly and with care, letting his lover breathe in gentle gasps - trying not to focus on his cock nuzzling through heat and silk and skin, over and over and over, gripping around him, Mycroft's desperate moans... fuck, fuck... fuck, oh fuck...

"Greg?" Mycroft whispered into the kiss, after some time.

The instant rush of protectiveness stopped Greg's breath. "Yeah, darlin'?"

Mycroft's face tightened.

"Make me come like this," he begged. "I - w-want - ... w-with you - ... oh God, please - make me come..."

*Christ, Christ, Christ...*


Mycroft was gripping his lower back, shaking, wanting Greg deeper. His moans hitched on every push. As his soft grey eyes closed over, he pulled his swollen lower lip between his teeth and stretched against the sheets, panting.

He was so fucking beautiful.

Greg couldn't breathe.

_Come for me, sweetheart... close your eyes, and come all over for me..._

__________________________

_So this is where he's hiding you, is it?_

_The faithful protector._

Two AM. Getting into the building had been easy. He'd waited for one of the other occupants to go out to the off-licence nearby, car keys in hand, front door left on the latch. They'd only be ten minutes, after all.

Ten seconds was enough.

He slipped inside the building, made his way to Lestrade's floor in silence, and took a good look at
These locks were old. For a policeman, Lestrade had picked his fortress poorly. A castle was only ever as strong as its front gate. Fifteen minutes, a little patience, a little luck, and the lock gave around the pick with an almost welcoming sigh.

The door swung open, revealing a small lounge shrouded in darkness.

He couldn't fight a smile. This had all come together so nicely that it was starting to look half-divine. Why did people think they were safe in the night? What about the average lock made them all forget so very quickly they were vulnerable?

He stepped without a sound into the flat.

The time for reckoning had come.

Close, close... oh God, close... Greg's mouth, soft on his own - Greg's roughened breath - the slow and gentle pushing into his body. Greg's stomach rasped against his cock on each steady stroke. The pillow behind his head was cool, and the sheets soft, and in raptures Mycroft realised all over again that this was happening. It was the middle of the night, and Greg was inside him, and it was wonderful.

He had a lover - a partner - someone to wake up with him in the darkness, stroke his skin and make him feel good. Slow, inside him. Making love to him.

He liked Greg this way - above him - the gentle pinning. Safe. Taken. Kissing, breathing, and Greg's moans were growing deeper now. He shook against Mycroft on each slow thrust.

Mycroft's heart contracted, pleasure rippling up his back.

"Darling..." He wound his fingers through Greg's hair. "Oh, God... oh, Greg - "

Greg stifled a strange, tight groan against his mouth.

He came to a sudden stop, fingers tensing on Mycroft's hips, and swallowed in desperation.

"Just - just g-give me - ..." He pressed his forehead to Mycroft's shoulder, his shoulders stiff, his breathing curiously measured. "Just - g-give me a minute. S-Sorry."

Mycroft realised.

He felt his soul heave.

He wrapped his arms around Greg's shoulders, shivering. "Too much?" he whispered in his ear.

"Fuck me up..." Greg breathed - and it was too wonderful not to laugh. They gasped together, shaking, as Mycroft's heart strained with the sheer and utter joy of it. Greg lifted his head, embarrassed; Mycroft gazed up at him, stroked back his hair, and watched him breathe. Too much for you. Too much pleasure. My lover. Overcome. Oh, God...

"It's - b-been a while," Greg said with a nervous smile, his pupils huge.
Mycroft's eyes shone.

"Hasn't it?" he murmured, stroking beneath his lover's mouth.

Greg grinned, dazed. He caught Mycroft's fingers and kissed them, drawing a long and steadying breath. "I'll... get myself some self-control, darlin'... I promise. Just out of practice..."

Mycroft smiled - too delighted to mind in the least. It felt good just to hold Greg inside him like this.

It was strangely comforting.

Sharing, he thought, gazing at his lover's flushed face. As close as humans can be.

"It's quite alright," he whispered, and Greg's eyes glittered in the darkness - soft, shining and embarrassed. He kissed Mycroft's fingertips, listening. "I'm... sure 'practice' won't be a hardship for either of - "

Mycroft cut off, suddenly.

He jerked his head towards the door.

Something awful flashed across his face. Every muscle in his body gripped. "Greg - "

Greg froze. "What?"

Mycroft's fingers dug suddenly into his forearms. "I heard -"

Then Greg saw it - a sweep of white light along the seam of the door.

A torch beam.

Looking for a handle.

Greg had half a second to react. His muscles moved without need of his brain. He grabbed the top sheet, lunged out of bed, and as the door swung open he threw himself forwards.

He flung the sheet across the intruder, swallowing up the torch beam before it even found them. He wrenched the sheet down over the figure's head, locked his arms around their torso and tripped them sideways onto the floor. They fell together, hard. A cry of pain went up. Greg didn't waste a moment. He pinned the intruder at once beneath his full weight, his arms locking into place like iron.

The shape tried to struggle - then, realising the situation, gave up.

It was all over in a second.

Greg held the bastard down as he panted.

"Ring 999," he bit out. *Fuck. Fuck.*

He heard Mycroft scrabble for a phone.
And then a voice spoke, muffled beneath the sheet, from a face audibly squashed against the floor. "You might wish to hold off on the cavalry, brother mine..."

Realisation dawned.

*Jesus fucking Christ.*

Lestrade had had close combat training, then.

Unfortunate.

He was also heavier than he looked, and - both to Sherlock's advantage and disadvantage - it seemed that he'd timed his arrival into the scene to a moment of hyper-awareness.

It meant that he'd caught them. There would be no excuses now - there would be no more flimsy attempts at deception. Even Mycroft, dedicated adherent of the practice, could not continued to lie about his attachment to Lestrade when he'd been caught so very *physically* attached to the man.

But it also meant that Lestrade's instincts were rather sharper than Sherlock had hoped - with the result that the man was now pinning him by the face to a bedroom carpet. There was also the unfortunate consequence that he was about to see Lestrade naked.

A sorry sight he imagined it would make - and, worse, his gangly excuse of a brother would also be gadding about naked as well. *Revolting.* Sherlock supposed he should thank Lestrade for being so quick to react with the sheet. At least he'd had only the very briefest glimpse of them rutting away.

And now the truth would come out. *All* of it. And Mycroft would finally get on with admitting the actuality of things, and this tedious business could be put behind them.

*Game, set and match, brother mine.*

As the hands upon him clenched, Sherlock twitched. He attempted to wriggle himself some more room to speak.

"You can *get off me* now, Lestrade," he told the carpet, annoyed. "And if you could cover my brother's immodesty - as much of it as you *can*, at least - *before* you remove the sheet, that would be magnificent."

In response, there was a strange silence.

Sherlock realised, with a frown, that Lestrade had started to shake.

"The bathroom," he heard Lestrade say - and it was in a voice Sherlock had never heard him use before. Hard, unyielding. "I'll deal with it."

The creak of the mattress. Footsteps, swift. Bare feet upon the carpet.

A door slammed, and locked.

Lestrade grasped hold of the sheet.
As he hauled it back Sherlock tossed his head, preparing to give a number of further statements he'd hoped to make at them from the door.

And then Lestrade's face appeared - livid, fixed with rage - and Sherlock Holmes realised, for one of the first times in his life, that he'd just made a grievous mistake.

As the shouting began, Mycroft sank to the linoleum. He couldn't think. He barely registered the words being yelled through the wall. He pushed his bare back against the radiator, reached a shaking hand for a towel, and wound the damp white fabric around himself like a blanket.

He brought his knees up to his chest in the darkness.

Numb, he hid himself away.

Greg's rage was absolute. He was upbraiding Sherlock with a fury Mycroft had never heard him unleash, explaining with the utmost clarity why Sherlock could from this day forwards consider himself an utter fucking arsehole. Mycroft listened, his pulse quick and weak, as he tried to let the words mean something.

They wouldn't sink past his skin.

He could feel every fibre in the towel - every ridge of the radiator. He was hypersensitive all over. His mind wouldn't work; there was only his body, its bareness, the feeling of how it moved as he breathed. Less than a minute ago, he'd been holding onto Greg's shoulders and panting with pleasure, drifting safe in his own fragility, his lover's gentle fucking like warm water lapping over his skin. The sensation of Greg pulling from his body at speed had felt like having his heart removed from between his thighs - one swift and devastating wrench.

He could feel shock now freezing its way outwards from the wound.

He couldn't cope.

Sherlock had begun to shout back. Aggrieved, he was struggling to speak. Greg drowned him out without a second's hesitation and continued to rage.

Sherlock stopped shouting.

As his heart began to slow, a wave of misery roiled up through Mycroft's stomach. He realised half a moment in advance what was about to happen.

He lunged for the shower, wrenched the door aside, and emptied his stomach across the tiles.

Done.

Enough.
It was half past two in the fucking morning, and Greg was finished. He'd hauled himself into a dressing gown in the first minute, then spent another fifteen shouting his throat dry. He'd not shouted like this in years. Even when Karen had hit him with the news of her final affair, barely six weeks out of therapy, he'd not shouted like this.

He wanted to take Sherlock by the scruff of the neck. He wanted to drag him to the door and hurl him into the corridor, kick him out into the rain and let Pritchard find him. He'd never wanted to hit someone so much in his life. Somehow, he'd only shouted - ignoring the angry banging from his neighbour on the floor below, ignoring Sherlock's white-faced attempts to shout back, ignoring the clenching of his hands as they imagined themselves around Sherlock's fucking neck - caring only about the sounds he could hear from the bathroom. Retching, gasping.

They jagged through his soul like knife wounds.

And it was over now, and they were finished here.

Greg snatched his phone from the bedside, snapping it out of the charger cord.

"I'm ringing for a police car," he snarled. "And you're going to stand downstairs and wait for it - d'you hear me? Then you're going back to Baker Street, back to John, and you're going to fucking stay there. You know he's been worried out of his head - don't you? You know we all have? And then you pull a fucking stunt like this?"

Greg unlocked the phone, shaking.

"Yes, your brother's here," he spat. "Yes, he's in my bed - because he's mine - and you knew it, Sherlock - you bloody knew it! You're so obsessed with hearing it from Mycroft's mouth that you'll go and do this? Then you can fucking hear it from mine."

Greg stared into his shocked white face, his shoulders heaving.

"I'm your brother's boyfriend. I'm his lover. Now get the hell out of my flat!"

Sherlock turned. He bolted from the room, and was gone onto the landing before Greg could even follow him to the door.

He'd broken the bloody lock.

"Fucking hell..."

Greg pinned the phone against his shoulder, angrily examining the mechanism as the call connected.

"It's Lestrade - yeah. I need a car to my flat immediately. Send somebody who doesn't like Sherlock Holmes. And can we get someone in uniform round here, please? Now. My flat's been broken into, and the lock's gone. We're still at risk of Pritchard. It's a long bloody story. Just get me a guard on the door, will you?"

Next, he called John.

"Guess who I've fucking found?" he asked, as he hauled the sofa across the room.

John let out a rush of breath.

"Oh - oh, thank Christ... where the hell was - "
"Breaking into my flat," Greg snarled, heaving the sofa up against the broken door. "To catch me with Mycroft. Who's now throwing up in my bathroom in distress. Mission accomplished. Sherlock's being delivered back to you in a police car. When he gets there, keep him there. And tell him I don't want to see him again."

He hung up, savagely, checked the sofa was wedged into place, and moved back through to the bedroom.

"Myke?" He tried the handle; it was locked. "Beautiful, let me in."

Nothing came from inside the bathroom.

Greg pressed his forehead against the wooden door, breathing hard.

"Mykie, he's gone. It's just you and me." He shut his eyes, praying. *Fuck. Fuck. Not after all this. Not now.* "Open the door for me, sweetheart, and I'll make it okay. I've made it okay before, darlin'. I'll do it again."

There was a long, long pause.

Movement then came from inside.

Greg's heart flipped. He listened to water being run in the sink as Mycroft washed out his mouth - finally, the lock gave a nervous click.

As Mycroft appeared, Greg pushed gently through the door.

He swept Mycroft off his feet without a word. Desperate arms threw themselves around his neck. He carried Mycroft back to bed, laid him down and pulled the sheets right over him, wrapping him up in them tightly.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, as Mycroft curled against his chest. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. But you're safe You're safe now, darlin'. Everything's going to be alright."

Mycroft was too distressed to speak. He just held onto Greg and shook, deathly pale and silent.

Greg held him, stroked his hair, and imagined drowning Sherlock slowly in a boiling bath of his own tears.

Some time later, Greg's phone began to ring.

He answered it one-handed, still cradling his lover with one arm.

"Lestrade."

"Greg, it's... me." John's voice cracked. "What the hell happened? He's just locked himself in his room. He didn't say a word."

Greg's jaw set.

"Good," he grunted. "Don't let him out until Pritchard's found. Not for anything."


Greg glanced down at the man now nestled in his arms - soft red curls and bare shoulders. His best
friend.

He placed a gentle kiss on top of Mycroft's head.

"Myke and I are seeing each other," he said - and felt Mycroft tremble in silence. "Have been for a while. Sherlock seems to think it's any of his business, and decided he wanted proof."

"Oh - oh, Jesus - "

"Yeah," said Greg, flatly. He pushed his tongue across his teeth. "We don't want a big deal about this. Alright?"

"R-Right."

"Pritchard's still after Myke. I thought it was him, breaking in. Sherlock's lucky that British coppers aren't armed, or he'd now be sulking with a bullet between his eyes. And I wouldn't be sorry."

"Pritchard's - ... wait - why is Pritchard after Mycroft? It's - Sherlock who caused all the - ..."

*Christ almighty.* Greg huffed. "Sherlock's given you half a story too, has he?"

John audibly held in a sigh.

"I think he has," he said, unimpressed. "Can I get back to you in the morning? Are - you and Mycroft both okay? D'you need anything?"

Mycroft made a tiny sound against Greg's collarbones. Greg stroked the back of his neck, shutting his eyes.

"We're fine, mate," he said. "Just some privacy. And some sleep."

"Okay. Well... take care of yourselves."

"We will." Greg paused. "Thanks, John."

John hung up.

As Greg nudged the phone away across the bedside, Mycroft stirred in his arms. His voice came weary against Greg's chest.

"Are you - alright?"

Greg's heart ached. "Am I alright?" he breathed. "Are you alright?"

"S-Shocked." Mycroft shuddered. "Oh, God. Oh God, how could he - "

"I know, love. I'm angry too."

"... to - to break and enter - just to prove - "

"I know..." Greg wove his fingers through Mycroft's hair, shutting his eyes. "I know, darlin'... I don't know what the hell he was thinking. Frankly I don't care. But at least we're safe. And at least he - might think twice, next time he - ..."

Greg paused, feeling his heart sink.

"He - got both barrels off me," he muttered. "I might've gone too far. I just - ... for Christ's sake - of
all the stupid bloody - "

"I heard..." Mycroft hesitated. "Frankly, I - don't think you went far enough."

"No?" Greg bit the corner of his lip. He wasn't so sure himself; guilt was already starting to set in. He'd never shouted like that at Sherlock. Never. He didn't think he'd ever shouted like that at anyone. "Jesus... what a mess..."

Mycroft pressed his cheek against Greg's shoulder.

There was quiet for a moment, as they both thought the same thing.

Greg kissed his hairline, gently. "M'sorry, beautiful. I know - the timing was - ..."

Mycroft flushed. "Hardly your fault..."

"M'still sorry, love."

"Thank you." Mycroft hesitated, laying a quiet hand upon his chest. "It - seems a miracle I even have a sex life for Sherlock to denounce... given quite how much he interferes in it..."

Greg couldn't fight a smile.

"I don't know if I'll get back to sleep," he murmured. "I'm - a bit jangled."

"No, I... I feel quite the same."

"D'you want a cup of tea? Dig out that camomile, maybe..."

Mycroft shuddered. "Camomile would be magnificent," he whispered. "Thank you..."

At quarter past seven, John heard the door of Sherlock's bedroom unlock. He glanced up from his tea, frowning, and watched the stairs as uneasy footsteps crossed the landing overhead.

Sherlock appeared, looking miserable in his pyjamas - and oddly young. He kept his eyes on the stairs as he descended. He came into the lounge in silence, keeled onto the sofa, curled up on his side and pulled the throw around his chin.

John took a steadying sip of tea.

"Do you understand you went too far?" he asked the silence.

Sherlock nodded, wordless.

_That's a good start, at least._ "D'you understand how much you've annoyed Greg?"

Again, Sherlock nodded.

"D'you realise you scared them both out of their heads?" John despairing in silence for a moment. "They thought you were Nick Pritchard, Sherlock. Greg could've kicked your head in."

Sherlock said nothing, staring miserably at the fringe of the throw.
John put his mug aside.

"What the hell's all this about, Sherlock?" he sighed. "It's like you're on some mad vendetta. You're pissing off everybody we know. This isn't just about winding up your brother - is it?"

Sherlock's face dropped into a frown.

"Mycroft has duped Lestrade," he said, distressed, "into believing he's somehow deserving of sympathy. Now Lestrade is angry with me. He thinks I'm a bad person."

John bit the end of his tongue. "You broke into his flat to catch him asleep with his boyfriend. That's not a good thing to do, is it?"

"It was the only way, John!"

"The only way to do what?" John demanded. "To piss Greg off forever, and give your brother a mental breakdown?"

Sherlock said nothing, glaring into space.

John took a long breath. "Why did you need to prove it, Sherlock? Why does it matter so much?"

Sherlock's silence continued.

John reached up to rub at his temple.

"Look," he said, as gentle as he could. "You're saying your brother's not a good person. But I've spoken to him on his own, and he's not as bad as some of them. He's a bit stuck-up, maybe, but... his heart's in the right place. Especially when it comes to you."

"Mycroft is arrogant and contemptuous."

"Yeah - so are you. Doesn't mean you deserve someone breaking into your room in the middle of the night, does it?"

Sherlock made no reply.

John quietened his voice. "You know Mycroft cares about you... don't you? You don't have to treat him like this."

"He does not care about me."

"He does, Sherlock."

"He does not, John! He never has. If he cared, he would have spoken."

"Spoken?" said John.

Sherlock retreated back into silence.

John pinched the bridge of his nose. This might take all morning - but with some luck, and more than a little patience, they might just get somewhere.

"Spoken when?" he asked.
Young love is a flame; very pretty, often very hot and fierce, but still only light and flickering. The love of the older and disciplined heart is as coals, deep-burning, unquenchable.

- Henry Ward Beecher

Sally was ready with coffee when Greg stepped through the door.

"What happened?" she asked, biting at her lip.

Greg wearily pulled off his jacket. *Sherlock burst in on me fucking his brother, Sal. Thanks for asking.*

"Bloody Sherlock," he grunted, and hung his jacket on the door. "Decided he needed to launch a two AM raid on my flat."

Sally winced. "What for?"

Greg gave a tired shrug; it wasn't entirely performed. "Christ alone knows... sure he's got his reasons."

"D'you want to press charges?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Jesus..." Greg hadn't thought about it - it'd be one way to teach Sherlock a lesson, he supposed. Then, bellowing at him for fifteen minutes last night seemed to have done the job.

