End Game

by Mottlemoth

Summary

Mycroft has a problem. After a drunken New Year's Eve at Baker Street gets out of hand, this preoccupation with Greg Lestrade doesn't seem to be going away. He makes Greg an irresistible offer: seven days alone together in paradise, to be with each other and exhaust the craving.

Sadly for Mycroft, Greg comes with irresistible offers of his own—and seven days in paradise might not be enough.

Notes

This story is dedicated with enormous love and thanks to everyone over on Tumblr, where the early parts of this story appeared.
'Blue Monday,' as common parlance now had it: the most depressing day of the year, as determined by what the newspapers had the gall to term science. Their reasoning was a baseless manipulation of various skewed social surveys, whipped up with a pinch of crime statistics and a misunderstanding of the suicide rate. They cited the fortnight now spent back at work after the festive period, with the weather at its worst and no hope of a bank holiday for months. Payday remained a stretch away. Christmas credit card bills arrived daily on the doormat.

It was nonsense, of course.

For one, Mycroft liked his work - as unthinkable as that might be to the general populace. He preferred an indoor environment, and so for him the British weather was welcome to act according to its whims. Bank holidays gave him a migraine with the disruption to work; 'payday' was hardly a critical feature of his life. None of it mattered in the slightest.

And yet it was January the fifteenth, and Mycroft couldn't function.

He was distracted and unsettled, worn thin, grey in his face and black in his mood. It bothered him. It made no sense. He was neither ill nor overly taxed with work. Sherlock was in excellent health. The Christmas period had been... restful. There was no good reason he should be despairing over a perfectly ordinary Monday.

Reports to read were suddenly unbearable; decisions to make - inconsequential; meetings to attend - unendurable. His thoughts strayed at the slightest chance, and he resented the smallest interruption. His appetite had vanished. He didn't know if he wanted stimulation or quiet, tea or coffee, warmth or fresh air. He feared it was becoming apparent to all who passed him in the corridor that something was keenly, critically wrong with him. He felt imbalanced; he felt restless. He saw it reflected back at him in every face he passed.

The afternoon's session with the security council devolved into its customary farce. It was nothing new. Usually, Mycroft would sweep into the ego-riddled mess after a few minutes and put an end to it - haul discussion back onto some semblance of a schedule, so they might all leave here with their sanity intact.

Today, he couldn't bring himself to care.

He hadn't the strength. He let the fools argue, drifting free from it all. He gazed down at the briefing document, seeing none of it, hearing not a word, as his thoughts wandered where they would. He stroked his fountain pen with his thumb.

Why was he so absent from his own head?

Why in heaven's name could he not fight this?

After fifteen minutes of silent reflection - chasing emotional responses to their origins, considering all possibilities, and allowing himself at last to see the pattern he was so reluctant to see - Mycroft came
to a single conclusion.

It was not a wanted conclusion - but it was the only one that fit with all the facts.

And now that he'd acknowledged it, he would have to act on it.

Disruption to his work was a line he'd never thought he'd cross. It could not be allowed to continue, however difficult dealing with this might be. He had no other choice in the matter.

He was going to have to fuck Greg Lestrade.

The problem could be traced to its source at Baker Street - drinks, on New Year's Eve.

Attendance had been a howling error.

Not that it had felt like it at the time.

Mycroft had been rather pleased to receive an invitation, and taken it as a sign of a fraternal bridge being built - Watson's stabilising influence, perhaps. The man continued to impress Mycroft. Monitoring Sherlock through a network of associates was expensive and unreliable. Being invited there to do it in person was far preferable. Sherlock had barely spoken a word to anyone all evening, of course - occupied himself with the violin in the window, watching the snow - but it was a genial gathering nonetheless.

Mycroft had made a discreet examination of the flat not long after arriving, and uncovered no signs of recent drug use whatsoever. Sherlock also seemed to be eating regularly, sleeping most nights, and bathing at least once a day.

It had put his older brother in an excellent mood.

He found himself contentedly alone by the fire, feeling oddly fond of the fairy lights and the clutter, sipping a plastic cup of Mrs Hudson's punch as he considered the curious collection of souls that his Sherlock had now gathered around himself. They were all of no threat, and seemed without exception to be dedicated to Sherlock's well-being. Glancing around them, Mycroft had - for the first time in many years - the conviction that his brother was in safe hands.

It was immensely settling, and a good sign for the year ahead.

As he finished the last of his punch, Mycroft became aware that he was being approached. He looked up to find a pair of dark brown eyes, sparking with a smile, and a hand being offered out to him.

"Mycroft -"

"Inspector Lestrade." He took the man's hand; they shook, functional and bracing. "Good evening."

"Please - 'Greg'. It's good to see you. Didn't know you were coming."

Lestrade had proposed the informality of first names before.

Mycroft chose once more not to honour it. A certain professionalism with his brother's associates
would always be preferable, to allow Sherlock to feel at ease in their company.

Not that maintaining such a distance was easy in the case of Lestrade.

The man had a certain affability and honesty that were hard to resist. It was the eyes, Mycroft thought - those large, dark eyes - a certain seriousness in his face, which in social company seemed to soften - a quick and careful mind beneath. Lestrade had a grounded sort of resilience about him, and he'd been an invaluable influence upon Sherlock this year. He seemed that rarest of rare things: neither intimidated nor alarmed by Sherlock's gifts, and more than willing to be patient with the personality that accompanied them.

When he'd first heard of Sherlock's connection to a Scotland Yard inspector named Lestrade, Mycroft had worried that his brother was being exploited in some way.

A few minutes' conversation, and all his fears were laid to rest.

Lestrade was not a calculating man.

He seemed sincerely fond of Sherlock - protective, even at an early stage - and he had the patience to provide Sherlock with reliable, long-term support. It was a support that Sherlock sorely needed. A respect for the authority of the law would not go amiss, either.

As far as desirable role models for his brother went, Mycroft could not have asked for better.

Though, if Lestrade could have been slightly less aesthetic, it might have made him easier to encounter socially.

The heterosexuality helped - a reassuring restriction of the possible - but God alive, the man was exquisitely crafted. The chaos of human genetics could sometimes stray far too close to art. Somewhere in the depths of time, when Mycroft had been young and mindless and free to dwell on such things, he'd liked characterful eyes. He'd liked broad shoulders and boyish chins. Even the voice - that pretty edge of smoke, and a laugh that was East End London to its heart - had the ability to tug his thoughts in impermissible directions.

But it was New Year's Eve, and Mycroft owed the man a great deal - and thanks were due.

Lestrade was utterly gracious as Mycroft thanked him - grinning, sliding his hands into his pockets, and assuring Mycroft that his efforts towards Sherlock's welfare posed no inconvenience. He said he was glad that he could help. He cared about Sherlock, he said; he understood it was easy to worry. Mycroft thanked him nonetheless, and apologised for any trouble he might have been caused.

In the time that they'd been talking, Mrs Hudson had refilled Mycroft's cup without his notice. He'd been planning to make a discreet exit soon - but short of pouring the woman's punch into an unsuspecting pot plant, it seemed he was now staying a little longer.

Lestrade asked him how work was - then answered his own question with a grin, supposing that Mycroft couldn't say.

Wishing to facilitate conversation, he asked Lestrade the same question in kind. Tiring, Lestrade admitted - a 'ball-ache', sometimes - paperwork and procedures. A long case with no conclusive end had made him weary.

They began to chat.
After his third glass of punch, Mycroft started wondering precisely what Mrs Hudson had put in it - and if it were entirely legal. The stuff was nearly a fire hazard. They were still standing by the fireplace talking, and Lestrade was asking about the new Audi in which Mycroft had arrived; about his trip to New York, back in November; about what Sherlock had been like as a child.

Mycroft couldn't stop staring at his bloody jaw.

The slight shade of stubble there was... distracting. Tactile. Lestrade's eyes were so dark that his pupils seemed permanently dilated, and he'd scuffed his hair a little by running his hands through it as they talked. He laughed his East End laugh at Mycroft's every punch-fuelled flash of wit, and kept refilling Mycroft's glass to the brim.

Mycroft recalled with surprise that he'd meant to stay for one drink, wish everyone a prosperous new year, then make his exit.

Then it was suddenly long past eleven, and he and Lestrade were sitting on the couch together, ties loosened, plastic cups still in hand. Lestrade was explaining to him in detail how to get puff pastry to co-operate. The trick was apparently to freeze one's utensils beforehand and cut straight down - never at an angle.

Mycroft didn't usually care to receive advice from other people, even on matters as trivial as culinary techniques. They rarely had anything substantial to add to his knowledge.

Now all he wanted in the world was to hear more about puff pastry.

The rest of the room suddenly started counting down.

It was testament to Mycroft's distracted state - and to Mrs Hudson's bloody punch - that it took him until six to realise what in God's name was going on. John Watson was hurrying to hand round champagne. Lestrade began to count down too, excited. Conversation stopped.

Three. Two - one - and the brand new year ticked over.

It was 2018; it was met with rowdy cheers.

Mycroft winced at the noise, smiling all the same, and took the champagne that Dr Watson passed to him. "Thank you," he mouthed, inaudible over the racket. Watson toasted him, and drank.

Mycroft had the glass halfway to his mouth when arms suddenly wrapped themselves around him.


Two seconds into the year, and time screeched to an irretrievable stop. It was over. The universe had ended. It was done. Mycroft's soul heaved as it found itself suddenly in Gregory Lestrade's arms. It let out a silent groan of longing that took the breath from his lungs. He felt his every primitive instinct take flame at once - one flash of fire, two seconds and he was gone, ignited into nothing. The man was grinning into his neck, hugging him - hugging him, for God's sake - and he smelled so male that Mycroft wanted to expire on the spot. He'd come straight from work; he hadn't changed his shirt.

Mycroft wanted to rip the thing from him at once.
Lestrade's arms were tight, and his shoulders were solid and warm - all muscle. He was now rubbing Mycroft's back - those large, masculine hands, moving fondly between his shoulder blades. Mycroft couldn't breathe.

He couldn't cope.

He clung onto his glass of champagne, and succeeded. He clung onto his senses, and failed.

After what felt like an age, there came a last thump on his back - a final squeeze - and Lestrade let him go.

Mrs Hudson had come hurrying over for her first hug of the year.

As Lestrade bundled her up, laughing, Mycroft drained his glass of champagne in one wide-eyed swig.

The year wasn't even ten seconds old - and he'd just been emotionally compromised, to such an extent it had probably registered on the Richter scale. He found himself overwhelmed by the force of his response.

It crossed his mind immediately that the thing to do was leave - feign a cigarette break, and call his driver - remove himself from this place at once.

In weeks to come, when Mycroft looked back, he would realise this was the moment that he'd doomed himself. He could have walked away - and if he had, the situation would not have reached the stage that it did. A long night could have been spent, regretting his rash decision to socialise, mortifying himself against such future idiocy, and learning a valuable lesson.

As it was, he found himself taking a second glass of champagne from Dr Watson - with the deepest of gratitude, shaking slightly as he drank it, pale as old paper and quite sure he'd just been altered on a cellular level.

Lestrade asked him, grinning, where he'd been this time last year.

Mycroft couldn't remember.

He couldn't really be certain he'd even existed last year.

Molly Hooper came bouncing over for a hug of Lestrade. She topped up both their glasses, and the night wore on.