He'd never seen Sherlock's eyes go that wide - nor seen his mouth go that quiet.

Greg wasn't sure if he now felt more angry or more guilty.

"Nah," he said with a sigh, and booted up his computer. "We'll hold off on the hand-cuffs for now, Sal... got better things to do with our time. Any news overnight?"

"Nothing," Sally admitted. "Got a full day of interviewing Pritchard's posh chums lined up." She paused. "Want to sit in? Blow off some steam?"

*Fuck yes.*

"Yeah... yeah, I'd better do. Might cheer me up, shouting at lying rich bastards."

Sally smiled. "Always works for me, sir. I'll give you a shout when the first gets here."

Ten minutes later, she was back. Greg was halfway through the surveillance team's report.

"Yep?" he said at the knock, not looking up.

"Sorry, sir... visitor for you."
Greg tore his eyes from the screen.

In the doorway behind her, looking exhausted, was John Watson. He had his hands in the pockets of his coat, and an expression that suggested he'd not slept much.

Greg almost smiled.

He pushed back his chair, and got to his feet as John entered the office.

The handshake was offered - so John - all these years, and still the formal handshake without fail. It was a firm one today. It came with a quiet look of solidarity, and a clearing of John's throat.

"Sorry," he said to Greg, "just to - ... hope you don't mind. Thought it'd be easier if I - ..."

"It's fine, mate." Greg was aware of Sally still hovering in the door, ready to offer coffee. "You - look like you've got something to tell me?"

John hesitated, glancing at the door.

"Not - 'tell', as such," he said. "Just talk."

Greg got the hint. "Shall we take this off campus?" he said.

John coughed a little, grateful. "Maybe best."

"Right." Greg reached for his jacket. "Off out, Sally. Keep the place standing while I'm gone, will you? Don't make too many toffs cry without me."

They went to Harlequin.

It was the first place that came to mind, five minutes from Scotland Yard - Mycroft's favourite. The two of them had spent hours here together now. At first, they'd spent the hours talking about Sherlock - then less and less as the weeks went by, and more and more about other things. Mycroft loved their pastries, and he was crap at hiding it. Greg still remembered the first time he'd seen Myke eat one of the things - trying his best to seem utterly disinterested in it, but losing track of the conversation whenever he took a bite.

You couldn't really watch Mycroft Holmes licking pastry flakes from his fingertips and not fall in love with him a bit.

Coming here with someone else felt gently odd. John insisted on buying Greg a coffee - a first step towards making amends, Greg thought, even though John hadn't done a bloody thing wrong - and they took a seat near the counter to talk.

"How's Mycroft?" was John's first question.

Greg's heart tugged. Good old John. He smiled slightly, wrapping his coffee in both hands.

"Alright," he said. "Bit shocked still." This was new, he realised - talking like this about Mycroft. He'd never done it before. He took a sip of coffee to steady himself, strangely glad it was John. "He - got off to work alright, anyway. Think he was looking forward to some normality."
John listened, looking thoroughly sorry.

"And how're you?" he asked.

There's a question. Greg decided he deserved the truth; he took a second to put it together.

"Angry," he said, for starters. "Tired. Sorry for Myke. Annoyed about my bloody door... wondering where the hell this is all gonna end." He took another sip of coffee, frowning. "How's Boy Wonder?"

John rubbed the handle of his mug with his thumb. Something quiet passed over his face.

"I got him talking," he said. He pulled at his lip. "He's upset, if you believe me. Thinks that he's annoyed you."

Greg raised an eyebrow so high it nearly hurt. "He thinks he's annoyed me?"


Greg said nothing for a moment, watching the surface of his coffee swirl.

Guilt curled in his stomach along with it.

He was trying not to remember some of the things he'd said last night. All of them, he'd meant - but it didn't mean he'd had to say them.

It wasn't easy. In that moment, he couldn't have kept it all in his mouth anymore than he could have just breathed fire and burned Sherlock into ash.

"Christ knows I shouted at him loud enough," he muttered. He took a mouthful of coffee. This stuff was too good to throw back - Myke would have been appalled - but Greg was exhausted, and he needed it. "I'd be amazed if Sherlock hadn't realised, to be honest. He was white as a bloody ghost. Never seen him look like that."

"Did he - deserve it?" John asked, with care.

Greg thought of Mycroft, throwing up behind a locked bathroom door; lying on the sofa with him in their dressing gowns at four AM, watching old episodes of Countdown as they drank tea together and tried to forget; seeing him off to work with a hug on the doorstep.

He sighed.

"Yeah," he said, heavily. "Yeah, he did, mate. Massively. He - doesn't understand that - ..."

Christ, how do I say this? How much can I really share? Greg looked into John's eyes, and found only patience and calm looking back at him. He felt his chest twinge.

"Look," he said, breathing it out. "Mycroft's not used to - relationships. This is his first in a while. A long while. And the last thing I need is Sherlock swinging his way through it on a wrecking ball. I know he thinks his brother's a twat, but he's not. And last night was bloody ridiculous."

John listened, commiserating in silence. He picked up his coffee.

"Sherlock - told me something. This morning." He hesitated, reading Greg's face. "Took him ages to come out with it, but... when he and Mycroft were younger - "
"... their dad," Greg said, quietly. "I know... Myke's told me, too."

John's expression creased. "What did he tell you?"

"That Sherlock came out at fourteen - caused a scene one night. Mycroft sat there, panicking, while the father tore Sherlock to pieces."

John's eyes dropped to the table. "Yeah, that's... that's what I heard, too." He hesitated. "Sherlock - thinks that Mycroft - sort of left him to his fate."

Greg bit the inside of his cheek.

"He can't force someone to come out in his defence. Sherlock jabbed a tiger with a stick, then expected Myke to get eaten alongside him. You know the dad was a tyrant, don't you?"

"Yeah, I got that impression. I just - ... I don't know how to make Sherlock understand. He won't listen to me when I say it was a dodgy situation. He's just convinced that Mycroft's - well..."

"A heartless prick?" Greg suggested, raising an eyebrow.

John squirmed. "He - does tend to... when he first meets people."

"Politics," said Greg, flatly. "Besides... what bloody reason has Sherlock given him to open up? Sherlock literally broke into my flat last night - just to come and point and jeer. Myke's spent half his life hauling Sherlock out of drug dens, breaking laws to keep him safe, dropping everything to look after him. And Sherlock's still acting like that? Frankly, mate, there's one heartless prick in this situation... and it's not Mycroft."

John glanced down into his coffee, masking a smile. He bit his cheek.

"What do we do, Greg?" he asked.

Greg didn't know.

One immediate answer came straight to mind: 'nothing'. Mycroft had been uneasy enough with Sherlock already. The chance of them now finding their way through this was surely close to zero.

But Greg couldn't bring himself to say the word.

It seemed so final - all over an argument from twenty-five years ago. Family was meant to mean more than that. Relationships weren't meant to be that fragile. After all this time, all the snarking and the backbiting and the viciousness, Mycroft still dropped everything for Sherlock - and Sherlock still went to the ends of the earth to wind Mycroft up.

That had to mean something.

Greg took a long breath, glancing down into his coffee.

"I... don't know, mate. Honestly, I don't. I don't know how to make Myke see his brother as an adult. I don't know how to make Sherlock behave like a bloody adult... I don't know where to start."

He took a drink, shaking his head.

"I don't know if I even want to do something," he mumbled into the mug. "Myke's my priority in this. And last night he got violated. I - can't forget that."
John's forehead creased, pained.

Greg didn't know what to say. He wanted John to understand - but he couldn't explain it. *He's only just opened up to me. Twenty-eight years to feel safe. Now I don't know if he'll feel safe again.*

John hesitated, wrapping his mug in both hands.

"Sherlock's - upset," he said. "He's really upset. And it's - you, Greg. I don't think he ever thought he'd piss you off like that. I don't think he realised you had a limit."

Greg huffed, saying nothing.

"Honestly I don't think he really knew what he was doing," John said. "He just had this goal in his head - *prove it, prove it, prove it* - and he couldn't see anything else around that..."

Greg rolled his jaw.

"I get you," he said. "Genuinely, I do. I know what he's like - and I know he gets stuck on things. It's just - ..." There was only one way to put this, he thought. "Mycroft."

He looked into John's eyes. *Please understand.*

"That's the bottom line for me," he said, weak. "I - can't stand between them anymore. I have to stand with Myke."

John read his eyes, quietly.

"It's serious," he murmured, after a moment. "The two of you... isn't it?"

Greg's pulse quickened. Hearing it made it suddenly real; heat flashed across the back of his neck. He shifted, and took a drink to settle his face back into something that felt normal.

"It's - getting there," he mumbled. *Christ. Christ, he's mine. He was trusting me, John. He wanted me. He wanted me to look after him. And Sherlock fucking wrecked it. Yet again. We're - ... um, we've been - for a while. We're close. He - means a lot to me.*

*Christ, Lestrade. Stop. He doesn't need to know.*

"I want him to be happy," Greg's mouth said for him. He found himself gripping his coffee mug rather tightly. "If that means sorting things out with Sherlock, then I'll do it. But... if it means Sherlock leaves him the hell alone forever... I'll do that too."

John took a long breath in.

"I... just don't know if we can leave things like this," he said. "Sherlock's - not okay."

*Bloody hell.* Greg let himself believe it, rubbing the side of his neck.

"You're - maybe right." *If Myke hasn't had Sherlock shot or deported to Madagascar, it means there's hope.* "Christ, they're brothers. We can't just - ... but bloody hell, if they could just talk without - ..."

"I know, Greg. I know..."

Greg sighed, biting his tongue. "Then what the hell do we do?"
John hesitated. "I - sort of had some thoughts."


"About getting them to talk, I mean. Making it easier. We'd - probably need to go out somewhere, for a start. Neutral territory. So that no-one feels - ...

Greg understood. "Yeah... and less chance of a scrap kicking off."

John huffed. "There are two of us. We can separate them."

"Yeah?" said Greg, with a small smile. "Suppose you're right." He checked his watch. "Listen, I've - got some time. And I want to get this fixed. Shall I get us more coffee?"

"If you're sure - "

"Yeah, I'm sure. And we'll come up with a plan. 'Cause - look, if we're going to do this? We might only have one shot at it. I don't how many more chances Myke's prepared to give. And once he says no for good, I have to respect that."

John nodded. "Totally understandable."

"Right." Greg pulled his wallet from inside his jacket. "If anyone can sort them out, mate, we can. Cappuccino, is it?"

---

how are you? xxx
Sent 11:54

A minute later, Greg's desk phone began to ring.

He shut his office door, sat back in his chair and answered the phone, pulling open a pack of sandwiches as he did. "Lestrade."

A touch of amusement graced the voice at the other end. "Hello, Lestrade... it's Holmes."

Greg smiled, glancing through the glass front wall of his office.

"Hi, Holmes." He tucked the phone against his shoulder. "How're you?"

Mycroft exhaled, almost luxuriously. Greg heard him roll something around his mouth. "Are you alone?"

"Having lunch at my desk... office is empty. Why?"

There came a softened pause. "You and I made love last night."

God help me. Greg bit down into his smile, feeling his heart swell.

"Yeah, darlin'... we did. That okay?"
"Mm." Mycroft gave a little hum. "I'm rather - distracted today."

Greg pulled his first sandwich from the cardboard pack, grinning.

"You sound like you're feeling better," he said.

"I suppose I am. I'm - not entirely recovered from the less palatable events of last night, but... now the shock has ebbed, I'm rather pleased that at least we weren't both murdered..."

"Always good to make it through the night alive," Greg said. He huffed, leaning back in his chair as he took a bite. "Surprised your brother didn't end up murdered, to be honest."

Mycroft sighed. "Mm... what a marvellous outcome that would have been."

Greg chewed a mouthful of sandwich, wondering what the best way into this conversation would be. He decided after a moment on the direct route, knowing that anything else would feel like deception. He braced himself, took another bite, and asked,

"How're you feeling about Sherlock?"

Mycroft's voice curled in his ear. "Why does that sound like a loaded question?"

"It's not," Greg promised. "M'just wanting to know."

Mycroft took a moment to put his thoughts into words.

"Infuriated," he supposed. "Violated. Astounded by his ability to reach entirely uncharted depths of unacceptable behaviour."

_Not a great start._ "Can I ask something serious?"

Mycroft paused. "Go ahead."

Greg gave the question the weight that it deserved. "Are you - done with him, beautiful?"

It took Mycroft some time to answer.

"I - suppose one can never really be 'done' with - ..." Greg's heart stirred with hope. "Family. As much as one might wish to be." Mycroft inhaled, stiffly. "Having said that, last night was horrendous - and I've never hated him quite so keenly in my life."

There came a squeak; Mycroft had turned in his office chair.

"Why do you ask?" he said.

Greg licked a blob of tuna mayo off his thumb. "I met John earlier. We went for coffee."

"Oh?" Mycroft remarked, a little too casually.

"He - says Sherlock's upset."

"Oh?" Mycroft remarked, a little too casually.

"He - says Sherlock's upset."

Mycroft snorted. "How dreadful. Did someone invade the sanctity of his home when he was attempting intimacy with his lover?"

Greg tried not to smile.

"No," he said. "But apparently he's got the message that he was out of order. He's - more open to
listening, maybe. More open to understanding."

Mycroft was quiet for some time.

"I see," he said at last, and nothing more.

"So..." Greg said, carefully. "John and I wondered..."

Mycroft breathed in, sharply. "I will not apologise."

"Christ - no, darlin'. Nothing like that. We wondered if you'd want to talk."

Mycroft said nothing. Greg reached for his coffee, speaking with care.

"We'd go for dinner," he said. "The four of us... tonight, if you're happy. We can sit down and talk, and try to get Sherlock to understand he was out of line. Then, afterwards, you and me go home, and that's that."

Mycroft was thinking. Greg could hear him doing it - weighing positives and negatives; establishing outcomes.

"You wish to forgive him," Mycroft said, at last.

Greg took the time to construct a proper answer.

"It's not about flat-out forgiving," he said at last. "It's about - understanding. Making him realise what he's doing. Trying to explain to him what we're doing... maybe finding some space where we can all live together."

Mycroft huffed. "I do wish you weren't so gorgeously reasonable sometimes."

As Greg smiled, he felt his heart squeeze.

"I can be unreasonable, if you want." He rested his head back against his chair. "I mean it. If you never want to see your brother again, gorgeous, that's fine. We never will. And I'll back you up on it, hands down - no questions asked. He's your brother. This is your choice."

"That - ..." Mycroft took a moment to speak. "I - appreciate your consideration of my wishes. Deeply."

"Just want you to be happy." Greg realised he was rubbing the base of his third finger. He sat up a little, reaching for his coffee again. "I love you. You know I do. We wouldn't know each other, if it weren't for Sherlock... doesn't mean we have to keep him there between us, though. 'Specially if he's going to upset you like he did last night."

Mycroft took a breath.

"Last night was appalling," he said.

"It was. John says Sherlock knows it."

"Mm." Mycroft took a moment. "If it - were your choice... whether to attempt reconciliation, or not... what would you elect to do? Please tell me candidly."

Greg wondered for a second if he should insist - if he should keep his own thoughts out of this, and encourage Mycroft to occupy that space just for himself.
He then remembered this was a partnership. Sherlock was interfering in their relationship - their lives. His opinion was being sought; it mattered to Mycroft.

And so he gave it, with honesty.

"I - guess I want to hear what he's got to say. Even if, when I hear it, I call him a tosser again and leave..." Greg curled the phone wire around his thumb, thinking. "It's - maybe worth you spelling out to him that this is make-or-break. Either you fix it, and you start working on an adult relationship that suits you both - or you wish each other well, shake hands and walk away. One last attempt to talk."

Mycroft processed this, listening. Greg chewed the corner of his lip.

"Then you'd know you did your best," he added. "You gave him every single chance, and then another one. And if you choose to walk away, you'll know it was the right thing to do."

Mycroft's voice softened. "You are wondrous."

Greg smiled. "Do I count as a government advisor now?" he asked.

"You assume I work for the government?" his lover said, amused.

Greg found himself grinning.

"What do you do?" he asked. "What's it say on your payslip? Consultant of some sort, right?"

Mycroft gave a slight, soft laugh - a little awkward, a little teasing. It made Greg's stomach flip.

"I'm... afraid you would need spousal security clearance to be privy to that information, darling. Attain it and I'll tell you."

Greg's grin widened.

"You're saying I have to marry you?" he said, playfully. "Before I find out what you do all day? Apart from texting me, I mean... I know that bit."

"Mm," Mycroft said, amused. "In as many words."

"Right." Greg coiled the phone cord around his fingers, his heart thumping happily. "Something to work towards, I suppose."

He wished he could see Mycroft's face. The voice was giving nothing away - just the tiniest, tiniest hint of a smile. "Always nice to have a goal."

Greg didn't think it was possible to grin any harder.

"So... dinner?" he said, biting his lip.

Mycroft huffed, and gave in. "Mm... dinner."

"D'you have any preference?"

"Somewhere we do not like," Mycroft murmured. "So it will not be ruined by the memory of throttling my brother bare-handed over the dessert trolley."

Christ. "I'd pay good money to see that," Greg admitted.
"Indeed? You could well have your chance."

"I'll help," said Greg, smiling down at his abandoned sandwich. "I'll hold John back, while you punch Sherlock. Teamwork. S'what love is all about."

"Agreed. Somewhere French, please?"

"Yeah?"

"Mm. At least then it will be an enjoyable meal."

"We could go out at the weekend," Greg offered. "If you want? Just me and you. Somewhere special, Saturday night... relax. Put the week behind us."

"'Special'?"

"Mmmh... maybe Roux?"

"The Landau?" Interest suffused Mycroft's tones. "Is it a special occasion?"

"'Course it is," said Greg. "I love you."

"Greg..." Mycroft's voice softened; wonder filled his tones. "Greg... I..."

Greg's office door clunked open. He glanced up to find Sally, holding an enormous stack of papers. She gave him an apologetic smile, her arms clearly aching.

Greg dropped her a reassuring wink.

"Bring them in, Sal," he said. "S'fine. No rest for the wicked."

He inclined his head to the phone, trying not to smile. In the most blokey tone he could manage, he said,

"So - Pizza Express tonight, mate, yeah? Seven okay? Then we'll head out on the lash."

Mycroft's voice rippled with amusement in his ear.

"Don't you dare," he purred. "Seven is fine."

Greg grinned. "See you later."

"À tout à l'heure, mon lapinou." Mycroft hung up.

In between signing invoices, Greg googled French restaurants near to Baker Street. He found one that seemed nice enough, reserved a table for four under the name of Lestrade, and texted the details to John.

Now they just had to hope.
At six that evening, Greg entered his bedroom to find Mycroft sitting by the mirror, damp-haired, quietly unscrewing a metal tin. He had a look of uncertainty on his face.

Greg came up behind him, knelt down, and gently kissed his shoulder.

"Do something for me?" he murmured.

Mycroft smiled a little, meeting his eyes in the glass. "Mm?"

Greg reached out, and took the tin from his hands.

Mycroft released it without reluctance.


Mycroft huffed. He lowered his eyes.

"And neglecting to use hair product will achieve that, will it?" he said.

"Might do more than you think." Greg wrapped an arm around his waist. "Can I persuade you to lose the tie, darlin'?"

"Gregory..." Mycroft said, gently appalled. "We're going to dinner."

"So? I'm not wearing a tie... you've come out to dinner with me before without a tie."

Mycroft shifted, not meeting his eyes.

"I - relax in your company. With my brother, it seems more advisable to - to maintain a certain - ..."

He faded out.

Greg raised an eyebrow.

"Might be the last time you ever talk to him," he said. "It's worth a try, love. Let him see you as you are. Even if it's for the last time."

Mycroft held his eyes, saying nothing.

After a moment, he reached for his tie.
"If the sight of my collarbones persuades Sherlock to be a little less vile to me," he murmured, undoing the knot, "then so be it..."

Greg kissed his shoulder again, watching in the mirror.

"You've got nothing to hide, love. Don't go dressed like you do. Let him see your collarbones. Let him see your curls. Let him see you sitting next to your boyfriend. Just... let him in, darlin'. For once. There might even be a miracle."

"And if he's foul to me?" Mycroft enquired, biting the inside of his cheek. He slipped the tie free from his collar.

"Then we get up," Greg said. "Calmly. We pay our half of the bill, and we go. And you'll know once and for all that you're the bigger person, that your brother's a lost cause, and you did everything you possibly could."

Mycroft loosened his top button. He carefully adjusted his collar in the mirror, contemplating his own reflection. His gaze was cool and impassive, his eyes a wintry grey against the sapphire blue of his pocket square. He looked calm; Greg knew it was in hope that he would feel calm.

It crossed his mind, quietly, that he'd be helping Mycroft to undress later.

As he returned his thoughts to dinner-appropriate subjects, he found Mycroft watching him in the mirror - the smallest of smiles just lifting the corner of his mouth.

"Might I borrow a hairdryer?" Mycroft asked. His eyes shimmered. "If I am to resemble a freshly fluffed spaniel, I should at least be a dry spaniel."

Greg felt his heart take a breath.

"Sure," he said. "Let me find one for you, darlin'."

La Phalène was nice - bigger than Greg had imagined, softly lit, full of round tables draped in snowy-white cloths. By ten to seven, it was already busy. There were quite a few families around, groups of friends laughing over wine, couples talking quietly by candlelight.

As Greg walked in with Mycroft at his side, he had a feeling the gentle jazz would be helpful. It was peaceful - not so serious that it'd feel like divorce terms were being laid out, but not so light and breezy that they couldn't talk.

They were shown to their table by a waitress in a waistcoat. Greg ordered a lemonade, suspecting he'd need to keep his head. Mycroft opted for white wine.

When it arrived, it did little to relax him. He kept his guarded gaze upon the door as he sipped from the glass, his shoulders rather high, his cheeks rather pale.

Beneath the tablecloth, Greg laid a hand upon his knee.

"Oi..." he said.

Mycroft cast him a wary glance over the rim of the glass.
"If he's a nightmare," Greg murmured, "and you're done, then tell me. I'll get you out of here."

Mycroft's hand tightened around his glass. He swallowed, his eyes softening for the briefest moment.

"Thank you," he managed.

Greg smiled. "S'alright, beautiful. Proud of you even for coming."

Mycroft made an indistinct noise, taking a drink.

"Let us wait until the taxi home," he muttered into the glass. "Then you can decide if my conduct merits pride."

"Already does." Greg rested an arm along the back of Mycroft's chair, watching him gently. "I mean it. Considering it's less than twenty-four hours since - ... and here you are, trying to sort things out."

Mycroft's mouth thinned.

"Mm," he said, and no more - occupying himself with his wine.

Greg made a mental note to keep track of how many glasses he had.

At that moment, the arrival into the dining room of a familiar black-coated figure brought an end to conversation. Sherlock was looking unsettled, and much paler and quieter than usual. He was accompanied by John, quietly resolute in a smart shirt, and by their waistcoated waitress.

She showed them over to the table, gestured to their seats, and offered brightly to take their coats.

Sherlock looked as if he quite wanted to hold onto his. At a quiet elbow nudge from John, he restrained himself to only a small eye roll, unbuttoned the coat and reluctantly handed it over, along with his scarf.

He watched, rather pained, as they were taken away from him across the restaurant.

John then cleared his throat, and nudged at a chair.

Sherlock sat himself down.

John sat beside him, pulled in his seat, and briefly met eyes with Greg through the candles. A questioning glance was given.

Greg gave a slight nod, covering it with a sip of his lemonade.

Beside him, Mycroft had gone still. Though not a word had been spoken, the sharpness in the air was nearly enough to draw blood. As Greg rubbed Mycroft's knee beneath the table, slow and soothing, John and Sherlock ordered drinks - and then their waitress walked away, leaving them with the menus and each other's company.

Greg took his cue to start.

"Before anything's said," he began, with care, "John and I want to put a system in place."

Mycroft paused, lifting his eyes from the menu with concern.
Sherlock, too, went still. His gaze flickered silently over Mycroft's hair, the open neck of his shirt, and the discreet contact between his brother's elbow and Greg's. No reaction crossed his face.

"We think it'll help," John said. "It'll make things easier, and it means everyone gets a chance to speak."

"What system?" Mycroft enquired, already unimpressed.

John visibly braced himself.

"The two of you - aren't allowed to talk," he said.

Mycroft seemed to take a moment to be certain he'd heard right.

"That is ludicrous," he told John, flatly. "Why on earth have you summoned us here, if we aren't permitted to - "

Greg intervened.

"You're not allowed to talk to each other," he said. "You can talk to me. Sherlock can talk to John. John and I will then talk to each other, on your behalf. There've been enough misunderstandings already, and the pair of you need a filter in place if this is going to work."

Mycroft said absolutely nothing. He was now regarding Greg with distinct displeasure.

Greg held his gaze, calmly.

_Trust me. Please._

_This is the best way._

At last, without a word, Mycroft returned his gaze to the menu. The slight lift of his eyebrow was all that suggested weary acceptance.

Across the table, Sherlock said nothing - simply frowned.

The lack of protest would do, Greg thought.

"Is there something you wanted to say to Greg first?" John prompted Sherlock, his voice low.

Sherlock's face worked. "May I speak to 'Greg'?"

"Yes," said John. "You're just not allowed to speak to your brother."

Sherlock bit his tongue. His eyes flickered in Greg's direction - then down to the tablecloth, a little numb.

"I am - sorry that I entered your property by force," he mumbled, "to ascertain if you were harbouring my brother. It was - drastic. You were upset." He hesitated. "I didn't want that."

Greg found himself almost moved.

Then Sherlock carried on.

"And I'm sorry I disturbed you during intercourse," he added.

John spat wine through his fingers.
"You didn't tell me - " he gasped.

Mycroft threw down his menu at once. He shunted back his chair.

"We are leaving," he bit at Greg. "Now."

Greg reached out as he stood, catching his arm.

"Hey," he said. "Hey, hey... sit down, please."

Mycroft glared at him, unbreathing. "I am not having this discussed in public," he hissed.


Mycroft didn't move.

Greg waited, his expression gentle, heart pounding in his throat.

After several wary seconds, Mycroft resumed his seat.

He picked up the menu, locked his eyes upon it, and read with his tongue poked into his cheek.

Greg released the breath he was holding.

"Nobody's listening," he murmured to Mycroft. "Nobody cares. They're all busy with their own lives. And we're just here to have dinner."

Mycroft said nothing, now contemplating the seafood specials as if wondering which of them he should have executed first.

Greg told himself this would be fine when they got going.

He turned his eyes across the table to Sherlock.

"It - wasn't okay," he said, and watched Sherlock go pale. "Last night. What you did. It was bang out of order, frankly. Whatever old grief you've got with your brother, it doesn't matter. That's my flat you broke into. That's my privacy you broke into. I've never done a thing to you, have I?"

Sherlock said nothing, distressed. Greg's heart ached a little - but they couldn't just brush this aside. Nothing would be learned.

"What did you want to achieve?" he asked, pained.

Sherlock's gaze darted to John, seeking reassurance.

John gave him a small nod. "Go on."


"Of?" said Greg.

Sherlock said nothing.

"Of me and your brother?" Greg prompted him, calmly.

Sherlock gave a miniscule nod across the table, still avoiding Greg's eyes.
"You already knew, Sherlock. You had all the proof in the world." Greg raised an eyebrow. "Sure you weren't just hoping for a chance to point and laugh?"

Sherlock flushed.

"I am sorry," he muttered, again.

Greg supposed it was more than he'd ever heard from Sherlock - and it was a good start, if nothing else. He breathed out with it, aware of the waitress approaching in his peripheral vision.

"Alright, Sherlock," he said. "You're - good to say sorry. I appreciate it. You learned something?"

Sherlock nodded, still mute.

"S'fine then," said Greg. "We'll put it behind us."

The waitress took their order.

Mycroft opted for salmon salad with no dressing, and handed her back the dessert menu at the same time. It wasn't a good sign. Sherlock - declaring himself not hungry - was wheedled into fillet of sea bass by John, who himself asked for coq au vin. Greg ordered a steak, rare, and another glass of wine for Mycroft.

As the waitress and the menus left, he felt the table take a communal breath.

"Right," he said, calmly. "Someone's going to have to start." He turned to Mycroft, receiving a sharp look in response. "How about you tell your brother how you felt last night?"

Mycroft regarded him with a mixture of disbelief, displeasure and despair.

"This is ridiculous," he intoned.

"Tell me," said Greg, gently. "Then I'll tell him. You don't even have to look at him."

Mycroft's tongue appeared at the inside of his cheek. He leant sardonically towards Greg's ear.

As it was offered, he breathed into it,

"This is laughable. You know precisely how I felt - and frankly I do not want him to know. I do not trust him to care in the slightest. Tell him I want a bloody apology this instant, or I am leaving. And, if you hadn't reached this conclusion yourself by now, you and I will be sleeping in separate rooms tonight."

Greg processed this.

He turned calmly across the table to John.

"Mycroft feels like he's owed an apology," he said. "He feels like he can't trust Sherlock any more, and like Sherlock doesn't care."

John listened to this - then inclined his head to Sherlock, whose face had dropped into a severe scowl.

"What do you feel about that?" John asked.

Sherlock's jaw set. "I feel that my brother is hardly in a position to - "
"Ah, ah - no. You tell me, then I'll tell Greg. Alright?"

"For God's sake," Mycroft muttered, covering his eyes with a hand. Beneath the table, Greg quietly squeezed his knee.

Sherlock leant with irritation to John's ear, and spoke in mutters for some time. He finally drew away, folded his arms, and looked away across the restaurant.

John breathed in, slowly.

"Sherlock feels he's due an apology too," he said. "For what happened before."

There was a pause.

Sherlock's head jerked around.

"And," he said, annoyed. "And the part where Mycroft has failed, consistently, and without remorse, to - "

John reached out, and put two fingers on his mouth to cut the flow.

Greg's stomach jumped a little.

"Stop," said John. "That's the gist of it. I'm translating, and it won't be exact - because you can't be trusted with your feelings, can you? You make a mess of them. That's why we're outsourcing them to people who know how to cope with the things. Now shush and let your brother talk."

Greg turned, patiently, to Mycroft.

"How do you feel about that?" he asked.

Mycroft recovered his annoyance, and leant near.

"I feel," he intoned in Greg's ear, in a voice of iron, "that my brother can have an apology when he wrenches it from my cold dead hands."

Greg bit his tongue, trying not to smile.

"I'm not telling him that," he murmured. "And you didn't answer. How does it make you feel?"

Mycroft's throat worked.

"Angry," he hissed. "Exceedingly angry. Unjustly treated. Exhausted, that after twenty-five years, I am still being held accountable for something I did nothing to cause."

Greg listened. He nodded, and lifted his eyes across the table to John.

"Mycroft feels - " he said.

And so the evening began.

The argument raged quietly back and forth over starters. Mistranslations were protested at several points; the complaints were logged, processed and rejected. From Sherlock to John, to Greg and to Mycroft and back, twenty-five years of resentment and anger were steadily handed along a chain. The time began to pass.
At first, the system seemed to be working.

Sherlock took to the rules with surprising speed. He lunged for his interpreter's ear the moment it was offered, and responded at length to each accusation made.

Mycroft remained more reluctant to put his trust in the idea. His answers were short - and as the meal continued, they became increasingly harder for Greg to temper. He barely seemed to notice his food. The argument never raised above quiet conversation, and though a few glances came their way from nearby tables, this was at least more peaceful than Greg had hoped. He kept the discussion moving, and kept pulling it back to feelings - over and over again, back to what mattered.

Sadly, by the time that main courses were underway, a pattern was beginning to emerge.

Sherlock showed few signs of listening.

And Mycroft was closing down.

His shoulders were set higher than ever, and his answers growing more and more guarded. He no longer contested how Greg conveyed them - not that there was ever much to convey.

"Tell him that is untrue," and no more.

Or, worse - "Tell him I do not care."

As Mycroft's answers became shorter, Sherlock's only seemed to grow. He now spent several minutes at a time whispering to John, who with some tiredness then had to summarise. Sherlock was all too happy to repeat himself, locked like a limpet to the same few points: Mycroft must say sorry. Mycroft is a hypocrite. Mycroft treats people poorly.

With each round, Mycroft grew paler and more weary. He ate without interest, without eye contact, without seeming to care at all.

Trying to soften him, Greg discreetly moved several chips to the side of his salad.

They were considered in intense silence - almost reached for - then returned, numbly, to their rightful owner.

As the waitress came to take their plates, Greg called a time-out.

There was a bin passage down the side of the restaurant. He took Mycroft along it to smoke, suspecting they would need the privacy.

"You alright?" Greg murmured, as his lover heaved at the cigarette as if he hadn't breathed in hours.

"No," Mycroft bit out, shaking.

"What's wrong?"

"God help me. You need to ask?"

"Spell it out for me," Greg said, his pulse heavy. "Then I can help."

Mycroft's eyes flickered along the bin passage, his hand tightening around the cigarette. His jaw clenched.
"He isn't listening," he said. His eyes flashed furiously at Greg. "At all."

Greg said nothing, trying to stop his face from agreeing.

Mycroft dragged on his cigarette, his shoulders hard, watching Greg sharply as he spoke.

"He is petulant," he said. "Still a child. His feelings. His beliefs. His injured pride. Why am I being forced to listen to this?"

Greg held his gaze. "You need to give him some of your feelings back, darlin'. Or all you'll do is listen."

"What room is there?" Mycroft demanded, overwhelmed. "What does it matter, when he will simply - "

"That's why we've got the system," Greg said, his heart banging against his ribs. "It's for you, Myke. You know that, don't you?" He stared into Mycroft's eyes, watching them struggle with it. "John and I came up with it to stop Sherlock monopolising. It's to give you the space to speak. And you're not giving me a lot to work with."

Mycroft shuddered, looking down at his shoes. He flicked ash into the night air.

"Perhaps I do not want things to work," he muttered, and shut his eyes. Grief wracked his features. "Perhaps that is the simple explanation."

Greg's chest ached.

"Tell me that like your heart's not breaking," he said, "and I'll believe you."

Mycroft trembled, dragging on his cigarette.

"He isn't listening," he said, again. His voice cracked. "He's - incapable. He does not care. He thinks I am our father."

"He's not listening because you're not telling him anything, love."

"Why should I?"

"Because then he might know you're a human being," Greg said, as gently as he could, as desperately as he dared. "Then he might think twice about hurting you. He apologised to me, didn't he? You saw it. And if he knew you were hurt, he'd apologise to you too."

Mycroft glared along the alleyway, shaking. He drew a long breath.

"Sherlock angered, on purpose, a man who - mistreated me. A man who frightens me even now. Decades later. Sherlock has endangered my safety. My privacy. My dignity. He invaded your home for the sole purpose of finding me there and humiliating me, and he chose a time when he knew I would be vulnerable, sleeping in your arms. And yet it is my responsibility to explain to Sherlock he has hurt me?"

Greg's heart twisted.

Mycroft stared into his eyes, broken.

"As if Sherlock couldn't possibly be asked to realise it himself," Mycroft breathed. "As if such a thing is unreasonable for me to expect. What more could he possibly do to cause me pain, before
he's expected to realise that he caused me pain?"

Greg took this on board, rubbing the bridge of his nose. He wished they were somewhere more private, where they could hug. *Was it a mistake to do this in public?* he thought - but then, if not in public, they'd have been in someone's territory - and that wouldn't have ended well either. *Christ, this is meant to be going better than this...*

"Okay," he said. "Alright, let's - let's *look* at that. Maybe we just take it as a fact. Maybe your brother's not got the programming to reach that conclusion himself, and it's just the way he's built. But we've seen him apologise - you *know* he can do it - he just needs the emotion turned up to eleven before he understands. If you don't hit him with a wet sack of it, he won't feel it."

"Bring me a wet sack," Mycroft muttered, smoking. "I will gladly hit him with it for some time."

Greg smiled weakly.

"Or you could take a deep breath," he said, "*hold my hand really hard under the table, and spell it out to him that he hurt you.* 'Cause otherwise this is a waste of your time. And we'll call it quits right now."

Mycroft swallowed, taking a last drag on his cigarette. His eyes shut.

"Sherlock doesn't believe I am capable of feeling." He dropped the cigarette to the ground, shaking. He crushed it under his foot. "The whole bloody world doesn't," he managed. "Because I have made it to be that way. Because it is the only way to be safe. Because this is where my bloody *feelings* lead."

Greg's heart clenched. He glanced along the bin passage. *Oh, Christ. This can't get any worse. Just go for it, Lestrade.*

He stepped forwards.

"*This is where your 'bloody feelings' lead - alright?*" He cupped Mycroft's jaw in both hands, pushed him back against the brick wall, and kissed him.

Mycroft's gasp was lost between their mouths. He jerked, grabbing for Greg's forearms.

Greg kissed him, bracing, half-expecting a knee in his groin.

And then he felt Mycroft shudder - and with a small, desperate sound, his fingers raked through Greg's hair.

They tightened, pulling him close.

Greg's chest flooded with relief. He exhaled through his nose and kissed Mycroft harder, pinning him into place. Myke's hands bunched in the back of his shirt. He tasted of smoke and salmon and white wine, and he whimpered a little as Greg's tongue filled his mouth.

Greg kissed him until he'd stopped shaking - until it felt like he'd remembered.

When their lips finally parted, Mycroft Holmes was several decades younger. His eyes shone in the darkness, vulnerable and nervous as he gazed at Greg.

Greg's heart wrenched at his ribs.

"Let your brother in," he murmured, his voice tight, "or let him go, beautiful. You can't go on like
Mycroft’s throat worked. He searched Greg’s face.

"Help me," he whispered. "I - I don't know how to - ..."

Greg looked into his eyes.

"Tell me what you want," he said, "and I'll get you there. I'll make it alright. Do you want a little brother? Or do you want to leave right now?"

As they returned to the table, Greg pulled Mycroft's chair out for him. He laid a hand on the small of his lover's back, helping him in; as he took his own seat, he nudged his chair closer to Mycroft.