By two AM, the rest of the gathering was on the decline around them. The other guests were descending the alcoholic spectrum from jubilance into slumber.

Mycroft Holmes was still very much awake.

And he couldn't stop staring at the wretched man.

They were sitting far too close on the couch now - sprawled upon it, having the kind of inebriated conversation that Mycroft hadn't taken part in since his early twenties. Lestrade's laugh had become so dirty that it raised a coiling, palpable heat in Mycroft's abdomen each time he made it - which was
often. He was watching Mycroft with a lazy, easy glitter in his gaze - as if the very sight of him felt good; as if he was enjoyable just to look at. They'd possibly consumed more alcohol together than Mycroft had all year.

And Lestrade's eyes were so dark - almost black.

"Are you gay?" Lestrade asked, apropos of nothing.

His voice came soft; it was for Mycroft alone to hear.

Mycroft gazed into his eyes, now so drunk that every breath felt like a sigh.

"Yes," he mumbled. *I haven't voiced that in years,* he thought.

"D'you have a boyfriend?" Lestrade asked, pressing the edge of the cup into his lower lip.

Mycroft looked down into his last inch of punch.

"No," he said, quietly.

Years beyond count, since a regular partner.

Over a year since... company.

The last time had been much like the rest.

A night's distraction - a night's relief. The middle of the Korea incident. Anthea had contracted glandular fever just before, and looking back, he patently hadn't been able to cope - exhausted already with the added burden of translation, then suffering the loss of his assistant.

He'd ended up longing to be reminded he was human.

A Tuesday. A hotel. A man, whose discretion had been secured with a material gesture of goodwill - a man whose obvious addiction to prescription painkillers, alcoholic father, and history of teenage self-harm, had been impossible to put out of Mycroft's mind. He'd paid the gentleman well, and he'd asked no unkindness of him - no indignity - no cruelty.

Just his skin, for a short while. Just his warmth.

Minutes after the man left, as he showered numbly in the dark, Mycroft had realised he'd wanted eye contact too.

But it seemed a strange and invasive demand to make - even of someone who'd probably been paid to provide every intimacy that two men could share. "And please let me look at you," felt like a plea far too far.

Mycroft had realised he'd be longing for that, the next time - and it was most unlikely he would get it. Since then, even when he'd grown lonely, the thought had kept him from making that unbearable phone call.

He hated it. He hated himself for it.

It was his only option - but all the same, he hated it.

"You should," Lestrade murmured, dragging Mycroft from the lonely, guilty grey swamp of his thoughts.
"Should...?"

_That smile, Mycroft thought. Those eyes._

"Should have a boyfriend," Lestrade said. His gaze lingered on Mycroft's mouth. "Miss my boyfriends. Not since before Angela. Christ... I miss that. Just keeping it quiet... just the two of you."

Mycroft's stomach turned at once into rock.

He didn't dare speak.

Lestrade closed his eyes a moment, stirring against the sofa.

"Something easy," he mumbled. "Stay in bed all weekend. Fuck until it hurts. Switch, and keep going..."

He lifted his glass to his lips with a sigh, and emptied it - then met Mycroft's gaze over the rim.

"D'you know what I mean?" he asked, his voice low.

His eyes lingered.

Mycroft's heart ached.

He'd never wanted to slide on top of someone so much in his life. Lestrade would taste like punch and smoke and poor decisions. His hands would be restless and demanding, and Mycroft would give them whatever the hell they wanted. He would gaze at Mycroft like that, while they...

Gaze at him... breathe his breath with him - let Mycroft kiss him, and touch him where he liked... gently say Mycroft's name.

A man to make love with who knew his name.

It was unthinkable.

"Security risk," Mycroft managed, closing eyes. He couldn't bear it. He was so drunk that he felt like he could breathe purple flames, and he couldn't bear to see Lestrade looking at him like that. _How good it would feel_, he thought. _How real._ "I - I am not permitted a - ..."

"A boyfriend?"

_How easily he uses that word._ "N-No. My - position makes it - ..."

Lestrade's voice softened with sadness. "Don't you ever get to...?"

Mycroft threw back the last inch of his punch. _No more alcohol_, he thought. _Had entirely enough._ "S-Sometimes."

He opened his eyes in time to see Lestrade's mouth curve. "Yeah?"

His stomach twitched. "Yes."

"That's good." Lestrade stretched against the sofa again, sleepy. He reached for a nearby bottle of soft drink. "M'glad for you... glad you get to have some fun, at least." He gazed at Mycroft as he unscrewed the cap, smiling through his lashes. "You should relax more, you know? Like this. You're interesting."
Mycroft raised an eyebrow, barely in control of his face anymore. "Interesting?"

"Mmh. Really interesting." Lestrade smiled at a sudden thought, snorting. He lifted the entire bottle to his mouth and drank. "You'll forget about this in the morning," he sighed, shaking his head as he put it down. "You're wasted. You'll put your politics back on, and forget about me... won't be like this next time I see you."

Mycroft's stomach squeezed.

I hope I don't forget, he thought.

At three AM, they shared a cigarette outside under Speedy's awning.

Mycroft's car arrived just as they lit a second.

He made it wait until they had finished.

"You have a good year," Lestrade mumbled at last, flicked the stub into the gutter, and slid his arms around Mycroft - hugged him slowly, sleepily, hands coaxing beneath his jacket and over the silk back of his waistcoat. Mycroft's entire being rippled with desire - heart, mind and soul, curling and reeling, craving. He breathed it in, overwhelmed, and felt Lestrade's jaw rub against his own. "Mmhm. Don't hate me in the morning."

Mycroft's head spun. "Why - w-why would I...?"

"S'fine." Lestrade exhaled, slowly. "You won't remember, anyway."

Mycroft could hear his own pulse. "I shall."

"Nah," Lestrade murmured. He nuzzled into Mycroft's neck - warm breath, rough stubble, male. Mycroft's heart was pounding. "If you do, you'll be mad. You don't like people seeing that you're human, do you? Human needs... m'I gonna wake up on a boat somewhere?"

Mycroft couldn't imagine anywhere he wanted Greg Lestrade to be in this moment, other than right here.

He eased his arms around Lestrade's shoulders, his heart thumping quick and hard. He could barely string his thoughts together anymore - but he didn't need to. This wasn't about thoughts. It was about the breath at his neck, and the hands enjoying the silky curve of his back, and the hardness he could feel nuzzling his own through a layer of polyester and a layer of navy wool.

"Do you want me?" Lestrade murmured in his ear.

Mycroft's breath evaporated.


Lestrade smiled slowly against his jaw. His arms tightened.

"Good," he whispered.
And he licked Mycroft's neck - just once - one slow, lingering, delicious stripe of tongue.

Mycroft's entire body shivered and burned as he felt it slide across his skin. *Fuck me, he wanted to whimper. Take me somewhere quiet and fuck me. Fuck me until I forget my name. Fuck me here. Press me to the window, pull my legs around your waist and fuck me.*

Lestrade's breath tickled the hot, damp stripe as he spoke.

"Call me if you remember, gorgeous... Happy New Year."

And then he let Mycroft go.

He detached himself, and stepped away.

He let himself back into Baker Street, brushed a shaking hand back through his hair, and shut the door with a clunk.

Mycroft watched him go, lost in a hurricane of sentiment.

He got into the car, smoked the entire journey home with the window down, and woke up the next day with a skull that felt three sizes too small.

He remembered Greg Lestrade.

He remembered every word; he remembered every moment.

He did not call.

But as the days went by, Mycroft was remembering the man more and more - and the longing would not ease, no matter how he tried.

This problem could not just be batted aside like a fly.

A number of very real dangers were involved, and Mycroft was not willing to underestimate them.

He spent several additional days considering the matter - stone-cold sober, full of the cold grey clarity of January, and with some part of his soul still dying in rapture beneath the awning of Speedy's as bloody Lestrade licked his neck.

He hadn't known that Lestrade inclined to men as well as women.

Clearly, he concealed that part of himself with care - dispensing the information on a need-to-know basis. It was a hopeful sign. A man who cared for his own privacy was more likely to care for the privacy of a lover.

*I miss that,* he'd said. *Just keeping it quiet, just the two of you.*

*Stay in bed all weekend.*

*Fuck until it hurts.*

Mycroft took a number of long showers over the next few days.
He'd felt this feeling before - this irrational, physical longing. Sometimes it was borne of tiredness, or sometimes distress. Sometimes it seemed to invoke itself out of nowhere, or blow in on some wind like a miasma. The only miserable option each time was to book a hotel, and trade his dignity for a few hours of a professional's time.

The feeling had never been fixed on a person, though - one mesmerizing person.

This wasn't loneliness.

This was connection, and it was different - and it was much more dangerous by far.

On paper, there were systems in place for high-level officials to have partners - relationships, spouses, families.

In actuality, the truth of the matter was very different.

The protection costs involved at Mycroft's level of clearance were astronomical. Extending security outwards from an official, and around someone they loved, effectively doubled an already significant drain upon the country's finances. Intimate relationships caused difficulties, too - lapses in focus, shifts in priorities. It turned an official from a machine into a person, a person who would think twice about working themselves into an early grave for good of the nation. Purely by fact of statistics, few people were ever born with a capacity for work and mental focus like Mycroft. The country needed each one that it could find.

And it needed them to work until midnight, then be up again at five, and not to start wondering if there were perhaps more to life than this.

The process to register a regular partner was not registration at all.

It was deterrence.

Any official who tried to have an intimate relationship authorised would find their prospective partner subjected to a gauntlet of security checks - invasive, exhaustive checks. Restrictions would be placed upon their lives. Previous indiscretions would be uncovered and laid bare. Pressures would be applied. The process's main aim was to see itself cancelled before completion.

On paper, officials of Mycroft's rank were more than permitted to form relationships.

But in practice, the formality of such a process would crush any fledgling bond into dust.

It was rather the point. A partner had to be authorised before the relationship would be permitted to begin. But without completing the process, attachments could not reach the level of commitment required to complete the process.

It was a viciously preventative circle, and it worked.

It had kept Mycroft alone for many years now. It would keep him that way for many more.

There was no possibility for him to have a partner.

But in the earliest hours of this year, Greg Lestrade's hands had not just eased beneath his jacket. They'd slipped without a care beneath his skin.

They'd stroked something in him that now refused to lie down and go back to its lonely slumber. It needed to know; it wanted more. It wanted those decadent brown eyes resting back in his own,
drinking him in - watching him. It wanted to hear the voice husking against his neck again, asking him, *do you want me?*

He wanted to tell the voice, *yes.*

He wanted to tell Lestrade *yes* somewhere they could follow that question to its very fullest answer.

A relationship in its proper form - an intimacy of any length - was forbidden.

But a moment of weakness would be overlooked.

It was an open secret throughout MI5. High-level officials, and their human needs, were single-handedly keeping the sex industry afloat in this city. A night of anonymous company in a hotel, every few months, was tolerated.

And Mycroft longed, for once, to be weak.

*Something easy,* Lestrade had said.

*Glad you get to have some fun, at least.*

Dear God, how Mycroft wanted it. Some fun. Some *relief.* A man who laughed with him, drank with him, shared a cigarette under an awning at three AM with him.

And Lestrade was a professional, for God's sake - a busy man with a busy life. He had endured a very grisly and public divorce, and endured it in dignified silence. He didn't show the least fascination in the power. If anything, his major interest seemed to be in pushing it aside.

Surely two professional men could take a little comfort in each other's company.

But there, Mycroft thought, arose another problem.

One night in a hotel suite with Greg Lestrade... would it be enough? He wished with all his heart that he could fool himself into thinking it would be. But he knew what he'd felt as the man hugged him. He'd felt the strength of the response that arose in him - primal - desperate - *restless,* wrenching him apart to the soul and deeper. It was keeping him awake at night two weeks later.

And it was laying waste to his interest in his work.

That potent a reaction couldn't be soothed in one night. It risked the indulgence of a second night - then a third, and a fourth - and before Mycroft knew it, he would have acquired a clandestine lover. Only ruin laid that way. As harrowing as the process to register a partner might be, maintaining an *unauthorised* intimate relationship was the most reckless form of insanity on the planet. Mycroft had enemies - powerful enemies - who would love nothing more than to get hold of an unprotected MI5 official's lover.

He also had superiors, who were no less dangerous when defied.

A short time in a stranger's arms was overlooked, if it was conducted with discretion - ended at once - and not a habit he indulged in too often. A return to that person would not be tolerated.

The facts of the matter, stripped to their core, were these.

Mycroft could not forget Greg Lestrade. He could not formally register Lestrade as a partner. He could not risk keeping him unregistered. But he couldn't bear a single night with the man, either.
There was only one potential solution.

Mycroft checked his diary for the rest of the month. A number of face-to-face appointments; they could move. His assistant was now competent enough to act in his stead for most eventualities. He could work remotely, if needed. It was all alarmingly possible.

He hadn't taken leave in three years.

If he was going to do this, the quietest month of the year was by far the best time.

The universe seemed to be drawing itself into alignment for something. Mycroft didn't believe in fate; he didn't believe in a higher power. He did believe that he would soon lose his mind if Greg Lestrade didn't throw him against a door and tear the clothing from his body like wrapping paper.

And so he began to make the arrangements.

As he did, struggling with his waning attention to work, he promised his restless mind that this fever would shortly pass - it would be soothed. Soon, he'd be able to fall asleep again without having to tend to his aching cock, without seizing lubricant from a drawer and envisioning for himself Lestrade's eyes, his hands, his coaxing voice, his thick fingers easing Mycroft open, his breathing and his groans and fucking until it hurt, switching over, keeping going.

At the final point that it could still all be cancelled, and sanity might yet prevail, it was a dreary Thursday evening. Rain was lashing every window.

Mycroft summoned his car.

The Diogenes.

Somewhere private, he'd thought - somewhere discreet - the persuasive warmth of the fire, quiet surroundings, a space for the two of them to negotiate. He had but a single chance to make this offer. He'd received every possible indication that it would be accepted - but he still found himself uncommonly nervous.

It was many years since he'd wanted something so keenly. It made him vulnerable. If he had any sense, he knew he would stop this now - analyse that feeling, 'vulnerable', in greater detail, and let it horrify him back inside the boundaries of rational behaviour.

But this had already gone too far. It was damaging his work - and that was a depth to which he'd never dreamed he could sink. He had to intervene.

The pitiful truth was that he was human. Lestrade had agitated something in him that now burned with a frenzy, and there was only one way to calm it. Only one thing would slake it. Mycroft just had to manage it as efficiently as he could, and pray that Lestrade wanted the same.

He got to the club at eight, dispatched the car to an address in Marylebone with an instruction not to return empty-handed, and poured himself a very large scotch.

He settled in a private room, in one of two armchairs by the fire. There he waited.

At twenty minutes to nine, an attendant appeared to inform him that he had a visitor.

Mycroft asked them to show the gentleman in.
Two weeks. Not a word.

Greg was pretty certain that Mycroft had forgotten.

Christ, who could blame the man though? The amount they'd put away on New Year's Eve... Mrs Hudson's punch could take down a bloody donkey. The woman had no sense of restraint. Greg had spent most of January 1st huddled in a heap on his tiny bathroom floor, groaning quietly to no-one and wishing he could summon alka seltzer from the kitchen by telekinesis. He didn't even have the comfort of alcoholic amnesia to blot out the worst of it.

Christ.

Eye-fucking Mycroft Holmes on the couch all night... those little smirks. Those long bloody legs in that gorgeous bloody suit, slender fingers wrapped around the stem of a champagne glass. Then, outside Speedy's at three AM together... smoking a cigarette side-by-side, passing it between their mouths. Jesus...

Greg had never wanted to shove someone up against a glass window so badly. He'd wanted to get both his hands under Mycroft's shirt, and find out what it took to make him swear. Greg liked posh. He liked how quickly it fell apart in the right hands. He liked ruffling it, and spoiling it, and making it blush. He liked seeing it try to put itself back together afterwards, when he knew all of its pretty secrets.

And Mycroft was the poshest of the posh.

He'd trembled against Greg - stifling his gasps, holding onto Greg's back like he'd not gotten laid in months, hard beneath his pretty grey suit and not hiding it. Mycroft wasn't just posh. There was something else about him, too. Something a little too controlled - a little rigid, a little needy - something deep as a pool, and Greg had wanted to sink right into him and never, never surface.

It was a miracle they hadn't woken up next to each other.

A miracle everyone else had been too drunk to notice.

Fuck you and your punch, Mrs Hudson. This is all your fault.

What a bloody mess. What a start to the year. As if Mycroft was ever going to talk to him again. Months of watching the guy from the corner of his eye - months of small talk, Sherlock talk - safe talk - then a single night, a few glasses of punch, and it was all over.

If Mycroft remembered, he'd clam shut. If he didn't remember, it still didn't matter. Greg couldn't exactly bring it up next time they ran into each other. So, hey... when we were trashed on New Year's Eve, you seemed like you'd be down to fuck. I kinda like to talk, too. D'you want to come round some time, and we'll do a bit of both?

Greg wished he'd pushed things a bit more.

He wished he'd not pushed them so much.

He just wished he'd done it differently.
As it was, he'd fucked up somehow. That much was clear. He watched his phone for the first weeks of January, just in case - but nothing came through. No unknown numbers. No texts. If he was dealing with anyone else, he'd have told himself he was an idiot for not giving them his number... but this was Mycroft Holmes.

If he'd wanted to contact Greg, he'd have found a way.

He hadn't.

And so he didn't.

And so, life continued - as it always did.

Work was waiting right there for Greg where he'd left it before Christmas. Sally'd had a good time with her sister up in Scotland, and people were generally a bit more cheerful after the break - but by the time that a couple more Mondays had passed, it was all just starting to feel bleak again. Greg had overspent for Christmas on his nieces, of whom there were now three. The credit card bill made him wince when it arrived. There were still two weeks to payday. His flat was still small, and his car was still one speed-bump away from falling apart. His nights were still spent watching telly on his own - maybe a little too often now with wine - and his chest still ached a bit whenever he saw his sister's husband smile and hug her.

It wasn't his brother-in-law that Greg wanted - far from.

Just someone to put their arms around him like that. Someone to need him like that.

To top it all, the weather was shit - and it shouldn't make a difference, but it did. Greg liked sun. He liked colour; he liked excitement. His life was full of tedium and grey.

'Blue Monday', the papers called it.

Statistically the worst day of the year.

But really, Greg didn't need the catalogue of reasons they listed. He knew what was preying on his mind.

It was Mycroft Holmes, resting on a couch beside him, watching him talk with that knowing little smile - as if Greg was delightful. Sharing a cigarette with him in the dark. Gasping as Greg's tongue eased across the soft, untouched skin of his throat.

It'd been a long time since Greg had felt a pull like this. Even longer, since he'd felt it for another man. There were plenty of nice-looking people in the world - people who were good to talk to. Something about Mycroft just itched at his soul, though. The cars, the suits. All the posing with the bloody umbrella. Greg had glimpsed beneath it now. He wanted to see a little more.

Now and then, Mycroft had said.

What did that even mean?

Greg didn't know.

Really, it didn't matter.

Mycroft wasn't interested - pushed too far, pushed too close - a risk too much - and that was that.

Then on Thursday 18th January, as Greg was halfway through putting together a lasagne, a brand
new black Audi pulled up outside his flat.

The guy had clearly been told not to take no for an answer. He stood in Greg's doorway, black-suited and imposing, and informed Greg that an associate of his had requested his opinion on a private matter.

He handed Greg a card from somewhere called 'The Diogenes Club', and told him he wouldn't need his coat.

Greg only knew one person posh enough to belong to a private club.

And there were only so many 'private matters' might be wanted for.

He found himself suddenly glad he'd showered after work. He wasn't sure on exactly which matter his opinion was being sought - but the driver was good enough to give him ten minutes to change his shirt and get some aftershave on.

Greg then found himself sitting in the back of the sublime little Audi, gazing out at London through tinted windows and drumming his fingers on his knee.

This is weird, he thought, watching the lights of Soho drift by.

He liked it.

He liked it way too much.

Summoned to a private club for... his opinion.

Christ.

He didn't even know what to think.

Was this how all rich people lived their lives? Did they just take a fancying to someone, and have them fetched in a car for their pleasure? Greg knew on some level that he could be offended, if he wanted to be. He wasn't a bloody rent-boy.

But holy shit, this was sort of working for him.

He'd done slow relationships before. He'd had steady. He'd had the kind of bonds that you gradually built up over a string of months - awkward cinema dates and mid-priced restaurants, negotiating your way into a space that fit you both. That was great, sometimes. It could pay off. Not so much when work took up a lot of your evenings - but it could be enjoyable.

This felt... a bit more raw than that.

This whole decadent world that Mycroft lived in - posh cars and private clubs. It wasn't real. Greg wanted to strip it all away from him, and find his skin, and make him come over and over so hard that nothing else mattered in the world. He wanted to watch what happened to Mycroft's dusky blue eyes as Greg's cock pushed its way inside him. He wanted to hear his name groaned in those elegant tones, wracked with need.
He didn't know what was going to happen tonight - but he wanted it.
All of it.
As they pulled up outside, and the driver got the door for him, Greg experienced a brief flush of worry that he'd maybe got this wrong.
What if Mycroft was just having a delayed reaction? There was a chance he was about to be warned to keep his business and his roving hands to himself, if he knew what was good for him - in which case, showing up in a tight black shirt and aftershave wouldn't really go down well.
He couldn't exactly go back, though.
This was happening, whatever it was. Christ, are we actually about to fuck in the backroom of a swanky club? Oh fuck, why do I fucking want that so much? Greg stopped asking himself questions, and got out of the car.
He made himself known to the front desk, and an attendant showed him in utter silence to a dimly lit room with two armchairs, a lockable door - and Mycroft Holmes drinking scotch by the fire.
"Thank you," Mycroft murmured to the attendant, with a quiet flick of his eyes. "Please leave us."
The attendant bowed, shuffled out backwards, and closed the door.
Mycroft wasn't wearing a tie. It was draped over the back of his chair, along with his jacket. His collar was loose, and his cuffs were rolled. Firelight flickered in the hollow of his throat, and as Greg watched him and waited, Mycroft reached across to the table for scotch, picking up the glass between his long, delicate fingers.
Greg had never been so certain he would see someone come before the morning.
Mycroft took a sip of scotch, returned the glass to one side, and said,
"Do sit down."