He then rested a forearm, palm up, on the tablecloth.

Shaking, and in utter silence, Mycroft took his hand.

Their fingers laced together.

Sherlock watched across the table without a word. His face remained quiet; he seemed to be trying to work something out.

The waitress appeared to offer them dessert. Greg took a menu to read, ordered four coffees in the meantime, and thanked her. She smiled, bright as a house sparrow, and went to fetch their coffees.

"Sherlock," Greg said, as she left. Sherlock glanced up from their joined hands with a blink. "Your brother cares about you. He doesn't want to lose you. He thinks the two of you can fix this."

Sherlock stared at him, thoroughly disarmed. He shot a wary glance at John, as if unsure how now to proceed. John gave him a hopeful look.

With caution, and with a hooded glance at Mycroft, Sherlock said,

"That... seems a significant U-turn."

Mycroft gripped Greg's hand, saying not a word.

Greg quietly rubbed the back of his palm.

"It's not, mate. Myke cut short his birthday weekend to rush to see you were alright. In January, the country ran itself for ten days while he worried at your hospital bed. He's spent decades dragging you out of places you're in danger. He's bent laws backwards on themselves for you. He loves you."

Sherlock's jaw moved in a stiff circle.

"Strange," he said, "that all this guilt-ridden interference hasn't yet suggested to him the idea of an apology."

"'Guilt-ridden' - " Mycroft began, in a fury.

Greg clenched his hand, hard.

Mycroft breathed. He sank back into his chair, shut his eyes, and did not move as Greg spoke.
"Mate, you've put the whole of your adult relationship on that one argument. I know it hurt - and I know it's crap you didn't get the support you wanted as a kid - but is it worth driving away that support now?"

"It did not hurt," Sherlock snapped at him. "It was unjust."

Greg's chest gripped.

"It... hurt, mate. That's why you've fixated on it. That's why we're all sitting here, quarter of a century later."

"I am not hurt," Sherlock bristled. "I am angry. And Mycroft shows no remorse."

"Because I did nothing wrong!" Mycroft raged, before Greg could stop him.

Greg gripped his hand. "Mycroft - "

"Nothing wrong?" Sherlock jeered, as John tried to stop him. "Then why do you continue to hound me at every turn, attempting to make your pathetic amends?"

"Sherlock, enough!"

"Because you are my brother!" Mycroft burst out, enraged. "Because, unthinkable as it seems to you, that actually signifies something to me! And because you are utterly incapable of even the smallest shred of self-preservation!"

"Myke, stop - "

John tried to speak. Sherlock drowned him out, then continued to snap to Mycroft.

Heads were turning towards them. One table along, a teenage girl had looked up from her mobile phone to gawp. She was watching the brewing argument with openly glittering interest.

Greg clamped down on Mycroft's hand.

"Right," he said, shoving back his chair. "Smoke break. Come on."

"For God's sake...!" Mycroft let go of his hand, furious. "We have just had - "

"And we clearly need another, don't we?"

"This is farcical." Mycroft wrenched the napkin from his lap, threw it into the middle of the table, and stood up. "I am finished. This is beyond my endurance. No more."

Greg's heart contracted.

"Darlin' - are you - "

"I said 'no more'." Mycroft's eyes flared; he fixed them on Greg, sharp and cold and afraid. "You made certain promises to me. I hope you recall them. If they were genuine, this is your opportunity to fulfil them. If they were not, then I suggest you do not follow me."

He turned away, and began to leave.

Jesus.
"This is it. The end of it.

At least we tried.

"We'll - get our half of the bill, guys." Greg pushed his chair back, wearily. "Thanks, John. We gave it a shot."

Mycroft was already striding away across the restaurant. Here comes a long night on the couch.

"Bye, Sherlock." Greg couldn't bring himself to smile. "Look after yourself, will you? Listen to John. Don't die of something I could've stopped."

Sherlock stared up at him, bewildered. His face had opened.

"Are - are you - ..." He didn't understand. "But I apologised."

Greg's heart heaved.

"Your brother comes first. He's important to me. It's - ... this isn't just a - ..." Shit. Shit, you could've been my brother-in-law some day. "Bye, guys. Get home safe."

He turned to follow Mycroft - who had stopped dead, halfway across the room.

As Greg stopped too, he realised that raised voices were coming through into the dining area.

"Sir! Sir, I'm sorry - but if you don't have a reservation, I really must insist that you - "

"And you're going to fucking stop me, are you?"

"Sir, please! If you carry on speaking to my staff that way - "

Mycroft staggered backwards.

He stumbled in a panic, bumped into a nearby table, and knocked over a bottle of wine. The outraged protests of the diners didn't seem to register in his hearing.

He turned around, white in the face, and began to race back towards their table.

Greg watched him, pulse spiking. "What is it?" he said. "What's wrong?"

Mycroft rushed straight for Sherlock.

He grabbed hold of his little brother, ignored his yelp and the swat of his hands, and forced him out of his chair. He pushed him forwards beneath the table.

"Hide." Mycroft was shaking. "Hide. Now. He must not see you. He will hurt you."

He.

Greg's heart stopped. "Oh - Christ - "

John stood up in a panic. "What's happening?" he said.

It was too late.
A man in a pinstriped suit with a neck like a bull had come storming into the dining area. His eyes raged in fury around the room. Before he could find his prey, the manageress intervened. She stepped in front of him, raised both hands, and insisted at volume that he leave.

Pritchard's face warped.

He seized the woman by both arms with a snarl, grappled her, and hurled her aside into an open cabinet.

Shocked screams went up from nearby diners. Glass came showering down; the manageress dropped. Every face in the room jerked towards the crash.

Pritchard searched them, panting, his teeth gritted.

As his eyes found their target, just behind Greg's left shoulder, they locked into place - and filled with untempered hatred.

Greg felt his stomach turn to rock.

Pritchard barged aside another waiter, kicked past a table, and began to come this way.
"Nicholas - " Mycroft's cry rang out in panic. "Nicholas, please!"

Pritchard's jaw set. He kept right on coming.

Greg moved without thought. He had his ID badge out of his pocket before his brain even knew that he'd reached for it.

"Nicholas Pritchard," he barked, striding between tables to intercept. "I am arresting you on suspicion of - "

The punch came from nowhere.

Greg buckled around the slug of force into his stomach. Air crushed from his lungs; screams went up. They vanished in an instant as pain blacked out his senses. He heaved with it, reeling too hard even to cry out.

As his brain kicked back into life, he found himself grasping two fistfuls of the bastard's jacket where he'd slumped - and with a surge of desperate strength, he hauled Pritchard sideways. He threw him against a nearby table. As cutlery showered the ground, the table collapsed beneath Pritchard's weight with a crunch. Louder screams went up. Other diners were now racing to the edges of the room, scrambling to get out of the way.

As Pritchard rolled in the wreckage of the table, dragging himself up onto his knees, Greg clutched his stomach. He was about to vomit, panting through his teeth with the pain.

"Call 999!" he shouted at the shocked huddle of staff in the doorway. He spat, retching around his stomach. "Tell them it's Nick Pritchard - get the bloody door locked - "

"Try it," Pritchard raged from the floor, "and I will fucking BATTER the lot of you!"

The manageress - now helped from the floor, her hands covered in cuts - brushed her terrified staff aside. Head high, face pale, she hurried for the doors.

Greg's hands curled into fists.

Get here quick, Sal.

He watched, his heart hammering, as Pritchard heaved himself back to his feet. The bastard was like an ogre from a storybook - six foot three at least, bulked out by rugby and the gym - deep tan, gelled hair, gold chain gleaming around his neck. Christ almighty. The suit was tailored. It probably cost more than Greg's car. It was now covered in red wine and coq au vin.
Greg held his ground.

Pritchard panted, staring him down. His eyes burned into Greg like a brand.

"Get the fuck out of my way," he breathed.

Greg had never felt so short in his life. He looked Pritchard in the face, every muscle tensing.

"I'm a police officer, mate." He set his jaw. "You lay another finger on me, and you can add six months to - "

Pritchard's eyes flashed. "Get the fuck out of my way."

Greg raised his voice. "You're gonna calm down, alright? There's no need for - "

Pritchard convulsed as he roared. Tendons strained in his neck. People flinched. "And you're gonna get THE FUCK OUT OF MY WAY!"

Greg's feet had locked to the floor. His heart wasn't beating.

"No, mate." Jesus. Jesus, this is bad. "I'm gonna stand right here. And you're gonna calm down."

"Nicholas..." Mycroft's voice came from behind Greg, shaking with panic. Frightened tears twisted the words. "Please. Please, don't."

Greg realised with a jolt that a mobile phone was being pointed at them. The teenager he'd spotted earlier was now filming from across the room. She'd even inched forwards to get a better view.

*Christ, at least there'll be evidence...*

Pritchard's ugly laughter made his skin crawl.

"Suddenly you wanna be nice, huh?" he snarled at Mycroft. "Suddenly you wanna plead with me? You've fucking ruined me. You've made me a laughing stock. I'm going to break every bone you've got. They'll carry you out of here in a fucking bin liner."

"You ruined yourself, mate!" Greg barked, trying to get his attention back. *Run, Myke. For Christ's sake. Get out of here. Get Sherlock and run.* "Living two separate lives, and you wonder why it's kicked you in the face? You've got nobody to blame but yourself."

Pritchard's eyes nearly bulged out of his skull. "The fuck do you know?!"

"Could've made your peace, mate." Greg tightened his fists. "University? Lived a happy life, like the rest of us. Instead you're so wound up with people finding out you're gay, you can't even cope when - "

Pritchard lunged. Screams tore out. Greg ducked the heavy blow, dodged beneath Pritchard's arm and tried to wrench it behind his back.

The bastard was too big. There was too much of him. Before he could lock his arm in place, Pritchard's other hand closed on the back of Greg's collar and wrenched at full force, choking him. Greg's grip broke. Pritchard seized hold of him, lifted him from the ground - and before Greg could brace, flung him aside.

Chairs. A table edge.
A crack.

Greg slumped to the floor. Pain blistered through his every nerve - white, gasping pain. He cringed around it, panting, burning as it wracked its way through him.

Myke.

Greg heaved his shoulders up from the ground.

He saw Mycroft scrabbling to get behind a table. He saw Pritchard take hold of it, and throw it aside with a deafening crash.

Greg dragged himself across the floor.

He lunged - a wild and reckless lurch. His arms lashed around Pritchard's ankle and he wrenched.

Pritchard's own momentum brought him down. Screams tore out, and a sound as if the roof was collapsing. Greg gritted his teeth, locking his arms around Pritchard's leg. It jerked in his hold.

Pritchard twisted, grabbing him by the neck.

Before Greg could move, two fists closed at his throat. They grappled him onto his back and held him down against the floor - fists that gripped without mercy, squeezed like they wanted to crush, and clenched like they wanted him to die.

Panic shrieked through Greg's heart.

He thrashed. No sound came from his mouth. He scrabbled, trying to kick as he choked in utter silence.

Panting, Pritchard held him down.

He could hear Mycroft screaming somewhere, pleading.

Pritchard's eyes blazed, watching Greg writhe in his hold. Greedy delight flashed across his face.

"That fuss all for you, policeman?" he breathed.

Greg dug his fingers into Pritchard's fists, clawing.

"Hear him begging me not to choke the fucking life out of you?" Pritchard grinned. "Are you special, huh?"

Greg curled his hands around Pritchard's fingers. He heaved with all his might.

They didn't move an inch.

Pritchard brayed with laughter.

"In for a penny," he grunted, tightening his grip. Greg clenched. His vision shuttered. "Laughed at for the rest of my life? Let me sit in fucking prison. At least I'll have a good story to tell when I get there."

Please.

Please Christ. Not like this.
Don't let him have to remember me like this.

A chair swung through the air.

It came down upon Pritchard's head so hard it smashed apart - and it was followed by Sherlock Holmes.

As Pritchard buckled, Sherlock flung his arms around the bastard's neck from behind. He wrenched upwards, his expression set, slamming his knee into Pritchard's back. Pritchard jerked with a roar. As he scrabbled for Sherlock's arms, his hands released from Greg's throat.

Greg heaved onto his side, choking.

He retched and coughed and spat in panic. The whole room hammered around him, pounding and whirling as air tore its way into his screaming lungs. He gasped it down.

He could hear Pritchard now laying into Sherlock and John, swearing and shouting enough to wake the dead. *Fuck. Fuck, fuck.* He tried to get up - but he was shaking too hard to support his own weight. He couldn't see.

Someone appeared suddenly at his side. He felt them kneel down.

Frightened hands found his face.

"*Greg -*"

Greg's heart heaved into his mouth. He choked on it, hacking.

"*Go,*" he gasped. His vocal cords were crushed; it hurt. "*Run -*"

"*No - no, I won't - I won't -*"

Greg's vision rippled. He couldn't make his lungs work. He couldn't breathe. He looked up at Mycroft, broken, begging him with eyes alone to run.

Then he glimpsed the shape over Mycroft's shoulder, staggering in their direction.

In one movement he swept Myke aside.

He lurched to his feet, staggered forward, and punched Pritchard across the jaw harder than he'd ever punched something in his life. The crack resounded through the restaurant. People shrieked; Pritchard reeled.

As he stumbled sideways, Greg went after him.

He brought his fists down one after the other. He didn't need to breathe. He just needed to keep Pritchard back. The bastard recovered the sense to hit him in return, but Greg barely felt the blows. One nasty slug to his mouth - a crunch, a rush of blood - it didn't matter. Pritchard was aiming for eyes and nose and teeth, his face wracked with fury. He was fighting like a thug.

Greg realised with a rush they could both fight like thugs.

He ducked another punch, lunged forwards, and drove his knee up into the bastard's groin.

A howl broke from Pritchard's throat.
It set Greg's blood on fire. He'd never heard such a satisfying sound. He'd never been so sure that someone deserved their bollocks smashed into oblivion. He slammed his knee up again, and the second howl cut into a whimper. Pritchard wracked double with pain. He began to sink.

Panting, Greg twisted beneath his arm.

John appeared at his side - staggering, spitting blood.

"Arms," Greg gasped. "Help me get his fucking arms -"

John grabbed Pritchard's other shoulder, hauling it back. Together they twisted his wrists around behind him. As John gripped them, panting, Greg forced the arsehole down onto his knees.

He got a hand in Pritchard's hair, wrenched his head up, and looked down at him as he cringed in pain.

Pritchard jerked, testing the hold.

It held.

A shocked and desperate silence fell.

Greg's brain lurched. He coughed, and spat a mouthful of blood sideways onto the carpet.

"We done now?" he raged, his lungs heaving. They felt like they were about to tear open. "You finished, mate? Made your point?"

Pritchard shut his eyes, shuddering.

As Greg wiped his bleeding mouth on his shoulder, movement caught his eye. He looked up.

Mycroft was standing before them. He'd gone as white as the tablecloths, and was staring down at Pritchard in disbelief.

Greg's chest strained. Twenty-eight years.

His lover looked up at him, silent with shock. Tears glittered in Mycroft's eyes.

Greg drew a breath.

"Nicholas Pritchard," he said - and watched Mycroft's face open. "I'm arresting you on suspicion of harassment, assault, breach of the peace, obstructing a police officer, and assaulting a police officer. You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention something you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence. D'you understand?"

Pritchard swallowed, opening his swollen eyes around their bruising.

He looked directly at Mycroft.

"Six months," he rasped. He swallowed thickly; his voice caught. "I'll be out. And I'll come looking for you."

Mycroft did not move.

He closed his fists, lifted his chin, and said,
"How fortunate I now live with a police officer, Nicholas." His eyes flashed. "I regret every moment of our association. You exploited me. You were unworthy."

Across the restaurant, there came the crash of the front doors.

Footsteps came flying this way.

*Christ. At last.* Greg shut his eyes, his lungs aching.

Sally Donovan burst into the dining area, with five armed officers at her back. Greg felt his heart kick back into life at the sight of her. She ran straight over, wrenching cuffs from inside her coat.

"What the hell took so long?" he gasped, as she bent beneath his arms and cuffed Pritchard. "There an ambulance here?"

"Jesus, why? What've you done to him?"

Greg swallowed. "Not for him."

As his knees gave way, the world rushed up to meet him.

"Greg!"

Chairs clattered aside. Arms dragged around him; Greg faded into them, blurring.

"Greg...!"

Another voice. "Mycroft - Mycroft, let me see - " John.

Greg couldn't feel anything. Just voices, rolling.

"Get an ambulance!" Mycroft, raging. *It's okay, beautiful... it's okay, you're safe... "Now! Get an ambulance now!"

"Gonna be alright, Greg." John, patient and calm. *Good old John.* "Just lie down for me. There we go."

"He's injured. He's hurt. How badly is he hurt?"

"He's alright, Sherlock. He just needs air. Can you keep people back for me? Not your brother - he needs your brother."

"Back! All of you, back! Make some space, please! He needs air!"

A sudden jolt of pain, sharp beneath Greg's ribs. He convulsed. He could feel someone coughing. A hand tightened in his own; fingers raked over his jaw. He couldn't see.

"Darling - "

Myke.

His Mycroft, crying. *Don't cry, beautiful. It's all alright.*

"Darling, you'll be fine - y-you'll be alright. Please - lie down - lie down for Doctor Watson - "

*I am lying down,* Greg thought, dazed. He gripped Mycroft's hand, closing what felt like inner eyes.
I'll be fine. We'll be fine, beautiful. We will.

We will, we will.

We will...
Care

There is no remedy for love, but to love more.
- Henry David Thoreau

When Mycroft came back into being, it was the middle of the night.

He knew because the lights were low, and there were so few people around. His sense of time had nothing else to tell him. He was rebooting - brain, heart and soul - and it was some time after midnight, and he was sitting in a hospital corridor, covered in the blood of the man he loved.

He was waiting.

The doctor was still with Greg. There was nothing Mycroft could contribute - no help he could give - nothing he could do. He'd now been sent out to wait, where he couldn't cause problems. He hadn't been able to suppress his panic every time someone touched Greg to examine him - hadn't been able to put aside the conviction that these medical professionals were all entirely wrong, and what Greg needed was just to be held somewhere quiet. His heart and his head had been unable to process the anxiety. He'd been left with nothing but distress, and no Greg to reassure him that these were perfectly normal things to experience - and so he'd been sent outside, where he could cause no further disruption.

He would have Greg back when he was allowed Greg.

In the back of his mind, he knew he should have called Anthea. She knew nothing of this. If she did, she would arrive within half an hour to take him home. He had the feeling that just the sight of her face would calm him - but he couldn't bring himself to make the call.

He felt somehow homeless. While Greg was here, he had nowhere on earth he could possibly go.

He would just have to wait.

Nicholas is in custody. None of it felt real. Greg is in hospital. John Watson is assisting the police.

And I am here, waiting.

Mycroft put his face into his hands, and existed just in his palms for a while.

How can I possibly have caused this? A week ago, this very night, he'd been packing a suitcase - folding his pyjamas, tingling with nerves and hope and little bubbles of enjoyment. He'd packed while imagining Greg lying next to him at night, holding him - the soft fabric of just nightwear together. Kissing. Greg's hands stroking his back.

Now Greg had been hospitalised in a fist fight.