Lestrade had changed his shirt.
Put on aftershave - something sweet and sharp, enticing those who caught it to come closer; something that would smell good to a lover; something that would linger in their senses the next day.
He thought they were going to have sex tonight.
With the realisation, Mycroft immediately wanted to.
A preface, he thought... make the man comfortable before the fire, bite at his neck until he begged, then get down on his knees on the hearth-rug and let Lestrade fuck his mouth pink, grip his hair into disarray. Dear sweet God, what has happened to me? This is insanity...
Mycroft wasn't sure how this would end - but he knew it would begin in fire.
There were things to discuss first. There was a veneer of propriety to be kept - a plan to be put into
motion. If there was to be an explosion, he thought, let it be a controlled explosion. Let it happen somewhere that its wave of destruction would not lay the world around him to ruin.

He watched Lestrade take a seat, then sat forwards and poured the man a scotch. He felt Lestrade's eyes fix intently on his face as he handed it over. No words were said; Mycroft wasn't sure he quite had the strength yet.

Lestrade took a first sip, and the moment settled between them.

The fire crackled its low, soft approval.

Mycroft's heart had not taken a beat in almost a minute.

"'My opinion'," Lestrade said, to begin with. "On a 'private matter'."

Mycroft's stomach tightened. It seemed the man wasn't playing games. Good. Mycroft didn't have the luxury of games. In another life, perhaps - but not in this one.

"I hope I can trust in your discretion," he said, sitting back, and crossing one leg over the other. He was perfectly comfortable already. He just wanted Lestrade to look at them.

Lestrade did.

He then took a slow sip of scotch.

"You can," he said.

Mycroft lowered his eyes, choosing his words with care.

"You and I imbibed a rather ambitious amount of liquor on New Year's Eve," he said. And I would like to know how much of it you remember.

Lestrade laughed - soft, dark. A little embarrassed.

"Yeah, we... put quite a bit of it away, didn't we?" As he drank, his eyes gleamed at Mycroft over the rim of the glass. "Your hangover worn off yet?"

Mycroft held his gaze.

"Not... quite all of it," he said.

He watched Lestrade understand. He watched those thick, masculine fingers tighten infinitesimally on the arm of the chair, and experienced the immediate desire to have them curling around his jaw, tilting his head up, telling him to be good.

Calming himself, Mycroft took another drink.

Lestrade drank, too.

"Why didn't you call?" he asked.

Mycroft took a moment to find him the truth.

"Because I needed to think."

"What about?" said Lestrade.
Whether the thought of you fucking me until I can no longer produce sound is worth risking my entire life's work.

"About what I can offer you," Mycroft said. He let his voice ease into a murmur, sounding far more assured than he felt. "And what you might be able to offer me. The restrictions upon both of those offers. The - consequences of accepting them."

Lestrade drank. He emptied the glass, and put it down.

"I get the feeling this is complicated," he said.

Mycroft couldn't lie. "It is."

"Does it - have to be?"

"Yes." About that, there was no doubt. "But there are... ways for it to be managed."

"'Managed'." Lestrade shifted, reaching for the bottle of scotch. "Are we talking about the same thing here? Just to check."

"What do you believe we're talking about?"

"I - think we're talking about you and me fucking, Mycroft." Lestrade looked him in the eye. "Unless I'm wrong."

Mycroft raised his glass to his mouth.

"Astute of you." He drained the contents, put it down, and watched Lestrade refill it at once. His heart was pounding. "Though I must immediately cap your expectations."

Lestrade watched the scotch pour. "Go on."

Mycroft's tongue curled around the words. "My position limits me," he said. "Greatly. I can't offer you anything of longevity." As much as I might wish to.

Lestrade quietly capped the bottle. He spoke with care.

"Are you - suggesting a one-night-stand?"

Mycroft's heart tightened. Several other parts of his body tightened, too. He picked up the scotch, leant back in his chair, and sipped. This was easier with a glass in his hand.

"You've - distracted me, Lestrade. Deeply. I need to work and I need to function." He paused. "I don't believe a single night would be enough for me to - find solace. But I can't take you as my lover, and I cannot put - this - from my thoughts."

He'd almost said 'you'.

It seemed too much. Too close. Let it remain an event, he thought. A necessity. An exchange of service.

"Couldn't we just - keep things quiet?" Lestrade said.

Mycroft tried not to find his own flush of bitterness amusing. "Not from my superiors."

"Christ, surely they don't have cameras in your bedroom."
Even the man mentioning Mycroft's bedroom was arousing him. He shifted, willing himself the clarity of thought to get through this.

"They have other ways of monitoring my activities," he said. "I've already taken a risk bringing you here. It will have been noted." He met Lestrade's darkened gaze, the scotch glass pressed against his lower lip. "They - will assume that you and I are in this moment fucking."

He watched a visible shudder run through the man's magnificent shoulders, down his spine and up around his chin.

"That's - ..." Lestrade threw back the rest of his scotch. "Keep that word to yourself, alright? Or they won't just be assuming."

"If I indulge this inclination with you," Mycroft said, as every inch of his skin prickled, "I will be expected to deal with it discreetly, then put it aside and not return to it again. We will no longer be able to meet privately. Any suggestion of lingering intimacy would jeopardise my position."

Lestrade hesitated. Something uncomfortable crossed his eyes.

"Even as friends?" he said.

"In - wider company, perhaps. If no hint of familiarity remained."

"Right." Lestrade looked down into his scotch, quiet for a moment. "There's - no way that you're allowed to - ..."

Mycroft swallowed. "No."

"Not even if I... sign some...?"

Mycroft almost smiled.

The man didn't realise how casually he was offering to attempt the impossible. He couldn't imagine the process he would have to endure. Two minutes into his first interview with MI5, Lestrade would suddenly recall he had some important errand to run, sprint from the room and not look back.

And Mycroft would still be forbidden ever to lay eyes on him again.

"Such an arrangement is - beyond the bounds of possibility," Mycroft said. "It is not an option."

Lestrade's eyes quietened. He barely seemed to notice his scotch anymore.

"Why did you bring me here?" he asked. His throat muscles worked. "To... tell me you can't have me?"

Mycroft took a long moment to ask himself if he were sure - if this was the only way.

He decided it was.

He licked his lips, and said,

"I have the option to take you out of the country. A week, perhaps - or - for less time, if you'd prefer."

Lestrade's eyes widened to twice their size.
Mycroft forced himself onwards, too involved now to turn back.

"We would travel somewhere privately, and - be there together," he said, forcing his voice to stay steady. "I'd be expected to give you up entirely upon our return to the UK. But by that point, I'd have exhausted this - preoccupation with you. Calmed it, I'd be free of it."

"Holy shit." Lestrade stared at him, pale. "A week... to - "

"To - relieve this problem." Mycroft ignored the heat threatening to rise in his face. "You would be treated excellently for the time you were with me, Lestrade. Your every wish would be met."

"Christ..." The word came very small from Lestrade's mouth. "A-And then we'd - "

"Return to normality." Mycroft lifted the scotch to his lips, wishing the glass would stop shaking. He drank. "I would still contact you in regards to my brother," he said. "Though it would likely occur via my assistant... to assure my superiors that our personal connection had been severed."

Lestrade was silent for a long time.

He then seemed to recall the scotch in his hand, and in one motion he threw it back. He placed the glass upon the table, wiped his mouth, and did not refill it.

"Is there an alternative?" he said.

Mycroft thought about it.

"You leave this room," he said, "and you and I attempt to forget each other. I fail. I weaken and break. We proceed to shipwreck each other's lives on the rocks of our reckless decisions. You are possibly moved by force to another country, to a prison, or to some other place beyond my reach. I lose my position. All is lost."

Lestrade swallowed.

"Right." He glanced up. "I'm - now realising why you didn't call."

"You would be afforded every courtesy while in my company." Mycroft hesitated. "You - would be well-treated, Lestrade. I promise you."

He realised he was attempting to sweeten this offer - to make the man say yes - and with it, he realised in a rush how much he bloody wanted it.

A single night would only make the craving worse.

A week would be all the time he needed to take this feeling, rip it open and drench himself in the force of it - to discover every tiny fragment of Greg Lestrade, to drink his fill of the man and soak his heart in memories that would keep him warm for all the lonely years to come - perhaps even to tire of Lestrade. To grow awkward with each other, alone somewhere in close quarters. To let this hissing stream of sparks burst into a bonfire, rage and then ebb as it was quenched, and die away, and settle into cold and quiet ash.

It was the most peaceful outcome Mycroft could envisage.

He longed for it. To indulge - to share - two nights, three nights, six nights, seven - just for once in his life.

Just for once.
"I'd - like you to sleep in my room with me," he said, his voice level, even as his pulse hammered against his ribs. "In my bed. We would dine together, if you wished. I would need to devote some time each day to work, but... my company would otherwise be yours. If you wanted it." Dear God, please want it. "I'd cover every expense. You would fly in comfort, privately - and the villa looks to be excellent. You would want for nothing."

Lestrade looked up from his hands, startled.

"You've picked somewhere?" he said - then: "Sorry... did you say 'villa'?"

Mycroft hesitated. "If it suits. If you - have no objections."

Lestrade stared at him. "Where?" he croaked.

Mycroft's heart heaved. Dear God, this was happening. It was being said. There was no way back now.

"Saint Barthélemy..." At the continuing blank look, he added, "In - the West Indies."

Lestrade's jaw dropped.

"The - fucking Caribbean?" he said - then: "A villa?"

"It's - perhaps more exclusive than some of the other islands, but will afford a certain privacy..."

Mycroft forced himself to recall his measured tones, his control. He could not lose his nerve now. Not now. Not so close. "It's noted for a high standard of cuisine. The climate is very pleasant in January, and the -"

"When?" said Lestrade.

Mycroft's heart lurched into his throat.

He swallowed it at once. "The flight leaves tomorrow," he said.

The words rang in the silence.

Lestrade didn't move. He didn't speak. For long and breathless seconds, he simply stared.

Then, as calm as a sea breeze, he said,

"Yeah. Yeah, alright."

Shock short-circuited Mycroft's senses. "You - accept?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I..." Lestrade swallowed, gripping the arms of his chair. "I mean - that'd be - ..."

He flushed suddenly, realising something.

"Work," he said, staring into Mycroft's eyes.

It was a plea.

"I can have you granted discretionary leave." Mycroft's heart was trying to beat its way out of his throat. He couldn't believe it. This couldn't possibly be happening. "Your commissioner owes me a significant favour. I can make the arrangements. I'll - take it out of your hands. All of it."
"F-Fuck." Lestrade looked as if he'd stopped breathing some time ago. "And - and you're sure you -"

"Yes." Mycroft didn't even know which part he was querying. The answer was yes, either way. He was sure. "Yes. Of course."

Lestrade held his gaze, shaking slightly. "Tomorrow?"

"Y-Yes."

"Right." Lestrade swallowed again. "When should I - w-where -"

"I'll send a driver." Mycroft's voice didn't sound like his own. The fire was suddenly stifling; the air too close, the pace of his heart almost too swift for him to keep up. "If you can be ready for eight AM with your luggage - and your passport - I will handle the rest."

"Christ. Fine." Lestrade's eyes hadn't left his own. "Is this a wind-up?"

Mycroft's heart ached. "No."

"No. No, you're - not the type for that." Lestrade bit at the corner of his lip. "A week in paradise," he said, "to get me out of your system."

A romantic rewording, Mycroft told himself. A passionate interpretation, made by a passionate mind. It was understandable that Lestrade would couch this in more evocative language, in terms that meant something to him. It was not an issue.

He ignored the smoky curl of heat that it caused low in his stomach.

"I - appreciate this is..." Mycroft struggled for the right word. Torrid, he thought. Inelegant. "...unorthodox."

"I... can deal with unorthodox," Lestrade said. The lowness of his voice rippled across the back of Mycroft's neck; it was all he could do to suppress a shiver. "Best go pack then, hadn't I? Dig up my passport from wherever I buried it..."

"Do you - not know where -"

Lestrade gave him a faint smile. "Haven't left the country in years."

"I see." Mycroft gathered together a little bravery - an attempt at civility. "This - should be an enjoyable venture for you, then."

Lestrade's gaze didn't move an inch.

"I think it will be," he said.

Mycroft flushed. He shifted, turning the motion into a casual reach for the scotch. "Quite."

Lestrade watched him open the bottle, drawing a breath.

"Listen, I - might head off. If that's okay. I'm fine with all this, I just... kinda need to think for a bit."

Relief - somewhat guilty relief - eased a previously-unnoted band of tension across Mycroft's chest.

He breathed with it, glad.
He too needed to think.

For the first time in days, he found the frenzy had cooled a little - comfortable enough to handle, to examine. *As expected,* he thought. *It is the experience of wanting that has caused the pressure. The experience of having will release it. Indulgence is the correct course to take.*

A step closer, a decision made, he might even get some proper sleep for once.

This was the right choice.

"Understandable," he said. "If you - change your mind, Lestrade, then send the car away in the morning. I will respect your decision."

"I won't change my mind," said Lestrade.

Mycroft's pulse quickened. *Heaven help me, I shan't survive this.* "Nonetheless," he said. "If you - "

"I won't," said Lestrade.

Mycroft swallowed.

He watched, unsettled, as the man got to his feet.

As his hand reached for the door handle, Mycroft heard his own voice speak. It said the name of its own accord.

"Lestrade?"

Lestrade hesitated, turning back for a moment. Though pale in his cheeks, his eyes were soft. They held Mycroft's at once, unreluctant. "Mm?"

"I - I'm glad, that you - ..."

Lestrade gave a quiet huff. "Yeah," he said, and let himself out of the room.
Flight

Day One

Seven AM.

Greg laid in the darkness for a while, gazing up at the ceiling of his bedroom.

Only the suitcase propped beside the door told him it hadn't been a dream. But then, what had it been? It couldn't have been real. He knew it wasn't - and he was now going to prove it, by standing outside his house at eight AM and waiting for a car that never arrived. He'd eventually slink back inside, unpack the suitcase, fish his work trousers out of the laundry basket and be sitting there at his desk by nine, wondering whatever gave him the impression he was going on a... sex holiday with Mycroft Holmes.

To the fucking Caribbean.

In a villa.

Christ.

Greg showered, dressed and had two rounds of toast, telling himself at every stage to go the fuck back to bed. At quarter to eight, he checked his suitcase. He had everything he wouldn't need for the sex holiday he wasn't going on with Mycroft Holmes to the fucking Caribbean. Loose cotton shirts he wouldn't wear; thrillers he'd been meaning to find time to read (but wasn't going to); suncream he definitely wouldn't apply. The car wasn't on its way, and this wasn't happening.

Life wasn't this interesting.

Not for people like him.

It was five to eight, and Greg put on his coat.

He'd unplugged all his appliances for no reason. He'd be back inside again in ten minutes, plugging all the bloody things back in. He got his cigarettes ready in his hand, so he could have something to do on the kerb while he waited not to be picked up for the sex holiday he wasn't going on. He locked his flat, hefted his heavy suitcase pointlessly down the stairs, and let himself out of the front door into the gloomy January morning.

As he did, a gleaming black limo coasted to a halt at the roadside.

"Christ..." Greg whispered, put his cigarettes away, and shut the door.

There was no Mycroft in the car, nor at Heathrow.
Greg grew increasingly nervous as the limousine took him to a private entrance, separate to the main terminals. He was met by a member of staff clearly more used to diplomats, rockstars and royalty than worried Scotland Yard inspectors. Before Greg knew it, he found himself in a private lounge so posh that he didn't dare touch anything, certain that at any moment he'd be asked to move along please sir. His clothes suddenly felt like rags, his suitcase like a grubby sack. Security procedures were over and done with in five minutes, and then there was another private car - and he knew this shouldn't be making him shake, but it was.

The second car drove him directly onto the runway - right to the steps of the plane.

Greg found himself looking forward to seeing Mycroft just for sight of a familiar face. Someone he knew. Someone real. The staff were so polite it made him feel weak, and all of them were pretending he was important. He'd never felt less important in his life. It seemed like an oddly small plane from the outside - not that he knew much about them. He'd flown in one to Spain a few times with his ex. That was about the sum total of his knowledge.

A supremely well-coiffed and symmetrical flight attendant greeted him adoringly at the top of the steps.

Greg barely heard a word the poor woman said.

He was too busy staring over her shoulder, at the interior of what he now realised was a fucking private jet.

It was like a posh cabin on a cruise liner - not that he'd ever been in one of those, either - a rounded, padded cream interior with a plush carpet, leather seating for no more than eight people at the most, gleaming walnut wood surfaces, and a long couch with cushions that faced a widescreen plasma TV. A huge ornamental peace lily sat beside it. *Plants on a plane. Fuck me up.*

As he stepped into the gorgeous space, Greg couldn't help but notice he was the only person here.

The attendant got him comfortable - let him just sit down on the sofa like it was a posh hotel room, and offered him a drink. Greg instinctively opted for scotch, only realising when it arrived why he'd found the idea comforting.

"Listen..." he said - she gave him a gentle smile. "You might not know, but... is - Mr Holmes gonna be here?"

"You're our only listed passenger for this flight, sir. But I understand that someone will be meeting you at Princess Juliana International Airport in St. Maarten, and then conducting you privately to St. Barts by boat."

*Fuck me up.*

*Tis my life. *This is actually happening.*

"Right." Greg did his best to pretend this was all perfectly normal. He didn't think he was pulling it off somehow. "How long's this flight?"

"Ten-and-a-half hours, sir. Shall I bring you a breakfast menu?"

*Christ.* "Erm. Sure - thanks."

By the time he'd had two almond croissants, and a cup of very strong and sweet coffee, Greg found himself settling a little.
It was impossibly weird to be alone on a plane.

But thinking about it, he could understand why Mycroft had chosen not to travel with him. He supposed it would have made for an awkward ten-and-a-half hours. Sharing powdery sweets from a tin, he thought. Playing endless rounds of Hangman. Trying not to think about all the sex they were going to have. Jesus actual Christ.

As Greg watched The Last Jedi, with his feet tucked cautiously onto the sofa, he found himself wondering if the staff knew who he was - why he was being flown in private luxury across the world, and at whose pleasure.

He hoped they didn't.

He kinda hoped Mycroft didn't do this often.

During the flight, Greg found himself experiencing something of a bell curve of anxiety.

After five hours of relaxing, stretched out on the sofa with a film, posh crisps and the first of his paperback thrillers, he was starting to develop a taste for the high life. The flight attendant kept checking on him and bringing him whatever the hell he liked. He toed his shoes off. Could get used to this, he thought.

Better not, mate. Seven days, remember... then you're out.

Still.

Seven days of this... who would turn that down?

When else in his life was he going to get treated like this?

He'd have been mad to say no. Mycroft could spend his money on what he wanted - and if he what he wanted was for Greg to eat posh crisps in the sky, undisturbed by other peasants, Greg wasn't going to stop him.

He finished his thriller (the twin brother - obvious from page four - the guy had no reason to be wearing those casually-mentioned leather gloves in June) and had lunch: posh sandwiches, more pastries and coffee.

The attendant offered him sushi.

Greg nearly fucking laughed.

Then, after a few more hours, and a bright notice from the flight attendant that they'd be arriving at St. Maarten in just ninety minutes, all the nerves Greg had left on the runway at Heathrow suddenly seemed to catch up with the jet.

God, what am I even doing here?

You're here to fuck Mycroft Holmes, mate. For a week.

Right. Who was in charge of our decisions when that happened?
An hour to go - then someone would be 'conducting' him to St. Barts by boat. (He'd noted the flight attendant calling it that - St. Barts. Mycroft had used a longer name. A better one. One that went up and down slightly in the parisian fashion, but Greg couldn't recreate it from just looking at the letters. Saun Barthellemeh. Bart-lem-yeh? Bartolemy - like P tolemy? 'St. Barts'; he thought. Easier. Dropping it casually at the ambassador's dinner reception, while wearing a monocle: _ah yes, Mycroft and I wintered briefly in St. Barts this year. We had an eye-watering amount of torrid sex in a villa, if I recall. Really was first class._)

Half an hour to go.

Greg used the bathroom one last time, trying not to catch his own eye in the mirror.

What the fuck would he even say to Mycroft?

"Hi"?

He'd be waiting for Greg at the airport. They'd be seeing each other in the next thirty minutes. Less than that, now.

"Alright, Mycroft, what's new"?

Christ, this was going to be so fucking weird. He couldn't cope with how weird this was going to be. They were genuinely here to fuck for a week, then never lay eyes on each other again. What if Mycroft decided after the first night that he was a crap shag? He'd never had complaints before - but suddenly the possibility ran pretty high.

And even if the sex went alright (by some miracle), what the hell were they going to do the rest of the time? Board games? Swingball? _Jesus Christ._ This was the stupidest thing he'd ever done.

And he'd done a lot of stupid things.

By the time the plane landed, Greg was locked once more into a pale frown - hoping to project a sort of rich grumpiness to hide his blatant inadequacy. He got off the plane, half-expecting Mycroft to be waiting for him on the tarmac in a Hawaiian print shirt, holding an inflatable crocodile and a coconut with a little umbrella.

There was instead just another black car.

Weary, Greg watched as his luggage was placed in the trunk. _I'm in the Caribbean right now. I've literally crossed the world._

"Is - Mr Holmes...?"

"I'm to take you to the ferry, sir." The driver shut the trunk with a slam, and opened the door for him. "Have a seat, Mr Lestrade."

The ferry would take forty-five minutes, Greg learned, as he waited in the lounge on the private dock.

The ferry would also have an open bar.
It was coming up to five when finally they set off. Greg wasted not a moment in securing himself a pint, took it over to a window-seat and for ten minutes just sat nervously with the thing as moisture rolled down the side of the glass.

It was only when he'd nearly reached the bottom that he began to notice anything of the world outside the window. A gleaming blue sea - impossibly blue. Blue like they just didn't have back in London. Shocking, gorgeous, unbearable blue, dotted with little rocky outcrops - tiny islands and spits of land. The sun was drawing low to the horizon now.

As they continued across the ocean, and the level of Greg's second pint sank with the sun, he watched the sky fill with colours he hadn't even known existed - casual, shining streaks of them, thrown out across the gorgeous glittering sea like it didn't even matter - like they were so plentiful they could just be wasted on a single sunset.

He found himself thinking about Mycroft.