God help me. There would be questions asked by his superiors. And what answers could he give?

My ex-lover arrived to assault me. He resisted arrest by my current lover. I hid my little brother
beneath a table, and tried to plead for Greg's life. I cried in front of armed police. I was of no help whatsoever.

Mycroft realised, breathing into his palms, that he didn't care.

Let the questions be asked.

He was too tired now to lie. He was too tired to hold the flaming wreckage of his personal life together any longer. Let his superiors learn the truth in all its miserable glory - that he was a broken man, with a brother who wanted him ruined, an abusive ex-partner who wanted him dead, and a lover who had now been battered to a pulp trying to defend him from the mess the other two had caused.

As exhausted tears burned across his eyes, Mycroft let them come. He kept them behind his hands. It was in some way a relief to cry alone. He had no secrets anymore - not to anyone. It was a comfort to have these tears just to himself - silent, restless tears, and for once nobody would witness them. He'd tried to have a weekend break, and been flown back in humiliation. He'd tried to make love, and been joined by a jeering audience. He'd then tried to make amends, for something he had not caused, and there'd been an actual physical brawl.

All he'd ever wanted was Greg Lestrade.

At first, just as someone to talk to - someone who understood the misery that Sherlock could cause without a single thought - someone to have coffee with, who asked about his interests, who asked how he was. Someone to meet for lunch. It had been years since he'd had anyone who counted as a friend. Years since someone had wished to attend a concert with him - years since someone responded so quickly to his messages, so fondly, so patiently - a lifetime, since he'd had someone to kiss. To hold him gently. To send texts that finished with a quiet, gentle X. He'd waited for months for Greg to come to his senses and leave, to grow tired of Mycroft's fragility, his inexperience, all that he couldn't cope with, all that he couldn't give - but Greg never had. He'd simply stayed.

He'd stayed, and he'd waited, and he'd loved.

As Mycroft realised why he hadn't rung Anthea, he pushed his fingers quietly across his eyes. I can't leave him. He never left me.

He brushed his tears away across his cheeks, shivering. It will not always be like this. Peace will come - peace, and privacy, and it will all be alright. It occurred to him, with a lurch, that he would be expected to return to his apartment now - to leave Greg's protection, and live on his own once again.

The thought made him more miserable than ever.

As heat broke over Mycroft's eyes once again, there came the squeak of a distant door.

He breathed in, willing the tears to staunch, and passed his hands wearily through his hair - attempting to seem merely exhausted, not heart-broken. He tried to ignore the footsteps, and hoped they would ignore him in return. Surely nobody approached a tired person in a hospital - surely here, at least, privacy was assured.

The footsteps slowed as they approached.

Recognition dawned.
Mycroft closed his eyes.

He didn't move as the chair beside him was quietly occupied. A long silence ensued, in which Mycroft wished himself out of existence and barely breathed.

As Sherlock began to speak, the words broke from Mycroft's mouth.

"I am gay." He pushed his hands into his hair, shaking with it. "I am gay. *I am gay.* I love Lestrade. His name is Greg, and he is wonderful. I have loved him for some time, and I am gay. I was gay when you were young. I was gay when Nicholas hit me at university. And *I am sorry* that our father was our father. I'm sorry I was afraid. You are right. You were always right. You have your bloody answers. I am gay, and I am sorry. Now please - *please... leave.*"

Sherlock said nothing.

The quiet stretched on. Mycroft wept in utter silence into his palms, too tired not to.

A nervous hand laid upon his back.

Broken, Mycroft cried without a sound.

"Nicholas Pritchard - mistreated you?" Sherlock said. "Physically?"

He'd never heard his brother's voice take that tone. He hadn't realised Sherlock even could be gentle.

Mycroft shook in silence, unable to speak.

Sherlock started to rub his back - uneasy, uncertain up-and-down, as if he didn't quite know how.

"Does Lestrade know?" Sherlock asked.

Mycroft's throat closed around the word. "S-Some of it."

"But - not the full extent?"

Mycroft convulsed. "No."

Sherlock was quiet for some time, thinking. "He'll - be distressed to hear it. Very distressed."

Mycroft shuddered, almost too angry to produce the words.

"He - n-needn't have known any of it, S-Sherlock - ... he c-could have never - ... but you just had to - "

Sherlock audibly swallowed. "I - hadn't realised that Pritchard - "

"That summer - " Mycroft clenched his fists, forcing himself to breathe. The words wracked their way free. " - after Nicholas - ... I-left in no doubt - no doubt whatsoever - that I was disgusting. That I was *repellant.* I hadn't a shred of self-pride left in the world. I was *nothing.*"

Sherlock listened in silence, his hand fallen still on Mycroft's back.

"And our father," Mycroft bit out. "T-Telling you that you were his next heart attack. That you were digging his grave. For Christ's sake. *What was I supposed to say? How was I supposed to speak? Do you have any concept of the position you put me in?"
Sherlock's voice came small in the silence. "Mycroft, I... I wasn't aware that - ..."

"No," Mycroft gasped. "No. Of course you were not aware. Of course you have no comprehension." His heart wrenched. "Of course you do not care."

He covered his eyes. It hurt even to say - all these years, and finally it was torn open. He'd made a mockery of the law for Sherlock. A mockery of his profession, his duties, his position. And his brother considered him no more than a domineering bully, as their father had been.

"Why did you tell him, Sherlock?" he begged. "Why did you make him say those - horrific things? Could you not have just - just been gay, for God's sake, just - had it for yourself, and not forced him to - ... God almighty. The things he said will be burned into my heart forever."

His hands shook in his hair.

"You think I walked away from that table unscathed," he whispered. "You think you endured that alone. I suffered every wound that you did. I heard the words as well. And I was helpless, just to sit there - to sit there and listen to him - raging at you. How could you possibly have expected his support? His understanding? Why did you do it, Sherlock? Why?"

Sherlock's response came after some time. The smallness of his words made his voice seem young.

"I - wanted to be proud." His touch shook between Mycroft's shoulders. "He was never proud. Of either of us. And so I - I took it for myself."

He hesitated.

"His anger was - restorative. It felt like proof. Who I was. His anger was mine by right, and I... I wanted it. I wanted to have that. If It was all I could have."

There was a long, aching pause.

"Why did you - not tell him?" Sherlock said.

Mycroft's heart broke.

"Because I was ashamed," he said.

"Because I was ashamed," he said.

Sherlock's voice tightened. "There's nothing wrong with it."

"I know there isn't!" Mycroft snapped - and paled at once with a rush of regret. He breathed the poison away, gentled his voice, and said, "You - s-should have told me. That you were planning to speak to him." His throat clenched. "I would have reassured you that - ... I would have explained to you that I- I could not - ..."

His wrists started to shake. He clamped down on it, biting out the words.

"You have the right to out yourself, Sherlock. You do not have the right to insist that others join you."

Sherlock swallowed beside him. "I - see that now."

"You do not have the right to force people into situations where they feel obliged to confess. That causes no pride. Only shame. Shame I already had in abundance."

"Y-Yes. Yes, I... understand."
"And you do not have the right to demand confidence from me." Mycroft stiffened, shaking. "You jeopardised my career, Sherlock. You jeopardised my personal safety. You jeopardised my only intimate relationship. In three bloody decades. All to punish me. Yet at no point did it occur to you to talk to me."

Sherlock said nothing, ashamed.

"How Father reacted was unacceptable," Mycroft said, turning his head at last to look. His little brother was gazing down at his hands, pale and distressed. "I am sorry that he spoke to you so harshly. I'm sorry I didn't seek you out afterwards, to express that to you. To reassure you. To explain to you why I couldn't speak."

Sherlock's face tightened.

"I'm sorry I entered Lestrade's flat," he said. "I'm - sorry I took the case against Pritchard."

Mycroft's heart strained. He gazed into his little brother's face.

"I'm... sorry it - seemed the only way for you to speak to me."

Silence fell.

They sat in it together, broken, side-by-side; the minutes slowly passed.

"Does Lestrade make you happy?" Sherlock asked.

Mycroft felt his stomach knot. He looked down at his hands.

"Yes," he said. "He is - very kind, and very patient." He paused. "He and I are very happy."

"Where did you go?"

Mycroft had a feeling Sherlock knew precisely where they'd gone. He'd probably deduced the hotel, the suite, which side of the bed had belonged to whom. "Cumbria. The Lake District."

Sherlock processed this, silent.

"Was it - pleasant there?" he asked.

Mycroft realised he was trying.

His heart broke all over again.

"Until I heard that you were hurt... yes. Then I rather couldn't enjoy it any longer."

Sherlock nodded. There was another silence, as he did his very best to think for something else to say.

"I - see that you're sexually active again," he remarked. "That must be nice."

Exhausted, joyful despair slugged through Mycroft's soul. He was too tired to protest.

"It's - excellent," he managed. "Thank you..."

Sherlock nodded - pleased for him.

Mycroft had the strange sensation that something had ended - something he'd never even realised
had begun. He glanced at his brother, gently, and found Sherlock looking down at his hands.

"John is very patient too," Sherlock said - and no more.

Mycroft's heart settled to the bottom of his chest. "Yes," he said, astonished. "Yes, I... I imagine he is."

Sherlock gave him a pained glance.

Mycroft smiled.

He wondered when it was they'd last spoken this gently. Half a lifetime ago, he thought. More than that.

"Is Lestrade alright?" Sherlock asked.

Mycroft gave a nervous nod. "He - has no obvious internal injuries. Many external ones. They thought he might have a broken rib, but he - s-seems to be rather more durable than that." He hesitated. "They've suggested he might not have to stay. He - may yet be discharged before the morning."

Sherlock took this in. "Good," he said.

He paused.

"John - said I should invite you to Baker Street. For dinner. And we shall talk there. You should of course bring Lestr-... Greg."

Mycroft's heart stirred.

"That would be kind," he murmured. "Thank you."

Sherlock looked down at his cuffs. "You are welcome," he said.

The door beside them opened.

Mycroft sat up at once, turning in his seat.

The doctor appeared - calm, quiet, and with a look of placating reassurance.

"He's well enough to leave," she said. Mycroft felt his every internal organ squeeze. "A good night's sleep, no strenuous exercise for two weeks, and over-the-counter painkillers as needed. The bruising should start to fade within a few days. If there's any problems - any unexplained bleeding or pain, especially in his stomach - fetch him straight back, and we'll fix him."

Her eyes sparkled.

Mycroft flushed, aware that his earlier distress had not made her job any easier. "Thank you, doctor."

She gave him a small smile.

"I think he'd rather like to see you now," she said. "Be gentle."

Mycroft's heart tightened. "Yes, I - ... th-thank you."
She held the door for him, amused.

As Mycroft stepped into the room, a pair of anxious brown eyes were waiting for him.

His heart crushed on sight.

"Greg..."

He rushed over to the chair, dropped to his knees, and was at once dragged into Greg's arms.

Greg gasped against his shoulder, gripping him in desperation.

"Christ... there you are..." His fingers bunched in Mycroft's shirt, clinging to him. "There you are, beautiful... are you okay?"

_Oh God._ Mycroft buried his face in Greg's neck, and gave up on every semblance of restraint. He didn't care about restraint. He cared about Greg. He wanted to go home - and he realised with a wave of emotion that it didn't matter which building that was.

It was where Greg would be.

He wanted to be there - always - every minute that he could. He would never leave Greg's side again.

Greg stroked his hair, held him and hushed his tears.

"It looks worse than it is, darlin'... m' alright. Just a few bruises."

"Y-You're hurt - he battered you, he choked you - oh, God - "

"Hey... hey, shhh... I'm fine. I'm just fine, love..."

"You passed out - "

"Mm hmm. Came round though, didn't I? And m' alright now... just ibuprofen and no skiing for a fortnight. S'all fine."

Greg caught his chin gently, lifting his eyes.

"See?" he murmured, smiling through the bruises. He was a mess; but his eyes were as warm and caring as if they were lying in bed, gently waking up. "No lasting harm done. He got a few good swings, but... he didn't have two guys to hold me down like with Sherlock. M'fine, baby. I'm made of tough stuff."

_God help me._ Mycroft knew he wouldn't cope until they were home. He needed to have Greg behind a locked door, in bed, in his arms - and then he would believe things were fine.

He turned his face into Greg's neck, held onto him and shook, willing his heart to find itself a slower beat.

Greg kissed his head.

A moment later, there came the sound of nervous footsteps at the door - and Mycroft felt Greg smile against his forehead.

"You okay, mate?" Greg sounded amused. "The pair of us have matching faces now. Did he get
you again?"

Sherlock stayed by the door, unsure if he were allowed to enter this moment.

"I sustained no new injuries," he said. "You - have the lion's share of those, I think." He hesitated. "You protected my brother, Lestrade. You care about him very much."

Mycroft closed his eyes, tightening his hands in the back of Greg's shirt.

Greg gave a soft huff. He rested his chin on top of Mycroft's head.

"Yeah, Sherlock... I do." Greg's pulse thumped softly in his throat; Mycroft kissed it, overwhelmed. "Your brother means the world to me. Has for a while now."

"He - cares for you, too. Very deeply." Sherlock paused. "You mustn't mistreat him. Not once - or you shan't be a good man. He deserves nothing less, Lestrade. I hope you know it."

Greg's chest expanded in Mycroft's arms.

"I do," he murmured. "More and more everyday." His voice warmed with a smile. "And you go easy on my boyfriend, Sherlock... alright? We're working him through some stuff. He's doing well."

Sherlock hesitated.

"Yes," he said. "He is."

_We all are_, Mycroft thought.

Sherlock closed the door quietly as he left.

The tip of Greg's nose nuzzled into Mycroft's hair.

"Have I missed something?" he asked.

Mycroft nodded, swallowing around the lump in his throat.

"Something to tell me about in the morning?" Greg murmured.

Mycroft shivered.

"Please," he breathed. "Please - let me come home with you. I need to watch over you. I can't leave you tonight. I can't bear it."

Greg smiled against his temple.

"Yeah?" he hummed. "You going to tend to me through until the morning?" He kissed Mycroft's eyebrow, fond. "Your wounded white knight."

A shudder shook its way down Mycroft's spine. He closed his eyes once more.

"I - I thought - at one point - "

"I know, darlin'. I - thought it too." Greg breathed in. "Think I can forgive your brother for breaking my door now..."

"Yes, I... believe amends have been made." Mycroft hesitated, placing a tentative kiss to Greg's
neck. "John is at Scotland Yard, giving a statement. His injuries were not - ... he was happy to help."

"Good old John." Greg stirred, nuzzling the bridge of his nose. "Pritchard in a cell?"

"I a-assume so." Mycroft's heart tensed, strangely. "I am so sorry."

"What're you sorry for?"

"If - i-if it weren't for me - ..."

"Oi," Greg said, and kissed his lips - as gentle as if Mycroft were injured, not him. "I'd take a beating like that everyday for you, you know that? If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be happy. I'd be miserable. Nobody to come home to at night. Life'd be crap, if it weren't for you."

"Greg..." Mycroft's heart heaved behind his ribs. He couldn't take his eyes from Greg's - those big, brown, loving eyes. "Greg, you... you are..."

"I love you, darlin'... that's all." Greg smiled, stroking a thumb beneath his lips. "Can you get a car here quicker than a taxi?"

Mycroft shivered. "Yes," he said. "Yes, of course... I will call someone."

"'kay." Greg bit his bruised lip, his gaze soft. "Where are we going? Mine or yours?"

"Your - d-door is still - "

"Ah... yeah..." Greg hesitated. "Are you - okay if I come to - ?"

Mycroft's heart tugged.

"Yes," he whispered. "Yes, of course..." He cupped Greg's face, gazing in distress at the bruises. His pulse quickened. He could have killed you. He could have ended your life, and all you cared about was protecting me. "My white knight," he whispered, flushing.

Greg's eyes shone. He gathered Mycroft close, and leant against his shoulder. "Take me home, sweetheart."

Anthea was distraught.

"Mr Holmes - " She almost ran from the car, vaulting up the hospital steps in her heels. "Are you both alright?"

Are you both. Mycroft's heart, already weak, reeled with the fresh slew of emotion.

"We are fine," he managed, as she reached them and laid a hand at once upon his arm. She'd never touched him before. Not once in years of service. "Greg - will be staying with - "

"Of course, sir..." She was pale, and had no make-up on. The poor girl had been asleep, he thought; she was now fretting over them as if they were family. "Inspector, I'm so sorry you were hurt..."
Greg, ever gracious, gave her a smile through his bruises.

"I've had worse," he told her, bright-eyed and tired. "Not as bad as it looks... your boss is more shook up than I am."

She didn't doubt it. "Let me take you home at once," she said, and got the door for them.

She escorted them all the way into the apartment. Mycroft hadn't laid eyes on his home for nearly a week. Even with the lights turned on, it didn't look right - too large, too richly-furnished, too clean - but it was safe, and he could care for Greg here. The rest could wait until morning.

"D'you - mind if I shower?" Greg said, as Mycroft helped him from his coat. Anthea hovered near the door. "I - feel a bit - ..."

Mycroft's heart ached. "Of course," he said. "It's - just through - " He gestured towards his bedroom door. Greg had never been in it; this was the first time they'd been here since his birthday.

"Right." Greg caught his eyes, a quiet connection. Mycroft heard the words as clearly as if Greg had spoken them. *Come be with me, when you're done. "Won't be long."

He let himself into Mycroft's bedroom, and closed the door behind him.

Anthea turned to Mycroft before he could say a word.

"I've cleared your morning's meetings, sir. You're not expected to be at the office until late afternoon. I can go to Inspector Lestrade's flat now, if you wish, and bring his things - along with your suitcase - or I can bring them for seven AM tomorrow, whichever suits. I'll bring groceries with me when I do."

Mycroft's heart tensed. Wiping his diary would have required explanation - in some cases, authorisation. For several seconds he could only stare at her, lost, feeling more vulnerable than he ever had in her presence.

"A-Anthea - "

*Oh, God. Oh God, this must be said.*

"This - n-news is - likely to proliferate. I fear it will bring with it certain - revelations about my private life. R-Revelations that might be - received with - "

Her brow creased. "What revelations, Mr Holmes?"

Mycroft's expression worked with discomfort. "I - think it's perfectly obvious," he said, his voice stiff.

The confusion remained soft in her eyes.

"I don't understand, sir... I see no information here that could cause the least surprise to anyone."

She held his gaze, her expression set - and Mycroft realised with a lurch he was being told something.

"Nothing new has come to light, after all," she said. "If any person feels the need to express surprise, or any other opinion, on any detail of your private life, then they should be treated with the greatest scorn - that they did not know the state of things already. You have always been as you are, Mr Holmes. You have never concealed a thing. If people are so obtuse that it's taken them all
this time to discover it, then they deserve nothing but contempt... and I will be very pleased to dispense it on your behalf."

She quietly lifted her chin.

"I'll be here at seven with groceries and your suitcases, sir. I will now leave you in peace. But do text me if there's anything you or Gregory require."

She turned, and let herself out of the flat without another word.

Mycroft listened to her heels echo away along the landing.

A very painful minute passed; then the bedroom door quietly opened.

"She headed off?"

Mycroft's heart contracted. He looked around.

Greg stood there, half-smiling, weary beneath his bruises. His shirt was undone, his belt was loose, and the sound of running water came from behind him.

"Yes," Mycroft managed, his voice tight. "Yes, she - she has gone."

Greg's eyes warmed.

"Had the feeling she wanted to reassure you," he said. He held out his arms. "C'mere. My turn now."

They stayed in the shower for nearly forty minutes - washing, kissing and cuddling, promises and tears.

As Greg finally eased into bed, exhausted relief washed across his face.

"Jesus, this is comfy..." he breathed. "Never been so glad to lie down in my life..."

Mycroft nestled tentatively against his side, trying not to lean on his shoulder, his ribs or his arms. Greg had bruises almost everywhere. It was almost impossible to believe he was here, settled into Mycroft's bed with him - the bed he'd slept in alone all these years.

"Do you need anything?" Mycroft whispered, gazing at Greg in the darkness. *How will I sleep? How will I not simply watch you until morning?* "For the night... to make you comfortable."

Greg smiled, his eyes shining. Damp from his hair blotched the linen pillow beneath him.

"M'fine, darlin'," he murmured. "Just glad it's all over. Glad we can rest."

Mycroft's heart stirred. *Over.*

It didn't yet feel real.
"You're only to go in late tomorrow," he said. He watched Greg's mouth curve. "You must relax in the morning - here with me, where I can monitor you."

Greg bit into his lip. "Looks like I've got no say in this..."

"No," Mycroft said. His heart drummed. "You have not."

"M'I allowed out of bed?"

"We shall see."

Greg's eyes smoked. "Keep me company," he murmured, "if I'm not?"

Mycroft flushed, repressing the heat that swirled at once through his stomach.

There came a quiet reverberation from beside the bed. Mycroft turned his head towards his phone - a text message.

He reached across to the nightstand for it.

"Who is it?" Greg murmured.

Mycroft took a moment to reply. A strange lump had formed in his throat.


"He knew it would be with me."

Thinks nothing of it. Supports me with your care.

"Someone was smiling on us the day your brother met John Watson," Greg said, stretching carefully against the pillows. "Can't imagine the mess we'd be in otherwise."

The words left Mycroft's mouth before he could stop them.

"Everyone has been kind." He hesitated. "Very kind." None of them have been shocked. None of them have been unsettled. Even the doctor. Even the restaurant staff. Not one person. "Everyone has - very swiftly offered sympathy, or help..." As if we are quite ordinary. As if nothing at all is
Greg's arm gathered around his shoulders, coaxing him close.

"Why shouldn't they?" he said, and kissed Mycroft's forehead. "They're all worried about you. You've been through a total nightmare... and we know good people."

Mycroft's heart was beating hard, muffled against the front of his chest. He had a feeling he wouldn't fall asleep straight away. He was thinking - thinking things that it was worth staying awake to think.

He placed his phone beside Greg's on the bedside, and settled into his arms.

He felt Greg breathe, resting at last. Gentle hands stroked Mycroft's back. The darkness wrapped its arms around them both.

"Mykie?" came the murmur, a minute later.

*Dear God. I'm starting to enjoy 'Mykie'. Where in heaven will this end? "Mm?"

"Had a thought."

"Yes?"

"I don't have any clean pants. Gonna be a very casual dress code at work tomorrow."

Mycroft felt his mouth smile.

"Anthea will be here at seven," he said, gathering Greg gently against his shoulder, "with provisions for breakfast, and clothing for you... hopefully including underwear."

What a task that would be for her - selecting which of Greg's boxer shorts he should have for the day. Mycroft was almost intrigued to see which ones she chose.

Greg nuzzled into his neck, sleepily. "What're we doing in the morning?" he asked.

Mycroft stroked the back of his head.

"Nothing whatsoever," he said. "Rest, relaxation. Painkillers. Peace. I shall make you breakfast, and we'll decide if you're fit to go to work."

Greg stifled a yawn against his shoulder.

"Gotta charge Pritchard," he mumbled. "Only got twenty-four hours, unless it's a serious crime... need to be there."

Mycroft's heart hardened with distress.

"His assault on you was a serious crime," he said. "He intended to choke you. He would not have stopped without Sherlock's intervention. That classes as attempted murder, Greg."

"Mmh." His lover nestled closer. "Best get him charged soon, then."

Mycroft knew he would not win this particular discussion. In truth, he knew there were good reasons to hurry. The idea of Nicholas being released from a police station without charge was nothing short of a living nightmare. And if the charge could be brought with enough evidence to
suggest Nicholas was too dangerous to bail, he'd be kept on remand - secure, safe behind bars until
the court hearing.

Mycroft supposed they would have the morning at least to rest, and for Greg to recover some
strength.

He kissed the soft grey hair at his lover's temple, feeling Greg's pulse drum against his lips. His
arms gently tightened. "As you think is best."

Greg stirred. "Darlin'?" he mumbled against Mycroft's neck.

Mycroft's heart squeezed. Please. Please let me always be your darlin'. "Mm?"

"S'worth it." Greg kissed his shoulder, gently. "I'd go through it all again. I - just need you to
know."

Oh God...

"I would never ask you to," Mycroft whispered, closing his eyes. "Never. Not a moment of it, Greg.
Not for anything."

He felt Greg smile against his neck.

"I know, love..." Greg cuddled close, breathing deep. "I'd do it, all the same."
It is love that asks, that seeks, that knocks, that finds, and that is faithful to what it finds.
- Augustine of Hippo

You never really knew how much you liked working at Scotland Yard until the afternoon you turned up, beaten black-and-blue - and the pisstaking began in force.

"First time brawling in a restaurant can be billed as overtime," Sally said, grinning, as she helped Greg gingerly remove his jacket.

He smirked, even as he winced.

"Feels good," he said, as she hung it up for him. "Most of my brawling in restaurants doesn't earn me a penny..."

"You know you still look a mess, sir, don't you?"

"Yep," said Greg, very carefully sitting down. A long morning of ice and Mycroft's care had done little to take down the bruising yet. "Scared an old lady as I got out the taxi. She must've thought I was some thug, here to hand myself in."

Sally gave him a slanted smile.

"The thug's been causing a fuss in the cells, by the way. Threatened to kick the custody sergeant's head inside out if we didn't hurry up fetching him his lawyer."

Greg huffed. It wasn't a surprise.

"Not really allowed to interview the bastard myself, am I?" he said.

Sally shook her head. "Not with your face in that state, sir. No."

"You okay handling it?"

"Mm hmm. Shouldn't be a problem. Plenty of witnesses in the restaurant - and we've got your entire face as evidence. Only so much he can deny."

Greg was looking forward to the court case already. He couldn't wait to see his entire face presented as evidence. "Don't go easy on the arsehole, will you?"

Sally's mouth curved. "Sharpened my teeth this morning specially. Coffee?"

"You star. Thanks." As she turned to leave, Greg added, "Erm - Sal?"

She paused in the doorway. "Mm?"

Sally did so, wary. She took a seat in front of his desk. "What's up?"

"Nothing," Greg said. "Just a - fact of the case. You're bound to come across it. Might as well tell you now, then it's out of the way."

Sally waited, holding the base of her chair. She looked discreetly worried.

"Keep it to yourself as much as you can, will you?" Greg said. "I - don't want it circulated. It's not a big deal, it's just - ... might surprise a few people, and... well. Keep it quiet for me."

Her eyebrow lifted, just a fraction. "Alright."

Com on, Lestrade. We can do this. "I was - at the restaurant with Sherlock and his brother. Mycroft."

Sally made the connection. "The surveillance address?"

"Yeah. That's who Pritchard was after. Pritchard is - an ex of Mycroft's, back at university." Christ, here it comes. Greg scrunched his toes inside his shoes. "And I'm his... current partner. He's - ... we're together. Mycroft and me."

Sally Donovan merely smiled.

"Yeah," she said. "I know."

Greg hesitated. "You do?"

"While you were on the floor, he was, ah... holding your face quite a bit. More than might be expected of a concerned onlooker." Her eyes danced. "Calling you 'darling'. Crying. Two plus two, sir. It's fine."

A knot eased itself at once in Greg's chest. The rush of it took his breath for a second. "Wow. Okay - erm, good."

"Is this the guy you're always meeting for lunch?" Sally asked, still smiling.

Greg tried not to grin. "Yeah, that's... that's him."

Sally bit her lip. She lifted her hands, and gave it scare quotes.

"'Helping my mate move'," she said. "'In the Lake District'."

Greg flushed. "Ah. Yep. That's him. And for what it's worth, I actually was in the Lake District."

"Uh huh..." Her eyes lit up. "And... which bits of him were you helping to move, sir?"

Greg pointed at the door. "Out."

Grinning, Sally got up from the chair.

"Coffee?" she said in the door.

Greg gave her a glittering smile through his black eye, opening up his e-mails. "There'd better be a
How are you? xxx
Received 13:47

Just fine love :) hows your afternoon? xxx
Sent 13:47

Productive. I may be rather protective of you later this evening... I find myself in a state of tenderness. xxx
Received 13:48

Shouldnt enjoy you fussing over me this much... but I really reeeally do... xxx
Sent 13:49

Gonna have to get my arse kicked more often ;) xxx
Sent 13:49

There was only one arse kicked in that restaurant, and it was not yours. xxx
Received 13:50

Fuss over me some more tonight? please. Tell me I'm brave and you're proud xxx
Sent 13:52

Only too happy to. xxx
Received 13:52

you honestly don't mind me staying? Landlord says the lock is being fixed right this minute... you can kick me out if you want to... xxx
Sent 13:54

Reassuring for me to keep an eye on you while you're recovering. I'm happy to have you stay with me. xxx
Received 13:55
Assuming you are also happy, of course. xxx
Received 13:55

Yep very happy :) xxx
Sent 13:56

Well, then. :-) xxx
Received 13:57

What are you doing right now? top secret stuff? xxx
Sent 14:03

Something for the Home Secretary... and trying my hardest not to fret. xxx
Received 14:04

What are you doing? xxx
Received 14:07

prepping sally for NP questioning... might be a tough interview. Can't really go in with her. seeing as I'm the victim :|
Making sure she knows her stuff and she's ready for whatever aggro he might throw at her xxx
Sent 14:11

Ah. I see. xxx
Received 14:12

I hope it goes well. xxx
Received 14:12

it will, beautiful. Sending her in fully armed... xxx
Sent 14:16

At what time? xxx
Received 14:17

Half three. I'll text when its over... might be a long one though. His lawyers been funny with us already xxx
Sent 14:19

Would you want to have a statement from me? xxx
As half past three arrived, Greg took his place to observe through the one-way glass. He tried to keep his heart beating steady as he waited, arms folded, turning his phone quietly in his hand.

Pritchard - puffy-eyed, split lip, and not looking half as smug any more in his standard issue jumpsuit - sat scowling like a gorilla beside his slick-haired, silk-shirted lawyer in a lavender tie. The guy probably earned more per hour than an entire team of nurses. He was taking diligent notes, and wore a watch that glinted in the light with every wrist movement.

Sally entered the room on the dot of half past three, laid down her papers, and switched on the tape recorder.

As she took Pritchard through the usual caution, Greg realised he wasn't breathing. He shifted his weight to the opposite foot, telling himself it would be fine. The bastard could only deny so much. If he got bail, he got bail. They would deal with it, somehow.

Mycroft had been here for half an hour with Sally. Greg didn't know what had been said. He hadn't
been present, not wanting to risk a defence lawyer finding out he'd been involved in interviewing a witness who was his lover - in a case where he was also the victim. Sally had handled the lot. She'd even kept the typed statement away from Greg. Mycroft had been and gone without them even encountering each other. It was as high above board as it was possible to keep things - and it made Greg uncommonly nervous.

As she'd gathered her notes together upstairs, Greg had put a hand on Sally's arm.

"I don't know what Myke told you," he said. She held his gaze, stony-calm. "Just - don't use it, if you don't have to. Please. Try and keep him out of this."

Sally nodded, said nothing, and drained the dregs of her coffee.

Now they'd find out if she could do it.

Greg bit the inside of his cheek, glanced down at his phone-screen, and told himself the worst of it had passed. One way or another, it would be fine. He kept catching his own reflection in the one-way glass - pale, half-there, as battered as a boxer and looking ten years too old.

Sally finished the caution, and asked Pritchard if he understood.

He muttered that he did.

She then opened her case notes, calm. Greg could see Mycroft's handwriting, even from this distance. He gripped his phone.

"Did you physically assault Sherlock Holmes on Sunday night?" Sally asked, to begin.

Pritchard didn't move.

"Yeah," he grunted.

His lawyer's head jerked upwards from his notes.

"Did you attempt to assault his brother Mycroft in La Phalène last night?" Sally asked, raising an eyebrow.

Pritchard snorted. "Yeah," he said.

"Mr Pritchard," his lawyer said, swiftly. "There's no need to -"

"In the process," Sally said, drowning him out, "did you assault the manager and another member of staff who tried to stop you?"

"Yep."

"Mr Pritchard, please! You needn't -"

"Did you resist arrest by DI Greg Lestrade," Sally said, "and then assault him?"

"Yep."

"Mr Pritchard -"

"Did you try to choke DI Lestrade?" Sally asked.
Pritchard's lip curled back from his teeth. "Yeah," he said.

Pritchard's lawyer threw down his fountain pen, and buried his face in his hands.

"To death?" Sally asked, calmly.

Pritchard grunted. "If I'd had another minute."

Behind the one-way glass, Greg's mouth dropped open.

_That's attempted murder. Holy shit._

And they had it on tape. No lawyer on earth could save the stupid bastard now.

Sally had realised it, too. She took a second to pretend to read her notes; Greg knew it was to steady herself.

"Did you pressure Mycroft Holmes into manipulating the media," she asked, "using photographs you claim to have of him from your university days?"

Greg's heart clenched.

Blackmail could put someone away for fourteen years. It could also justify anonymity in court.

Pritchard looked Sally in the eye, smirking.

"Binned 'em years ago," he huffed. "Still fucking works..." He paused; his jaw locked with a crunch. "Usually fucking works."

Pritchard's lawyer whimpered into his hands.

Sally took a moment just to enjoy the sight. She then reached across to the tape recorder, and flipped her case notes shut.

"Interview concluded," she said. "Three thirty-two PM."

---

*How are you?*

Received 15:37

_I'm good thanks mate :)_

how are you doing? Bit calmer after last night?

Sent 15:38

*I am fine. Thank you for asking. Is Mycroft well?*

Received 15:40

Yep he's ok. You should text him and ask, if you like. He wouldn't mind :)
Got a confession from our friend Mr P by the way... admitted the lot. Should be going away for some time if the lawyers do their jobs

Sent 15:42

Would you be willing to come to court? Do us a twirl in the witness box? it'd be a massive help...

Sent 15:43

Yes of course.

Received 15:45

John says he is also quite happy to stand.

Received 15:45

thanks Sherlock :)

Sent 15:46

You are welcome.

Received 15:46

Just realised we didn't pay for dinner, did we? oops! can't go back there now :P

Sent 15:49

They probably don't mind. I imagine the publicity is going to be fairly lucrative.

Received 15:52

... publicity??

Sent 15:52

Sherlock. PLEASE tell me you havent gone to some journalist about all this???

Sent 15:53

Why would I have done that? There's no need.

Received 15:54
The office door opened.

Greg looked up from his phone to find Sally in the doorway, looking concerned.

She had a copy of the Evening Standard in her hand.

Greg felt the breath vanish from his lungs in an instant. "You're not serious," he said.

Sally bit her lip. "You know that thing you didn't want widely circulated?"

_Oh, Jesus. Jesus, tell me no._ Sally held out the paper; Greg pulled it from her hand.

He didn't even need to rip it open - it was on the front bloody page.

As he read, his stomach dropped further and further towards the floor.

*NICK PRITCHARD APPREHENDED IN RESTAURANT FIST FIGHT ARRESTED BY 'HERO DI'*

Following a public brawl in a busy London restaurant, shamed business tycoon Nick Pritchard was taken into custody last night over his suspected assault of popular private detective Sherlock Holmes.

*Mr Pritchard, who has evaded the authorities for several days following the Baker Street assault last Sunday, is said to have stormed into La Phalène on Dorset Street not long after nine PM - in search of Mr Holmes's older brother, who was dining there at the time.*

Eyewitnesses report that *Mr Pritchard was stopped in his attempt by the dramatic intervention of DI Gregory Lestrade, who - following a violent attempt by Mr Pritchard to resist arrest - is now being treated for his injuries in St Mary's Hospital.*

*DI Lestrade has previously worked with Sherlock Holmes on a number of cases, most notably the capture of notorious kidnapper Peter Ricoletti.*

An eyewitness told the Standard, "Nick Pritchard was shouting and screaming from the second he came in. He kept telling the guy to get out of the way, but he wouldn't move. It was awful. We thought someone was going to get killed. There was blood and glass everywhere."

Mr Pritchard was eventually overpowered with the assistance of other diners, and taken into custody by police. *He is expected to be charged with four separate assaults, including two members of La Phalène staff.*

It is understood that DI Lestrade intervened in defence of his partner Mycroft, 46 - a civil servant and Cambridge University graduate - whom Mr Pritchard held responsible for the exposure of his recent gay sex scandal.

*The manager of La Phalène told the Evening Standard's reporter this morning that...*

"Oh - oh, holy... _shit..._"
Greg scrabbled for his phone. He selected the contact quickly and held it to his ear. Sally had already made herself scarce.

As the phone rang, Greg read the bottom of the article over and over again. ... ‘in defence of his partner Mycroft, 46’...

*Christ, Christ... how has this happened? How?*

A polite female voice answered the phone. "Mr Holmes's office."


"Of course."

The line went quiet.

It was quiet for some time - and when it was picked up, Greg's throat gripped itself shut.

"I'm here," Mycroft said, calm. "What has happened?"

"Hey. It's - it's me." Greg forced himself to speak, willing his heart not to rip itself out of his chest. "Erm - odd question, but - have you seen the Evening Standard yet?"

He heard Mycroft take a moment.

"I hadn't thought to acquire a copy..." he said. "Why?"

Greg took a deep breath. "There's - an article. About last night. Front page."

After a long moment, Greg heard a cup placed back in its saucer.

"Do I get the impression that you and I should meet for coffee?" Mycroft said.

Greg's stomach heaved. "Yeah. Yeah, that... that'd be - ... H-Harlequin, maybe? Twenty minutes?"

Mycroft liked Harlequin. It meant he was less likely to fall apart.

"Yes... yes, I think I can make that." Greg heard Mycroft's chair squeak. "Shall I acquire a copy of the Standard?"

"No," said Greg, quickly. "No, don't do that. Just... meet me there. A-And we'll talk."
Greg got to Harlequin first.

He ordered two cappuccinos, and thought about getting Mycroft a pastry of some kind - then realised it would look exactly like the bribe it was - that, or a stupid attempt to make light of the situation. He decided against it, took a table in the window, and waited in his jacket.

Mycroft appeared just a few minutes later. Greg spotted him coming along the street - calm and upright, the umbrella at his side. There was a file under his arm, and quiet resolve on his face.

Greg's heart sank like a stone.