Some part of him wished they could be doing this on a rainy January night back in London. Someone's flat. A hotel. Somewhere grim. Just... fuck, and get it over with - and realise it was just sex, and it was never going to live up to the hype. It didn't matter how much the sight of Mycroft Holmes made his heart pound - made his soul stretch and pad and softly snarl, purring to be allowed to touch. It didn't matter how many nights he'd now spent lying on his bed, easing his straining cock with a hand while imagining those eyes, those fingers, that mouth. It wasn't going to be miraculous. He didn't even know what he'd say to the guy when they met.

At least I got to see this, Greg thought, gazing at the colours.

He finished off his pint. At least I got to drink this. He tried not to throw up as the ferry docked, and he discovered yet another posh black car with a bloke holding his name on a sign. At least I got to sit in a posh car. They were driving through Gustavia, and Greg gazed in wonder at the bars and the restaurants and the people, all glittering in the sun's last hour of light. The capital gave way to a road and lush vegetation, and through every broken patch of trees, there was the ocean - flaming, burning, ignited into molten gold by the sunset.

Greg realised there was a lump in his throat. He didn't know why.

At last, as the ruby and orange and lilac of the sky settled into smoke, and the night began to draw in close, the car wound its way along a hillside.

A villa appeared up ahead.

"Oh, fuck off..." said Greg.

The chauffeur - a local - let out a laugh that he'd would never forget. Grinning, chuckling, the man ran his tongue across his teeth.

"Forgive me, sir," he said. "S'not often I hear that kinda talk in my car..."

Greg found himself grinning too, embarrassed - relieved to hear a laughing voice. He'd not spoken to anyone properly all day.

"Come on..." he said. "Surely you spend half your life thinking 'oh, fuck off'..."

"S'not for me to say, sir..." The chauffeur brought the car to a stop, still fighting a smile. He switched off the engine. "Your first time in St. Barth's?"
"Is it obvious?"

The chauffeur opened the door. "You got that look in your eyes. M'good at spotting it by now."

He stepped out, and held the door for Greg.

"Mr Holmes's on the terrace," he said, indicating a path that ran around the villa and down the hillside. "Fastest way's just down there. I'll take your case inside f'you."

Every worry came crashing back over Greg at once. His heart lurched in his chest, cutting his breath with a fresh rush of fear. Can't I just stay up here with you, mate? C'mon, we'll play cards and drink. He wondered if a ten-hour flight, a ferry crossing and a drive through thick jungle to an isolated hilltop meant it was too late to change his mind.

The chauffeur shut the trunk, locked the car, and hefted Greg's case away inside the villa.

Alone, Greg glanced towards the path.

His heart sank.

What the hell would he find at the end of it?

Mycroft. Someone he'd thought he knew. Sherlock's posh older brother. Three-piece suits and umbrellas. Calling him 'inspector'. Pocket-watches, queen and country. Now they were alone here for a week, with a single purpose.

Greg swallowed, pushing his hands into his pockets. He didn't even have the money to fly back if he needed to. This was insane. But he couldn't spend a week standing here beside the car.

Telling himself that he'd now learned his lesson - and that the next time a high-ranking government official offered to whisk him away to the Caribbean for seven nights of gratuitous fucking, he'd bloody well say no - Greg headed for the steps, and made his way along the path.

The trail sloped downwards over the hillside, passing amongst greenery that seemed to breathe in the night air all around. The view up here was glorious. It was unreal - the hugeness of the sea, impossible and unending, all the island and the mountains shimmering in the very last of the light. Greg had never seen a place like this. He didn't think he ever would again.

After about a minute's walk, aware of his own heavy footsteps on the track, he found himself looking down upon a terrace nestled safe into the hillside. It was shrouded with the night's first shadows. A private pool glittered gently in the glow of ankle lights, as round and soft and white as the moon above them.

Sitting alone on a lounger, facing out over the ocean, was Mycroft.

He was just visible in the gloom, rubbing his eyes beneath his glasses. His white shirt was rolled to the elbow, and a laptop rested on the table beside him. There was no product in his hair - no slickness to it - even the first hint of a curl. He was barefoot, dressed in loose linen trousers the colour of stone, and an empty wine glass rested on the table. The bottle sat beside it.

He looked exhausted.

As Greg watched, frozen into place upon the path, Mycroft took off his glasses. He laid them aside with the laptop, carded his fingers backwards through his hair, and pressed both palms to his eyes.
Greg's heart thudded against his ribs, realising something.

Mycroft wasn't exhausted at all.

He was scared.

_God, gorgeous - don't be scared... it's only me._ Greg's nerves vanished in the sudden rush of breath. Four-thousand miles, and London was long gone. It might as well not exist. This was the world now - this island - this hillside - the next seven days. _What's to be scared of, gorgeous? You know who I am..._

Biting his lip, Greg realised he wouldn't be going home as quite the same person he'd arrived.

It didn't scare him as much as it should.

He made his way down the last stretch of path, hands in his pockets and his eyes kept low, his footsteps quiet against the hush of the sea.
The night was drawing in.

Surrendering, Mycroft laid the laptop aside.

There was only so much work he could have expected himself to complete today. He wished he could blame his lack of productivity on the long flight, but he wasn't enough of a fool for that.

A fool, certainly - but not enough for that.

Throughout the day, his mind had focused solely on the sporadic updates sent to him by text. He'd hoped that the first, at a few minutes past eight, would relax him. Safely collected. En route to Heathrow now. It had enabled Mycroft to breathe in comfort for around a minute, but no more. Since then, each new message had only worsened a tumult of emotions that he couldn't even begin to process.

On board the aircraft. No problems during check-in. Comfortable and having breakfast.

Landed. Transferring to ferry now.

Ferry departed.

Ferry landed. On his way with chauffeur. 25-30 mins.

That was twenty-five minutes ago.

Suffice to say, it was probably too late to have the poor man sent back - as desperately as Mycroft might wish to.

About an hour ago, he'd seriously considered vacating the villa and departing for England himself - leaving Lestrade a message to consider the week a gesture of thanks for his assistance last year with Sherlock, to enjoy his time here alone in peace, and be assured that the staff would take care of his every need.

But surely that was horrific... to drag the man across the world, then abandon him alone out of cowardice?

Seven days of solitude would be entirely comfortable to a man like Mycroft - and, in this moment, rather welcome - but to a social creature like Lestrade, it was an unforgivable thing to do. Lestrade hadn't done anything wrong. He didn't deserve it.

And yet, was it any worse than subjecting him to seven days of Mycroft's company?

Mycroft had realised his mistake as soon as the jet had left English soil.
A week?

Together?

Lestrade would be clawing at the walls by the second day.

To say nothing of the second night.

Dear, sweet God... what have I done? Mycroft had enribboned himself so tightly in the thought of copious time with Lestrade that he'd not even considered whether he'd be able to... entertain the man. Keep him happy. Ensure that a four-thousand-mile journey had been in any possible way worthwhile. Seven days. God help me. It had been over a year since Mycroft's last deplorable night of company, and the company in question had lasted for a single evening - only then with the mortifying transferral of funds beforehand. He knew nothing about how to keep a lover content.

And now Mycroft was to reap what he had sown - to have the keenly miserable experience of disillusioning Lestrade utterly within hours of arrival, then watching the man count the hours until he could escape.

Sweet Jesus. Seven days.

Draining the last of his wine, Mycroft wondered if there was still time to leave.

This had been - quite simply - the most spectacularly unwise idea he'd ever had in his life, and he deserved every moment of the misery he was about to endure. He only wished he could spare Lestrade from having to share that experience.

Even the location had been a blunder. Brainless with lust, he'd engrossed himself in thoughts of seclusion and privacy in which to enjoy one another - not realising that he was cutting them off. A weekend break in a major city would at least have provided Lestrade an escape route: things to see, things to do. Things to occupy his mind. Culture. Cuisine. Transport links.

Mycroft had instead stranded them in the middle of the sea.

He might as well have locked them in a lift for seven days.

Now Lestrade was on his way, and Mycroft could hardly tell the car to turn around.

Perhaps if he told Lestrade to forget the intention of intimacy... to strip the sex out of the sex holiday.

And do what for a week? Mycroft rubbed miserably beneath his glasses. Charades. Table tennis. Read each other the newspaper.

"God help me..." he mumbled into his palms.

He hoped Lestrade had brought a decent book.

Mycroft removed his glasses, folded them onto his laptop, and dragged both hands backwards through his hair. He almost wished it weren't so beautiful here. The view only made him feel more wretched - the Caribbean sea laid open in all its glory, and beside it on a sun-lounger, Mycroft Bloody Holmes: who'd thought he could somehow satisfy the interests of Gregory Lestrade, for a week. Mycroft pressed his palms against his eyes.

How best to offer that ressurance? "You can leave at any time, Lestrade. Do please say. Post-coital, if you can - though I'll also understand mid-way."
And I deserve it utterly, Mycroft thought.

That was by far the worst part.

The sound of footsteps pulled him from his palms.

Before he'd even thought, he'd lifted his head and looked - and there he was.

Perfectly at ease, as if he walked this hillside trail every day of his life, Lestrade strolled between the low-lying plants. He moved with the same calm and steady purpose that had first caught Mycroft's eye, all those months ago.

Mycroft's heart collapsed and died at once in his chest.

The man was so at home in the world. Nothing seemed to ruffle him; nothing bothered him.

Mycroft watched him approach, unbreathing, telling himself in desperation that it would be fine. They'd never be alone again after this week. What did it matter if Lestrade remembered him only with weary reluctance? Perhaps seeing the man tire of Mycroft after the first few unspectacular shags would teach him to conduct himself with more control in future.

Lestrade stepped onto the terrace, saying nothing. He passed along the poolside - slow, steady steps - and came towards Mycroft's sun lounger.

He held Mycroft's gaze as he did.

Speak. Speak to him. Say something.

But Mycroft's throat had sealed shut.

Speak, you fool! This is agonising enough! At least greet the man you just put through a fourteen-hour journey.

Mycroft's heart heaved.

He couldn't.

Lestrade was... magnificent.

That quiet tread; his broad and easy strength. The way his dark shirt creased in a V at his collarbones. His serious eyes.

The night gathered around him like it loved him.

Mycroft had wanted very few people in his life - no-one, on this scale. No-one like this. It stole his very breath.

Lestrade had reached the foot of his lounger. Mycroft stiffened, bracing to speak - to say something - anything - but Lestrade didn't appear to be stopping. He planted a knee between Mycroft's legs, laid a hand on each arm of the lounger, and leant down.

Mycroft realised only half a second before it happened.

It wasn't enough time. He wasn't ready.

Lestrade's mouth crushed against his own.
It cut off a gasp that ripped itself at once into a moan. The rest of Lestrade's weight shifted into the loungers and pinned him - and as Mycroft realised he was now being held down and kissed, his entire world erupted into fire.

He panted against Lestrade's mouth, whimpering with relief as it burned.

Lestrade's tongue eased forwards to coax his lips apart. Mycroft couldn't remember taking hold of the man's biceps. He clung onto them, heaving into the kiss, as without another moment's waiting, Lestrade began to fuck his mouth - rough, ardent thrusts of tongue - wanting him, having him. Mycroft jerked in desperation. Lestrade pushed himself closer, sliding between Mycroft's thighs as they parted over the arms of the loungers for him, and they kissed in a fury - gasping each other's breath, straining to get nearer, grinding their hips with urgency. Mycroft's entire body blazed with the sensation. He fought for breath, now dragging both his hands through Lestrade's hair. This felt raw - it felt wild. It felt sublime. Lestrade shuddered, snarled into his mouth, and began to thrust against him in rhythm with his tongue.