*Jesus, we were in the clear... it's all over. It was all alright. And now I'm about to...*

Mycroft let himself into the shop with a tinkle of the bell, glanced around, and spotted Greg sitting in the window.

He came over, removing his gloves - the gloves Greg had bought him for his birthday. Greg's stomach twisted inside out.

"Have you ordered?" Mycroft asked.

Greg tried a smile, all too aware he'd turned the colour of the table. "Yeah, I - went for a cappuccino for you... is that alright?"

Mycroft sat down, now regarding him with concern.

"What happened in the interview?" he asked, as he leant back in his chair. "You're - making me rather nervous."

*Christ. The interview.* In the space of a minute, they'd plummeted from utter relief into disaster - Mycroft didn't even know.

Heart heaving, Greg said, "Admitted it. All of it - Sherlock, the restaurant, the blackmail... the lot. Just shrugged and came out with it. Told Sally he'd have killed me if he had another minute. He - doesn't seem to care what happens to him anymore. Almost like he wanted to go to prison."

Mycroft said nothing for a moment, watching Greg closely.

"He likely imagines he will do well there," he murmured, guarded. "He's lost his standing in wider London... and so he will rule over inmates, instead. Why are you not pleased?"
Greg's heart dropped.

"I am," he said. "I'm - ... Jesus, as I walked out of that room... I've never been so glad. If he pleads guilty, you won't even have to testify. None of us will. I'm over the moon."

Mycroft didn't move, waiting.

Greg realised he couldn't hide this any longer.

*Please don't freak out. Please. Not after everything.*

*Please.*

Bracing himself, he reached inside his jacket.

"Listen, this - is the absolute last thing you'll want." He pulled out the rolled copy of the Standard, begging his hand not to shake. "But we've - ended up in the bloody paper. I don't know who - ... one of the other diners? There was a girl filming us at one stage - maybe she - ..."

As Mycroft flattened the paper against the table, and cast his eye across it, Greg felt his pulse jolt.

"I mean, this - Sherlock and Pritchard thing has been the story of the week - so I guess it makes sense that there's an interest in what happened, I - I just..."

He watched Mycroft read, unbreathing. Nothing was crossing Mycroft's face. *Please don't panic. Please.* He could see Mycroft's eyes coming up on the final paragraph. Greg clenched his hands beneath the table.

"They've - named you as my - ... a-and I get that this is the opposite of everything you want right now. And I need you to know, if you want to get a correction ordered, or a retraction printed, or - whatever - I'm *fine* with that. *Anything* you need. And I'm sorry."

Mycroft finished reading.

He gave the slightest, tiniest lift of one eyebrow.

Greg's heart collapsed and died in his chest.

"I'm so sorry," he said, in desperation. "I'm - really, *really* sorry. I know this is bad. And I know you'd never - "

The waitress appeared with their coffees. Greg shut up at once. She put them down, smiling, and Mycroft thanked her with a polite murmur.

Greg waited until she was gone.

"Say something," he begged, staring across the table. His heart was trying to choke itself. "Please, Myke. Don't let this screw things up. Not after everything we've been through."

Mycroft reached for his coffee, strangely calm.

He blew across the surface, took a sip, and said,

"A correction will of course be necessary."

Greg's soul twisted.
"Whatever you need," he said. "Can we ring them? Now? Before this hits the other - "

" - given that my brother is, of course a consulting detective..." Mycroft took another sip. "Not a private one."

Greg stuttered to a stop.

Mycroft lifted his eyes over his coffee. They glittered as they looked into Greg's.

Greg hardly dared to speak. "What - what about the rest?"

Mycroft's eyebrow raised but a fraction.

"Greg," he said, gently. Greg's heart thumped in response. "Who do you suppose told them to say 'civil servant'...?"

Greg's jaw dropped.

"You - you contacted - "

"They contacted me, initially." Mycroft took a quiet sip of coffee. "The call came through not long after midday. They'd had the bare bones of the matter from some charming amateur teenage journalist, who was quick enough on the draw to capture most of the engagement on her mobile phone. Their editor recognised me in the footage - we've met a number of times - and she called to ask if I'd care to flesh the story out for them a little... I told her I'd only be too charmed."

Greg stared across the table, wondering if this was the concussion the hospital had warned him about - just delayed.

"You... you - asked them to put - "

Mycroft held his eyes. "Did I overstep myself?"

"But..." Greg couldn't believe it. "Myke, you - know this means - people will - "

Mycroft placed down his coffee with care.

He then opened up the file that he'd brought.

As he turned the paper-clipped pages across the table, Greg watched his fingers shake.

"This is an official form," Mycroft said. Greg looked down at it - details, documents, spaces for a photograph. Large sections had been completed already, Mycroft's neat navy handwriting winding from box-to-box. "It's the first stage in registering a relationship of significance. To my superiors. If you wished to - and there is no obligation for you to do so - it would add you to my file. Officially. Anthea would be able to contact you in the event of an emergency, and you would be authorised to access restricted areas if needed. The process is largely a security procedure, but... you would be listed as my partner. Treated as such. It would afford you certain protections, and... and a great degree of acknowledgement..."

Mycroft glanced up at last, suddenly nervous.

"If you wish," he added. "Only if you wish." He swallowed, reading Greg's expression. "I thought that - in light of recent events, and recent discussions, the... time has come to balance my love of privacy with a much belated recognition of pride. It seemed this would make a fitting first step."
Anxiety filled his eyes.

"I have - much to be proud of. More than I ever thought I would. I - w-will need time to - ... a-and I recognise, fully, that you may not be ready - but, in the hope that you are, I - "

Greg reached across the table.

He took Mycroft's hand - and wrapped their fingers, tight.

A round-eyed softness flooded Mycroft's face. He slipped his fingers through Greg's, curling around each other until no tiny space remained, and held on. A flush crept over his cheeks.

Beyond the front window, the city passed by - cars, taxis and people.

Nobody looked; nobody stared.

Nobody cast them so much as a glance.

Greg squeezed Mycroft's hand until the urge to cry had released its grip on his throat. Mycroft gazed across the table at him, frightened and understanding; he shakily stroked the back of Greg's hand with a thumb. His expression worked to contain what he was feeling. Greg watched every fear struggle in his eyes, and finally soften - and fall away.

For a long time they were quiet together, overwhelmed by these first moments of a brand new world.

Greg then reached for the file beneath their hands.

Mycroft watched, a little nervous, as he picked up and read the first page - his own name written at the top, Mycroft's elegant handwriting: Gregory David Lestrade, with his date-of-birth looped beside it.

"Will you - help me fill these in?" Greg asked, his voice tight.

Mycroft's eyes glossed over. He blinked it away, swallowing.

"Yes," he whispered. "Yes, of course I will."

Greg took a moment to recover the ability to speak. He gripped Mycroft's hand, letting it calm him. "What changed your mind?"

Mycroft took a breath, lowering his eyes. He thought for quite some time.

"The dawning suspicion I've been listening to old ghosts," he said. "Allowing them to dictate my living thoughts..." He bit the inside of his cheek. "My father... Nicholas. They both told me, in their own way, that the world wouldn't hesitate to humiliate and punish me. They warned me to expect the worst of the people who came after them... the very worst."

He hesitated, glancing up into Greg's eyes.

"I'm - now learning that it's safe to expect the best." His gaze ached. "The very best. If one only offers the opportunity."

Greg felt his heart strain. "Your brother?" he said.

Mycroft's face tightened.
"And you. Witnessing you with Nicholas, I - I suddenly seemed to see, properly, for the first time -... and Watson - and Anthea, I..." He closed his eyes, gripping Greg's hand harder. "Kind. All of you, kind. At the very first opportunity offered, kind. And now, I... I see no reason to -"

He shook, breathing in hard.

"God help me. I'm nervous, Greg. I'm terrified. I can't tell you that I'm not. But that's no reason to live as if - ... a-and I wish to give the world a chance, to be kind. To show me. And if cruel things are said, then let them be said. My father's viciousness hurt because I loved him. Nicholas's viciousness hurt because I loved him. The man I love now is kind - kind without question. Kind without fail. No opinion matters to me but yours. And with your support, and your affection, I... I believe I can endure whatever petty cruelty comes my way. It will mean very little."

He looked into Greg's eyes.

"Because I'm loved," he whispered. "Loved without limit." His expression broke. "I'm - prouder of you than I was ever ashamed of myself."

Jesus. Jesus, Jesus. Greg's heart couldn't cope. He had to say it. He couldn't hold it.

"L-Listen," he managed, as he started to shake. Tears threatened to well in his eyes. "I - ... s-shit -... this is - everything for me. What we've got I didn't see it coming. Not in a million years. But - b- but then we just started talking, and the weeks went by, and I - ... a-and now..."

He breathed in, hard. Fuck, fuck.

"I like you," he managed - and watched Mycroft stifle an anxious laugh. He smiled through his panic, gripping Mycroft's hand tighter. "N-No, I - I mean it. I really like you. Christ, I was married to someone who didn't like me - didn't really care if I got hurt, didn't care if I was humiliated - ... but you care. You - you look at me like -..."

He swallowed, trying in desperation to haul himself together.

He couldn't do it.

He'd just have to break.

"You told Pritchard - ... you said - shit - you said you live with a police officer now... a-and I don't know if you were just - ... but if you weren't, and you - you'd maybe think about -"

Mycroft's expression folded. "Greg -"

"I mean, we could - f-find somewhere, or I'll come to yours, or - ... a-and we could -..." He gripped Mycroft's hand, pleading with him. "- ... e-everyday. Every damn day. You and me. Sit on the sofa, every night. Sleep, every night. And I'll always be there when you get home from work, and - and we'll -"

Oh, shit. Shit. I'm crying in a coffee shop. We're in the bloody window.

" - and we'll be together," he said. "Everyday. Please, just - please. Come live with me. Move in with me."

Mycroft pushed back his chair, overwhelmed.

Greg's heart ruptured.
"I don't want you to go," he gasped. Mycroft came around the table, reaching for him. "I don't want to let you go. Oh - shit - "

Their arms found each other.

They dragged themselves together, a hug that hurt. Mycroft's fingers pushed in desperation through his hair. Greg shook, holding onto him tighter than he'd ever held someone in his life, as the café and everything in it vanished in an instant. The world outside of Mycroft fell away.

There was nothing but this.

His best friend - his partner Mycroft, 46, a civil servant.

Mycroft's arms held tight around his shoulders.

"Yes," he whispered in Greg's ear. "I would love to live with you... yes."

"Oh - Christ... " Greg gripped him harder, gasping in relief. "Thank God. Thank Christ. Thank fuck. I love you."

Mycroft shook in his arms.

"Greg, I - I can't tell you how much you - ..." His voice broke. "Oh, God. This is undignified. We're weeping in a café."

Greg nuzzled into Mycroft's neck, his face breaking open in a grin. "Yeah, darlin'... yeah, we are..."

He felt like he was grinning in all of him - everywhere, all over, right down to the soul. It felt like some part of him would always be grinning.

It felt like something amazing had begun.

"Come stay with me," he whispered, pulling back to gaze up at his lover. Mycroft smiled, touching his face. "Tonight. Or I'll come to you, I don't care. We'll do paperwork. Make plans. Cook together. Just you and me."

Mycroft bit his lip.

"My white knight," he murmured.

Greg's heart thumped. He felt his smile glowing in every corner of his soul. "Always, darlin'. Always."

As Mycroft smiled, blushing, some quiet spark of mischief crossed his eyes. He glanced over his shoulder. The other occupants of the coffee house were all engaged in their business. Not one person seemed to have noticed them, even crying and cuddling. The world and all its people didn't mind.

Mycroft looked back at Greg. His gaze flickered, shyly, across Greg's lips.

As he leant down, cupping his jaw, Greg's grin doubled in size.

It felt like a first kiss - gentle, healing, and as soft as early morning rain. Greg tightened his arms around Mycroft's waist, heart aching with happiness as his lover kissed him, wondering if they should just stay here all day - talk, and kiss, and be together. All the worry was over. They were safe, and they were happy - and things would stay that way.
When Mycroft finally drew back from his lips, a pink flush had returned to his cheeks. He cast a quiet glance around the café, ensuring that no-one had taken offence - then stole another kiss from Greg's mouth, a soft brush that made his heart squeeze.

"Do you... need to hurry back?" Mycroft asked, still cradling his jaw.

Greg smiled, biting the corner of his lip.

"I've got time," he said. He gazed across his lover's face, so happy he could see nothing else. "For you, love. I've got all the time in the world."

Mycroft's eyes shone.

"Might I buy my partner a coffee?" he enquired.

Greg grinned.

"Only if I can buy mine a pastry," he said, leaning close for one more kiss.

The End

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, guys... I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did.

I'd like to say a special thank you to Davi for checking the end for me and a thank you to everyone who followed this fic as a work-in-progress. I'm incredibly grateful to you guys for your support - I honestly couldn't do it without you. <3
Thank you all so much for your incredibly kind comments. I'm delighted you enjoyed *Under the Rose*. As you know, all my cliffhangers and angst conceal the fluttering heart of a fluffbunny, who loves a happy ending - and so here follows a little more of one, as a special token of my thanks.

I love you all to bits. Have a fantastic *Soft Smut Sunday*. x

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**Two Months Later**

Greg licked his fingertips as he carried the final plate to the lounge. Atop a large cardboard box, by the glow of a desk lamp sitting on the floor, the table was set for two - sweet and sour pork; chicken chow mein; two disposable plastic cups, and a bottle of three-figure Moët.

As Greg placed down the spring rolls with care, and settled beside Mycroft on the carpet, his lover gave him a look that contained every moment of their busy day - love, exhaustion and bone-deep contentment, all in a single glance.

Greg smiled, accepting the plastic cup he was handed. He held it up.

"Cheers, darlin'."

Mycroft's eyes glittered in the lamplight. "Cheers..."

As they drank, Greg slipped an arm around his waist. Mycroft leant into his side, nestled safe against his shoulder, and reached for a spring roll.

"Still seems an odd requirement," he remarked, with amusement. "Remind me of the precise link between Chinese food and a new home."

Greg smiled, pulling his sweet and sour pork across the box lid towards him. This had been an illuminating day for Mycroft Holmes - he'd learnt all sorts.

"Doesn't have to be Chinese. It can be any takeaway. So long as it's hot food, you don't have to cook it, and you eat it while knackered and sitting on the floor - it's traditional."

Mycroft gave him a wry glance. "Is a furious argument with a furniture retailer also traditional?"

"Yep," said Greg, without hesitation. "Definitely."

"I - fear I rather lost my temper with the gentleman."

"They didn't deliver our bed, beautiful. You had a perfect right to lose your temper."
"I'm not sure what I thought shouting would solve..."

"Are you serious? They're delivering it first thing tomorrow. That's what you solved. If we'd been all nice and understanding, they might have taken another two days..."

Mycroft flushed all the same, winding noodles quietly around his fork.

"It does seem a rather basic duty of a furniture company," he admitted. "To in fact deliver furniture... and they had our moving date a month ago. I confirmed it twice."

"You did, darlin'." Greg kissed his head, fond. "They deserved the sharp end of your tongue. Don't feel bad."

He didn't add that it was the most eloquent execution of a customer service assistant he'd ever seen, and adorable to witness. Mycroft didn't lose his temper often - but when he lost it, he lost it.

Greg loved seeing it.

"We'll be alright tonight," he promised, as Mycroft contented himself with another spring roll. You and your spring rolls... Christ, I love you. "We'll be fine on just the mattress. Get it all cosy, make ourselves a nest... then the bed'll be here in the morning. No worries."

"Mm..." Mycroft leant against his shoulder. "In truth, I... doubt I could have organised the bedroom tonight anyway. I'm rather weary."

"I know, love. Me too. No more moving today. We're here safe. Everything's arrived okay - "

" - except the bed - "

" - except the bed - but the rest's here, and the door's locked. And all we need to do now is relax." Greg smiled, watching Mycroft take a quiet sip of champagne. "We'll get the rest all set up tomorrow."

Mycroft huffed, smiling against the edge of the cup.

"At least I'll be working from home this week. We can take our time."

"Mm hmm. Shall we get your office sorted first? Then you can run the world while I sort out the kitchen."

Mycroft's eyes brightened. "You've been looking forward to the kitchen."

Greg couldn't lie. The first time he cooked breakfast for Mycroft was going to be a special memory - possibly tomorrow morning, possibly wearing only an apron. He'd fallen in love with the kitchen as soon as they saw it - big and bright and gorgeous, laminate flooring and brand new appliances. He was going to grow herbs on the windowsill. They'd have John and Sherlock over for dinner one night this week. He'd put something impressive together, make it good - splash out on nice wine, make an evening of it.

And there'd be Mycroft at his side, in his socks, safe and sound in their gorgeous new home.

Contentment bubbled through Greg's chest. He kissed Mycroft's head, transferred some sweet and sour pork onto the side of his plate, and said,

"We're going to be happy here. Stupidly happy. I can feel it."
"Sickeningly happy?" Mycroft suggested, amused. "How long before we're horrifying the
neighbours with our mawkish romanticism?"

"Days," said Greg. "If not hours." He reached for his plastic cup of champagne. "Shame you're not
in the office this week - I could kiss you goodbye on the doorstep every morning."

Mycroft smiled, cuddling into his side. "Something we can save for next week, perhaps."

"Mmhm. M'looking forward to it." Greg drank, wondering if they'd be talked about in the street:
the charming gay couple who'd just moved in, a civil servant and his policeman. Changing his next
of kin with HR had been one of the happiest moments of his life. "Did you get everything sorted
out with work in the end?"

"I believe so." Mycroft tore a square of kitchen towel from the roll, carefully wiping the oil from
his hands. "Anthea will double-check everything tomorrow... she might call round in the evening
with files that need my attention."

"S'fine, darlin'. We'll be in." A thought occurred. "Shall I get her a key cut? So she can come and
go."

Mycroft made a little noise of amusement.

"What?" said Greg, delighted by the sound.

"I - rather like this."

"What d'you mean?"

"This... normality. It's very good for me." Mycroft gave him a shy glance. "I could have arranged
all this to be done for us. Every pair of socks to their new drawer. Every plant found a place. Every
painting hung."

Greg felt his heart squeeze.

"I - don't know if I'd have wanted that." He looked into Mycroft's eyes, pained. "Would have felt
weird, just to - ... it's our home. I want to set it up."

Mycroft's eyes shone. "I know," he said. He leant up, nosing at Greg's jaw. "I'm glad, Greg. I
wouldn't have it any other way."

Greg couldn't fight a smile.

"Love you," he murmured. He slipped his arms around Mycroft, pulling him close into a hug. "You
know that? I love you to pieces. I'm so happy right now. Nothing in the world could make me
happier. I mean it."

Mycroft sighed against his shoulder, cuddling close. Greg rubbed slowly at his back.

"Almost can't believe we made it," he said. "All the crap we went through..."

Mycroft shuddered. "Seems a lifetime ago."

"Mm hmm." Greg kissed the side of his neck. "I worried, y'know. Early on. Thought you'd just -
decide I was too much trouble, and send me on my way... don't know if I'd have been alright after
that."
"Never say that to me." Mycroft tightened his arms around Greg's shoulders, breathing in sharply. "Never. You are the bedrock of my life. You have been since the start." He hesitated. "My world fell apart in July, Greg. You held it safe around me."