*Rutting*, Mycroft thought. Like animals. Fucking. Fucking through clothing. Fucking with their mouths. Pinned down and fucked, with a hand fisted in his hair, holding him still to enjoy his whimpering mouth.

He realised one of his hands had found its way to Lestrade's arse.

He dug his fingers in, dragging the man pleadingly against him.

The growl it earned made his head whirl. He'd never been so hard in his life. Lestrade was hard, too - aroused, and *showing* him - nuzzling the thick bulge of his heavy cock with neither gentleness nor patience against Mycroft's, and they were alone here - utterly alone. No-one existed but Lestrade. There was no-one to watch, no-one to know - just the sunset, and the ocean, and the fingers tightening in Mycroft's hair. Lestrade tilted his head, angling his mouth for deeper thrusts of his tongue. Mycroft swore around Lestrade's tongue, shivering, panting for more - but the hand did not release him. It held him just where Lestrade wanted him. The rutting roughened. Mycroft writhed, gasping, and took it.

As he began to tremble, Lestrade hissed with satisfaction. He murmured into Mycroft's mouth - the first word - the first word they'd spoken, growled between rakes of his tongue.

"*Good?*

Mycroft gasped as if it were his last. "*Good - *

Lestrade grinned. *Christ help me.* His hand slid between them, grasped Mycroft's aching cock through his trousers, and squeezed.

"*Beg me,*" Lestrade breathed. His eyes ignited. "*Beg me to help you come.*"

Mycroft pulse lurched. Heat flashed across his face. He panted against Lestrade's mouth, his eyes closing tightly, fighting with his throat to produce the sounds he needed it to.

"*I - I want to - *

"*I know what you want,*" Lestrade said, gripping him by both the cock and by the hair, merciless in his hold of both. Mycroft's heart was pounding itself into pieces. "*I know why I'm here... now beg me for it.*"

Mycroft shook. The words cracked their way free.
"Please - " I never plead. "Please help me come. Please. P-Please, I need to - "

Lestrade reached the waistband of his trousers, and pulled it down.

Mycroft's cheeks burned. He stretched and squirmed as his cock bobbed free. A thread of precome shone in the light of the pool - the sight of his own excitement tugged a moan from his mouth. He clung onto Lestrade, arching his hips as well as he could beneath the man's weight, wanting to help - panting, blushing, as Lestrade worked the fabric down as far as it could come between them.

Thighs pinned apart, now restrained by fabric, Mycroft gripped white-knuckled at the arms of the lounger.

"Please," he gasped out. Lestrade had liked that. He licked his own bitten lips, his chest rising and falling fast. "Please. Please."

Lestrade gazed down at him, panting too. His eyes smouldered as they drank in the sight of Mycroft like this. Desperate, Mycroft thought. Pleading. Pinned.

"Touch yourself," Lestrade murmured. "Show me."

Mycroft trembled, gripping the arms of the chair tighter. "P-Please - I - "

"Show me, gorgeous..." Lestrade didn't fear his fear. "Stroke yourself for me... show me what it's been like."

Shaking, cheeks blazing with the soft and thrilling shock of shame, Mycroft moved both hands to his cock.

He didn't expect the wrap of his fingers to feel so good. He moaned with it, biting into his lip, and Lestrade's expression flushed with want - raw, proud, pagan in its intensity.

"Slow," he warned - soft. "Let me watch."

Mycroft huffed, biting harder. He shut his eyes tight as he began to stroke - one hand and then the other, how he liked - showing, trembling as pleasure coursed in the path of his hands, sliding them shyly from root to tip. His thighs stretched in desperation against his twisted trousers.

Lestrade's fingertips - rough skin, soft pressure - laid upon his stomach. Mycroft quivered, wondering if Lestrade wanted him to stop.

"Keep on," the man breathed. His fingers grazed over Mycroft's ribs, tender across the fragile skin there. Mycroft shivered, eyes still shut, as he nervously coaxed his hands over and over along his straining cock, softening into these comforting curls of pleasure.

Lestrade's weight gently shifted; he leant close.

His warm mouth nuzzled at Mycroft's.

Soft, this time. Asking. Stroking.

Mycroft trembled as they kissed.

Heaven help me. Of course he can kiss like a demi-god. Pressure, control, and gentle demand - slow sweeps of tongue - kisses that felt like sex: easy, coaxing kisses.

Distracted, it came as a shock to feel Lestrade's fingertips skim across his nipples. Mycroft tried to
mask his gasp, but it was heard - and as the pads of Lestrade's thumbs eased up to draw firm circles, Mycroft sobbed with need. Lestrade's tongue coiled into his mouth and he hummed, pleased. Mycroft panted around it, huffing, burning up as he tugged restlessly at his cock.

"Always thought about you doing this," Lestrade whispered, in the wake of his tongue. His eyes gleamed. "Look at you. Blushing... biting your lip. Do you still whimper when you're alone?"

Oh, God. Mycroft's eyes fluttered shut again, unable to bear both sight and sound. Lestrade's eyes were predatory. They were beautiful.

"I bet you do..." Lestrade hummed his low approval of the thought, dipping his wicked mouth to Mycroft's throat. "I bet you pant and blush and make your little sounds... I bet you think about this, too..."

And he licked Mycroft's neck.

Mycroft cried out. He then panicked, his thoughts suddenly skittering across the hillside in awareness of who might be listening - who might be witnessing this - hearing this happen to him, all his shame laid bare. There were other villas nearby. Other properties. He shrank quickly into silence, panting at full pelt.

"We - oh God, we - " The words broke from him in fragments. "P-Public - oh - fuck - "

Lestrade grinned against his neck, delighted by the obscenity.

"Can you come quietly?" he asked, still teasing Mycroft's nipples.

Heat bloomed afresh over Mycroft's face. "Oh - God - "

"Mhm..." Lestrade nipped at his earlobe. "Let's find out."

And he began to wind his way down the sun-lounger.

"Oh...!" As Lestrade nuzzled into his navel, Mycroft's head dropped back against the cushion. "Oh, fuck," he breathed, gasping. "Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck."

"If you say that word once more," Lestrade warned, licking a long stripe just above the line of Mycroft's hair, "I'm going to suck your cock until you scream."

Mycroft screwed his eyes shut, digging his fingers into the padded arms of the lounger.

Lestrade huffed with amusement. He nosed at the base of Mycroft's cock.

"And suddenly you're shy?" he murmured. "What happened to 'please'? I was getting a taste for it."

Mycroft shook in silence, risking a glance down his body - his thighs, still pinned apart; Lestrade amongst the twisted tangle of crumpled linen; his own cock, leaking and swollen, twitching as Lestrade investigated its root with his nose.

"Fuck - ..." Mycroft whimpered to himself.

Lestrade paused. His eyes flashed up into Mycroft's.

The slow smirk nearly stopped Mycroft's heart.

Without another second's pause, Lestrade wrapped his cock in one hand, guided it to his mouth, and
swallowed him almost whole.

Mycroft choked. He arched against the lounger, seized both arms and resisted with all his might the urge to buck. Lestrade was relentless - bobbing almost at once, laving the underside of the head with his greedy tongue and fisting the rest as Mycroft writhed. The low, insistent hum only meant one thing.

Lestrade wanted him to come.

Soon.

Loudly.

Mycroft fought it, biting his lip hard enough to taste blood. Lestrade redoubled his efforts, nuzzling into Mycroft's groin and making sure every wet, slick and torrid sound could be heard.

As fingertips raked up his heaving chest, found his nipples and pinched, Mycroft realised beyond all doubt that they were doomed.

This was going to ruin them both.

A week would never be enough.

These seven nights were going to blow every known corner of the world to smithereens. It was going to break them open on an unthinkable scale, and there wasn't a single bloody thing he could do to change it now. He just had to take it.

He just had to reap what he'd sown.

He came crying out across the hillside, shattered shards of "fuck" and "Greg" and "please". He came whimpering in despair and twisting against the lounger, stretching so hard that he felt a seam rip in the trousers bunched around his thighs. He came in floods down Greg's throat, squirming into the fingers that gently pinched his nipples in reward.

He was still shaking as Lestrade leant over the lounger, undoing his zip.

"Yes," Mycroft gasped, dazed - he pushed himself up to the right height. His whole body tingled with aftershocks. "Yes, yes - "

Lestrade freed his heavy cock, shuddering at the brief stimulation. One hand braced on the back of the lounger; the other wrapped the back of Mycroft's head.

Mycroft responded at once to the gentle pull.

He wrapped his hand in place around Lestrade's lengthy cock, and began to lap - quick, eager flicks with the flat of his tongue.

Lestrade stiffened.

"Shit," he gasped. His face twisted. "S-Shit..."

*Oh, hell - oh, fuck - oh, yes.. Mycroft coiled with his tongue, eyes closing, then gathered Lestrade's prick past his lips and into his mouth. He slid his tongue hungrily against the furrow on the underside; he wrapped his arms around the man's hips to steady him. As he sucked, shivering with enjoyment, the roughened breaths and gasps were all he needed to keep going. Lestrade's fingers laced through his hair - petting him - soothing him. Eased and indulgent after orgasm, Mycroft*
relaxed into letting this feel good. He softened his throat, letting Lestrade rock forwards. He nuzzled at the hand that stroked his cheek.

He'd missed doing this.

He'd forgotten how much he liked it. Obedient before a lover - a lover pleased with him, moaning at his efforts. Lestrade sounded like every wet dream Mycroft had ever had. His cock was full and thick and felt good in Mycroft's mouth, just a little too big to do this elegantly, hard as rock and curved, and his dark thatch of curls smelt male and animal and intimate.

In only minutes, the roughness of Lestrade's breath broke out into panting. Mycroft pushed on, restless, still half-in and half-out of his clothing - naked from the waist down on a sun-lounger, and not caring in the slightest.

"Fuck - ..." Lestrade choked out. His hips jerked forwards; his fingers tightened. "Oh, fuck...!"

Mycroft gripped onto his hips, holding Lestrade as he suddenly swayed. Yes, yes, yes - oh please, yes...

A rush of bitter fluid hit his tongue. He swallowed it back at once, shivering with satisfaction and glorying in the sounds now being made for him - grunts, gasps, fervent moans.

When the fingers finally loosened in his hair, there came his favourite sound of all.

"Mycroft..."

Lestrade breathed it with a shudder. He brushed his fingers through Mycroft's hair, stroking him.

"Y-You alright?" he panted, gazing down at Mycroft as he eased away.

Mycroft gazed back up at him, ruffled and pink-cheeked.

He felt more at peace than he had in years.

Fucked my mouth, he thought, flushing warmly - happy. Watched me climax. Listened to me call his name.

"That - ..." Mycroft swallowed, coughing. His throat squeezed itself back into shape. "That was - really rather - ..."

"Christ," Greg whispered. His expression worked. "Christ, I - I didn't mean just to - then I saw you, and I - ..."

Mycroft's heart strained.