Greg grinned, his heart pattering. "And now we're here," he murmured.

Mycroft shivered, overwhelmed for a moment. "I can hardly believe it."

"It'll seem more real when we wake up tomorrow. Always a funny feeling, first night in a new house... you have to have a shower and a cup of tea before it feels like you're staying. Put some books on a shelf, clean the kitchen cupboards out, hoover it, then it's yours."

"Dear God." Mycroft's shoulders shook. "We live together. You - live with me. Here. You will always be here."

Greg felt his throat thicken.

"Yeah, darlin'," he whispered. He smiled, rubbing down Mycroft's back. "There'll be no getting rid of me now."

Mycroft was quiet for a moment, his fingers gathering in the back of Greg's shirt.

"I would never wish to," he managed. He hesitated. "Greg, I don't - foresee a time that I'll - ... I mean to say, I... know that I'll - always want to - " He swallowed. "Oh, God. Tell me you understand."

Greg closed his eyes.

"I do, beautiful," he whispered. He wrapped Mycroft tighter in his arms, squeezing him. "'Course I understand - and it's the same for me. You know that? You're just - ... Jesus, you're everything. You make the whole world easy. M'not going anywhere. Ever. If you drive me off with a stick, I'll come back. If you put six metre high walls around this place, I'll find a way in. I'm here for good now, darlin'. Make yourself at home."

Mycroft shook in desperation. Greg felt his throat contract around the words.

"I - like myself. With you." Mycroft's voice cut. "That is no small thing."

Jesus. Greg nuzzled into the crook of his neck. "I know, love... means the world to me."

Mycroft kissed his temple, shyly.

"Our food's growing cold," he whispered. "And I'm unsure which box contains the microwave..."

Greg smiled. "Looks like I'll have to let go of you, then. Should warn you. Not gonna be easy."

"You could let go on a purely temporary basis, perhaps..."

"'kay..." Greg grinned, enjoying the gentle stroking of his shoulders. "Then bed?"

"Mm." Mycroft's lips curved against his brow. "Then bed."

They finished their food together in happy quiet. As Mycroft took the champagne to the fridge, Greg checked the doors front and back. He set the security alarm - it was first thing he'd told the estate agent they needed. Mycroft's people had made sure it was operational a week ago, and they'd be checking it once a month from now on.
In all honesty, it was unnecessary.

It would be many years before Nick Pritchard wore anything but a prison jumpsuit. The second he set foot outside the gate, he'd be watched by police and Mycroft's people - every step, every movement - and he'd have no powerful friends to shield him anymore. Mycroft had instigated a full investigation into the financial conduct of Pritchard's company. They were discovering more and more illegal practice by the day.

If Pritchard ever came looking for Mycroft, he'd find him safe inside a fortress, loved and happy - and Greg would be waiting at the gate. It would be years before it happened, if at all.

For tonight, there wasn't a thing to worry about in the world.

Greg had packed an overnight bag for them - towel, shower gel and shampoo. It had been a long day of hauling boxes, and they'd want to feel clean. Their new bathroom was gorgeous, and the bath more than big enough for two.

They cuddled in the hot water until Mycroft was on the verge of falling asleep, cradled against Greg's chest and yawning every few minutes.

"C'mon..." Greg whispered at last, tweaking out the plug with his toes. "S'get you settled down to sleep, darlin'. Been a long day."

Mycroft shivered, yawned, and with a murmur acquiesced.

It was a bit like camping, Greg thought, nudging their king-size mattress safe into a corner of the master bedroom. He laid their bedding out on it, plumped the pillows, and plugged a lamp in nearby, in case they needed it in the night.

As he switched it on, its glow fell gently across their nest - unorthodox, but cosy. *Perfect.*

He heard the bathroom door open behind him.

"D'you find your toothbrush in the bag alright, darlin'?" He looked around.

Mycroft came out of the bathroom - naked, a little timid, carrying the toiletries bag.

"Yes... thank you." He blushed. "You were kind to pack it."

Greg smiled. "S'alright," he said, and patted the nest. "In you get."

Mycroft's eyes sparkled as he approached. He knelt down, placed the bag beside the bed, and crawled with care onto the mattress. "I'm going in first, am I?"

"Mm hmm," said Greg. "So I'm nearest the door. You know how this works by now, beautiful."

Mycroft nestled beneath the duvet, amused. He arranged his pillows beneath his head, his hair still damp - there would be curls in the morning.

Greg couldn't wait.

He eased beneath the duvet, got comfortable, and let Mycroft snuggle into his arms.

For a few moments there was quiet, as Greg tucked the covers around Mycroft's shoulders to keep him warm. He hadn't seen Mycroft's pyjamas in weeks now.
Mycroft then kissed rather shyly at his jaw, and whispered, "Darling?"

Greg stroked back his hair. "Mm?"

Mycroft stirred gently closer. He slipped his arms around Greg's waist, and slipped an ankle around his calf.

"Darling..." he said again, his voice soft.

Greg's stomach gave a squeeze. *Mm hmm?* He let his hand run gently down Mycroft's back, following the bare curve of his spine to his tailbone; the hopeful shiver raised his pulse. Mycroft began to kiss along his jaw, dotting gentle presses of his lips as Greg stroked down his thigh and back up again, just passing his palm over Mycroft's skin. He'd thought Mycroft would be too tired - too drained, after a day of co-ordinating vans and fretting about clumsy delivery men.

Instead, his lover gave a little moan, leaning restlessly into his body.

Greg's eyes closed; he placed a kiss to Mycroft's shoulder.

"You not sleep just yet, sweetheart?" he whispered.

It was a language they'd built over two long months now - gentle phrases, soft things Mycroft could say.

As Mycroft shook his head, kissing at Greg's jaw, Greg felt his chest fill with warmth.

"Want me to settle you?" he murmured, and let his hand slide to Mycroft's rump, caressing with light, loving fingertips.

Mycroft swallowed, breathing in. "Mm hmm."

*God almighty, I'll never have enough of you... never, never...*

"What might settle you, darlin'?" Greg soothed, his voice gentle at Mycroft's ear. These words were secrets; they were special. "Would you like my mouth a little while, maybe?"

Mycroft shuddered, his breath catching in his throat. His hands curled at Greg's shoulders.

"And - a-and fingers..." he whispered.

Greg's stomach curled with protective heat. "Mmhm? My fingers, too?" He eased Mycroft gently onto his back, stroking his mouth along the column of his throat as he trembled. "If I just look after you a while... see if we can settle you... would that be alright?"

Mycroft's chest rose and fell as Greg kissed his way down it; his hands appeared at Greg's shoulders, timid, gently gripping.

"I love you," Mycroft whispered, and gasped as Greg mouthed beneath his navel. "O-Oh - ohh..."

Greg let his eyes close, joy stirring through his veins.

"I love you, too..." He ran his hand along Mycroft's thigh, stroking, as he took a little time to tease the bottom of Mycroft's stomach. His cock nudged at Greg's collarbones, filling already; Greg's tongue ached to soothe it. "I love that this makes you so hard, sweetheart... love doing this for you... love taking care of you this way..."
As he dipped his head, brushing his mouth across the head of Mycroft's erection, his lover's thighs tensed. He let out a little moan of excitement, shaking and shy. Greg flashed the crown gently with his tongue.

"Mm hmm?" he hummed, surrounding Mycroft with his hand.

Mycroft's fingers slipped, tentatively, into his hair. "Mm hmm..."

Greg caressed again with his tongue, his eyes closing over in contentment, then gathered Mycroft into his mouth.

Two months of learning Mycroft's language - two months of settling him to sleep: gentle fingertips on his thighs, slow mouth and steady licks, easy rhythm and resting. Mycroft liked it when he hummed. He liked long minutes of barely moving at first, and to know that Greg was alright - to know Greg didn't mind. When he felt safe enough to moan, when he began to rock anxiously into Greg's mouth, Greg knew it was time.

Two fingers - smooth and easy, in-and-out. Usually, two was enough. Mycroft liked the feeling of being gently fucked. He liked a lot of lube, and he liked just a little slower than his breath, and as he liked it more and more his hands tightened in Greg's hair. His shy rocking developed a tremble. His moans grew quieter, higher-pitched, threaded with whimpers of Greg's name. *Not long now, sweetheart... relax, and let it come... let me see...*

A sudden shiver tensed Mycroft's hands. He stiffened; his voice cracked.

"Greg - "

Greg opened his eyes. He raised his head, letting Mycroft's cock slip from his mouth. "Mm, darlin'?"

Mycroft was close. Greg knew that look - flushed, almost frightened, his pupils huge. As Greg met his eyes, Mycroft's expression contacted.

"I - ..." He inhaled, tensing. "W-With you."

Greg bit his lip. "Mm?"

"With you." Mycroft began to shake. "Please. With you. Please."

Greg watched his face as he eased two fingers out, and gently stroked with three. Mycroft reached for the sheet either side of him, knotted it within his hands and breathed in.

His knuckles whitened as Greg coaxed three fingers inside. His head fell back. He exhaled, and didn't move.

It wasn't pain.

It was trying not to come.

Greg held still for almost a minute. He watched, breathing slowly, as Mycroft twisted the sheets within his grasp in utter silence. He didn't dare thrust. It would be the end, if he did.

At last, a shudder coursed its way through Mycroft's body.

"Now," he whispered. "Oh, God. Now."
Greg carefully withdrew his fingers. He rubbed some of their slickness around his prick as he moved up the bed, barely breathing.

Their foreheads pressed; Mycroft's legs wrapped comfortably around his waist.

"Are you still close?" Greg whispered, lining himself up. His heart was pounding.

Mycroft trembled. "Yes..." He bit down into his lip, his face twisting, his arms surrounding Greg's torso tightly. Greg slowly began to push inside. "Oh, fuck...!"

Greg faltered.

"Good 'fuck'," Mycroft gasped, shaking. "Good 'fuck'. Please. Please. Please, just - "

Heart pounding, Greg took a risk - and eased inside to the root, deep, one smooth and restless stroke.

 Fuck -

Mycroft's face contorted. His fingers dug into Greg's back; he gripped, arched, and let out a sound that set Greg's every nerve on fire. It was a moan, cracked into pieces. It came from the soul. It was pleasure, raw and overwhelming, and it was beautiful.

 Fuck - tight - fuck, oh fuck...  

Mycroft's body squeezed, hard - and for a second, Greg thought this was it. He held himself completely still, watching his lover shake beneath him.

"Darlin'?" he whispered. He realised he was shaking too. Mycroft's desperate panting almost broke his heart. "D'you want to wait?"


"Y-You sure?"

"G-Greg - please - fuck - "

That was answer enough. Greg braced his weight on his forearms, reached his mouth down to Mycroft's, and began to thrust.

 Oh, fucking - oh - fuuuck -

Two months of trial and error; two months of exploring - one conclusion. Being inside Mycroft made Greg come. It made him come hard, and fast, and nothing on this planet was going to change that. Mycroft's body was silk-smooth heat, wrapping Greg so tightly he couldn't cope, and the sensation of pushing himself gently through that feeling over and over was more than he'd ever be able to fight. It made things no easier that Mycroft loved having Greg inside him. The sight of his lover's face, wracked with enjoyment, overlaid with his urgent whimpers and moans had the power to finish Greg in minutes. No position made it any easier. Delaying creams didn't work. Stopping and breathing grew ridiculous after the third time. There was a technique online that involved withdrawing, stopping and pinching. It worked, in that it was so utterly bloody weird - and only until the moment he slid inside Myke again, at which point he needed to come more than he needed to breathe.

It would maybe have been a problem - except that Mycroft loved it.
"Come in me, Greg..." Oh, Jesus. The breathless moan in his ear made him shudder - warm, tickling and close, Myke trembling beneath him as they moved. Teeth grazed against his earlobe, gentle and restless; his stomach leapt. *Fuck, fuck.* He wanted to shatter. He wanted to erupt. "Come inside me..."

*Oh fuck, just another minute. Please. Fuck.*

Mycroft shivered, sweeping his tongue behind Greg's ear.

"Come fucking me," he breathed. "Please, darling... I want it..."

It was that word - 'fucking' - whispered in his ear, as soft as *'I love you',* perfectly pronounced in Mycroft's gorgeous molten voice that finished Greg. He buried his face in his lover's neck as the feeling broke him open, as it ruptured and wracked its way through him in long, pounding pulses, almost stinging in its intensity. He could hear himself gasping and swearing; he could feel Mycroft's thighs gripping around his waist, cradling him.

Sharp stripes of heat suddenly hissed down his back, searing through the aching relief of his orgasm. He realised with a groan they were scratches; Mycroft was arching beneath him and crying out.

Panting, shaking, Greg listened to his lover come. Mycroft whimpered for him, sobbed and gasped his name, and held onto Greg through every wave of it, pulling Greg as close as he could, grasping his back as if afraid they would fall.

As he began to subside, Greg reached down to kiss him.

Mycroft's fingers wound into his hair.

Returning to the nest with a hand towel, damp with warm water, his lover gazed up at him as if he were some kind of god.

"Was that alright?" Greg whispered, crawling back beneath the covers.

Mycroft parted his thighs. He laid back, stirring as Greg gently cleaned him. His eyes closed.

"You are magnificent..." he whispered.

Greg's heart ached. "Yeah?"

"Yes..." Mycroft shivered, drawing a deep breath. "Oh, God... I think that's getting better each time..."

A grin broke over Greg's face. He cleaned Mycroft's stomach for him, gazing down in the darkness.

"Just practice," he whispered. "Finding out what we both like. That's all."

Mycroft's lips curved in a smile. "What I like is you..."

"Careful, darlin'... won't be room in here for furniture, if my ego gets any bigger..."

"We can live without furniture..." Mycroft stirred, stretched as Greg tossed the towel out of bed, and cuddled immediately into his lover's arms. Their skin came together, flushed and warm; the sound Mycroft made was of utter contentment. "Mmhm... thank you..."
Greg's heart squeezed happily. "Beautiful, you... don't have to thank me for sex."

Mycroft nestled closer, kissing the tender spot behind his ear.

"You take excellent care of me," he said, softly. "Why wouldn't I thank you? I'd thank you if you held a door for me... I'll thank you when you make love to me."

*Put it that way.* Greg stroked between his shoulders, smiling, and let his lungs fill with a slow and happy breath. *Christ, I'm so lucky... how did I get this lucky?*

As they cuddled in the darkness, and Mycroft's pulse began to slow, a thought swirled softly though Greg's mind. It was a thought he'd had more and more as the months went by. He'd never dared voice it until now - but this was their home, and they'd said 'always'.

It felt safe enough to ask.

"Darlin'," he murmured, his voice gentle. "Are you asleep?"

Mycroft stirred. "Not quite..."

"'kay..." Greg closed his eyes, taking a steady breath. "Now we're living together... I - wondered. Wanted to talk about something. Just - for the future."

"Mm?"

*Christ, how to phrase this?* Greg thought about it for a moment, wishing his pulse would go easy on him.

"How traditional are you?" he asked at last.

He felt Mycroft breathe. "I... wear pocket-squares, darling. I own sock garters."

Greg's mouth quirked. It gave him the courage to carry on. "How about... with other things? Not just clothes, I mean."

Mycroft gently kissed his neck. He took a moment to answer.

"Always found tradition rather comforting," he said. Greg's heart fluttered tightly in response. "These things can bring a great deal of reassurance."

"Yeah?" *Jesus. Jesus, please..."* Darlin', if - someday - when we're settled in here, and when it's a good time for us both..."

*Christ. Christ."

"If I maybe asked you a question," Greg managed, his chest tight. "Would that - be something you'd want me to do?"

Mycroft didn't speak.

His fingers curled, shaking, in the back of Greg's hair.

"I won't ever leave you," he whispered. Greg's heart strained. "I wouldn't cope, Greg. I couldn't... i-if you weren't - " His voice broke. "There wouldn't be happiness for me anymore. Only silence. I'll stay with you for every moment that you'll let me."
"A-And if I - wanted that to be every moment," Greg said, willing his voice not to shake. "If I like the idea of it being official, someday... is that something you'd want, too?"

Mycroft drew a deep breath.

"Yes," he whispered. Greg's heart vaporised. "Yes. That would be... yes, Greg."

Greg tightened his arms.

His eyes closed with joy.

"'kay." Grinning in the darkness, he kissed Mycroft's shoulder. "Just so I know," he murmured. "So I can... plans, someday."

When Mycroft spoke, it was barely audible. "When?"

*Jesus. Yes.*

Yes, yes, yes.

"When d'you think you'd...?"

He felt his lover shake in his arms. "Don't make me be the one to say it," Mycroft begged, a tight whisper. "Please."

Greg's heart twisted. He pressed a kiss to Mycroft's shoulder, inhaling. "If it happened before your next birthday, maybe... would that be too soon?"

"Oh, God." Mycroft swallowed. "No. Not too soon."

"Are you s-sure? Before I - "

"Yes. Yes, I'm sure."

"Don't - let me pressure you to - i-if you don't - "

"You're not," Mycroft said, and wrapped his arms around Greg tightly. "Not for a moment. You're never pressured me into a single decision, Greg. Not once in my life. You wouldn't be pressuring me into that one." He hesitated. "I - would like to be - ... before I'm fifty, perhaps. That - seems like a wonderful thought."

Greg breathed it deep.

"Alright," he whispered. He stroked his nose against Mycroft's neck, his heart drumming against his ribs. "Something to think about."

"Mm..." Mycroft shivered. "Perhaps rather often. And in great detail."

Greg grinned again, so happy that he wanted to run from room to room. "Yeah?"

He felt Mycroft tremble against his cheek. "Mm..." There came a pause. "Great detail, Greg."

*Christ. I need to buy a ring.*

"Leave it with me," Greg whispered, kissing his shoulder.

"I shall." Mycroft took a moment, then murmured against his jaw in the darkness. "Darling?"
"Yeah, sweetheart?" he said, softly.

He felt Mycroft's mouth curl in a smile. "Thank you."

_God almighty_. Greg tilted his head, and caught Mycroft's mouth with his own. They kissed slowly and softly in the quiet, stroking each other's faces and chests with gentle hands, until he could feel exhaustion ebbing over Mycroft once more.

As they drew apart, he whispered,

"You're everything to me." He searched his lover's sleepy gaze - gorgeous blue-grey, a few inches from his own. _I'm going to love you all my life. Every day. Every single day, I'll make sure you know it. You'll know it like you know your own name. "I love you... I love you more than the world."

Mycroft's eyes filled with stars. "I love you too..." he whispered, biting into his lip.

Greg's heart swelled.

"Let's get some sleep," he said, stroking Mycroft's lip with a thumb. "Big day tomorrow... lots to do." He grinned, dropping Mycroft a wink. "First day of the rest of our lives."

Beaming, Mycroft cuddled into his chest.

"Goodnight, Greg," he whispered. His arms gently tightened. "Sleep well... I love you very much."

Greg reached out from their nest, and switched off the lamp.

"Goodnight, beautiful... sweet dreams. See you in the morning."

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