He curled his fingers in the front of Lestrade's shirt, tugging him down.

"Please," he said. "Please - come here."

The lounger was not made for two. They made it work. Elbows bumping, legs entwining, squashed between the wooden arms, they shuffled until they'd settled face-to-face, and Mycroft could hold onto Lestrade while he breathed.

"I'm - glad to see you." The honesty came easily. Mycroft stroked his fingers through Greg's hair, enjoying the feel of the broad chest expanding and sinking in his arms. "I was - a little nervous. I didn't - ... I wasn't sure if you'd - ..."
Greg smiled, slowly. "This place is gorgeous," he murmured, gazing at Mycroft.

"Yes... yes, it is."

"Haven't even been inside yet."

Mycroft's heart swelled. "It's rather beautiful..." *And it is ours, for seven days. And you are mine.* "The bedroom is - ..."

He blushed, distressed that his thoughts had jumped to that. Greg's heart-rate hadn't even settled, and Mycroft was already eager for the next time.

"Tell me," Greg said, voice soft - and he placed a small kiss on Mycroft's jaw.

Mycroft shivered, enjoying the gentle contact immensely.

"It's very pleasant," he said. "The bed is - big, and very comfortable... white drapes. An ocean view."

Lestrade's fingers slipped beneath the crumpled hem of his shirt, stroking his back.

"Yeah?" He nuzzled at Mycroft's cheek. "D'you think we'll be alright here for the week?"


He felt Lestrade's smile curve against his jaw.

"Don't suppose there's a bath around, is there? S'veen a long day..."

"I - yes, of course..." Mycroft didn't want to let go of him - didn't want to relinquish this moment: his bare thighs wrapped with Lestrade's still-clothed legs; the hand gently palming his back; the ocean breathing with them as they rested. "I - should let you settle in... you'll wish to rest. Unpack. Make yourself comfortable."

"Think I've already made myself pretty comfortable," Greg muttered, with a grin.

Mycroft's heart leapt.

He nestled close, trying to remember the last time he'd laid with someone like this after sex - physical affection; playful words and fondness. It made him feel young and bright and safe.

He felt like he wanted to be touched.

"Would you - like to eat soon?" he asked. "I thought I’d wait until you - ..."

Lestrade shivered. "Now you mention it, yeah... yeah, I could eat. I wouldn't say no to a drink, either."

"I'll make arrangements while you bathe." Mycroft bit his lip, stirring slightly in Greg's arms, and glanced along the path up to the villa. "God above, was I... loud? I - forgot that there are other properties in the vicinity..."

Lestrade's eyes sparkled with mischief. "You weren't - ... well... alright, you were a bit loud."

"Oh, God."
"Couldn't help it. Wanted to make it good for you."

"Oh, God."

"Did that get too much?"

"No." Mycroft swallowed, looking directly into his eyes. "Not at all."

Lestrade's smile curled; so did Mycroft's stomach. "You gonna be really awkward all week with me now?"

A flutter of humour lifted Mycroft's heart.

"Oh yes," he said, without pause. "Entirely."

Lestrade laughed. Biting down on a smile, Mycroft added,

"I won't know what to say to you, Lestrade... it's going to be dreadful."

"Mmhm." Lestrade's eyes gleamed. They lingered on Mycroft's lips. "I... want to be good with each other this week," he said. "Have dinner. Talk. See stuff together."

His fingers brushed across Mycroft's lower back.

"Is that alright?" he said. "I'm not - ... I mean, if you just want to fuck..."

Mycroft's heart quickened. He gazed at Lestrade, holding his breath - then in a hormone-soaked surge of courage, reached up to catch the man's mouth.

Their third kiss was the softest of the three by far - as slow as the lull of the sea, and so tender that it thinned Mycroft's breath. Greg held him, stroked him, and by the light of the emerging stars, gently kissed him. Long moments passed.

The strokes of his lips were feather-soft.

"I want - ..." Mycroft couldn't stop kissing him to get the words out. He needed to feel their mouths brushing a little longer, the slow play of lips against his own. He needed this. " - e-everything. Please. Everything you'd wish to give."

"For a week," Lestrade murmured. Mycroft flushed.

"For a week..." he said.

"'kay." Between kisses, Lestrade said, "Should warn you. Quite a few things I now wanna give you."

_Oh, Christ._ "Give me them," Mycroft breathed, reeling at his own lasciviousness.

"Can I kiss you like this?" Lestrade asked, softly. "When I want?"

Mycroft shivered to the very core of his bones.

"Yes," he whispered, weak.

"Hug you, if I want?"

"Yes."
"Drag you into the bath with me," Lestrade said, "and get my hands over every gorgeous inch of you if I want?"

Mycroft's heart shattered. "Yes."

"Alright." Pulling him closer, Lestrade murmured, "Good."
As they walked the trail back to the villa together, Greg reached for Mycroft's hand. He decided immediately that he liked the little flush it caused - the quiet, secretive flash of a smile. Mycroft moved close at his side through the darkness, barefoot on the sandy stone path and with his laptop under one arm. Though he didn't speak, there was delight written in the upturned corners of his mouth.

He was moving a little differently, Greg thought - not quite so burdened with his own importance. Not quite as propped up by it, either.

He seemed happy.

As they approached the front door, he glanced back at Greg in hope of approval.

Greg grinned, eager to be shown.

This night was starting to feel a bit enormous. *This week*, he thought.

He had a feeling he was going to enjoy every second of it.

It turned out villas were as unbelievable on the inside as they were on the out. This one had a certain compactness that Greg liked - not a sprawling and stupid amount of space, in which they would rattle around like peas in an oil drum. Everything was instead in one long space, with dividing walls drawn back: a lounge area, plush sofas and pillows and a huge TV; a dining space with a table for two that looked out over the ocean; at the far end, the bedroom - white and cream, gorgeously soft in its shades. Linen drapes. A glass wall with the sea laid out beyond it. The bed was vast.

Mycroft was going to look magnificent in the middle of it tonight - panting prettily, blushing and whimpering as Greg fucked him.

Private bathroom. Posh toiletries; towels piled in perfect fluffy white cubes; a bath so big it probably counted as a pool.

Greg wasted no time in getting the taps running. Water gushed into the bath, steaming at once. Mycroft hovered beside him, a little nervous now the tour was completed. Greg decided they could dispense with nervous. He turned to Mycroft, reassuring him with a smile, and reached at once for the buttons of his shirt.

"C'mere," he murmured, undoing the first. Mycroft flushed gorgeously. "Let's get you cleaned up, posh boy. Look at the mess I've made of you..."

Mycroft shivered, biting his lip. "To my benefit."

"Mmh. I hope you know we're going to a beach at some point..."

Mycroft's pupils swelled; his eyes flickered into Greg's, checking. He didn't dare ask in words.

"What?" Greg said, amused, as he worked his way through the buttons. "Brought me to the Caribbean... of course I'm going to ruin you somewhere on a beach."

"The beaches here are public," Mycroft said, his flush deepening.

Greg undid the last button. "Means and ways," he said, pushed the fabric back from Mycroft's
shoulders, and loosened it down his arms.

Mycroft breathed in, slowly. His eyes fluttered shut as Greg leant in to kiss his bare neck.

"Oh, God..." he whispered, thickly. His arms wrapped around Greg's shoulders. "Oh, God help me... we only just - ..."

"Mm hmm." Greg nuzzled beneath his jaw, reaching for the waistband of his trousers. He slid them down with a little more finesse this time. "You were there on New Year's Eve, posh... you knew what this would be like. That's why you've put an ocean between us and England... so none of them can hear you."

"Oh - Christ - "

Greg sank to his knees to take the trousers the rest of the way - freeing them from Mycroft's ankles, one and then the other. He kissed his way gently back up his thighs.

"Look how gorgeous you are..." he whispered, finding freckles - he fucking loved freckles. He nosed at them fondly, promising he'd be back later, then nuzzled into Mycroft's stomach, enjoying the faint noise of desperation that it caused. "You're so bloody elegant. You know I've been picturing you naked for months?"

"... m-months?"

"Mnhm. Can't believe I get to do this at last..." Greg sighed, rising back to his feet, and trailed his hands with longing up Mycroft's sides. He was still fully dressed. "You know we're not going to sleep tonight...?"

Mycroft let out a whimper, scrabbling for his buttons.

As they waited for the bath to fill, naked and surrounded by shed clothing, they kissed and touched each other slowly on the warm tiles. Mycroft trembled whenever their tongues stroked. He was so tactile, Greg thought - so affected by even gentle touches - how did he cope for long stretches without this? How did he force himself to live without it?

With the bath run and steaming, Greg stepped into the water. He held Mycroft's hands to help him over the side - Mycroft was blushing, shivering still. He looked as if he couldn't quite believe this was happening, torn between gazing into Greg's eyes and avoiding them desperately.

Greg rested against the side, guiding Mycroft to lie against his chest. He cuddled into Greg, wet, and Greg's heart gave a quiet twinge as they settled.

There was a moment of shared peace - a moment of quiet.

Greg hid a kiss in Mycroft's hair.

"First question," he murmured, with a small smile curling at his mouth. "How the fuck d'you pronounce this place?"

Mycroft snorted, grinning against his collarbones. It took ten years off his face.

"Saint Barthélemy," he said.

Greg's brain sparked. "Right - so - 'sawn' - we've got that bit..."

"Barthélemy."
"Hang the fuck on. Okay, I should've mastered 'b' by this stage in my life -"

Mycroft started to laugh.

"Bah-tail-aymee," Greg said, grinning, as the other man shook against him. "Sawn bah-tail-aymee."

"Saint Barthélemy," said Mycroft.

" - right - and for those of us with a London accent: sawnbahtailaymee."

"Perhaps I should handle French?" Mycroft said, no longer trying to hide his delight. His eyes were more gorgeous than the sunset.

"Fine," Greg said, still grinning. He felt his heart fill to twice its size. "You do French. I'll carry the bags, run you baths, and persuade you into flouting the local decency laws... which I probably should've googled before I got here."

"There's - wi-fi."

"You're here," said Greg. "Of course there's wi-fi."

Mycroft snorted with laughter into his collarbones again, wrapping a nervous arm around Greg's waist. "I - possibly should have realised you'd be like this..."

"Of course you should," said Greg, holding him close. "This is entirely your fault, posh. You're supposed to be smart..." He kissed Mycroft's temple, brushing back his hair. "You should've spotted from four-thousand-miles away that I'd be a rascal from start to finish. I can't believe you didn't."

"Oh, God... perhaps I did..."

"And brought me anyway, mhm? Telling." Greg reached for a sleek orange bottle on the side, reading the label with a raised eyebrow. "What is 'scalp revitalizer'?" he asked. "Is this what we commoners know as 'shampoo'?"

Out of the bath, Mycroft made a phone-call.

Greg relaxed naked in a wicker chair by the bed as he did, letting the warm night air dry his skin and his hair. He'd not felt this lazy and peaceful in years. A whole week, he thought - this was going to be amazing.

Mycroft spoke for a few minutes in quick and faultless French, then hung up.

"Dinner will be here in around an hour," he said - and glanced rather pink-cheeked at Greg's blatant lack of clothing. Mycroft had taken to light trousers and another linen shirt. Greg wondered if these ones would end up torn and crumpled, too. He hoped so.

"Ordered us pizza, have you?" he asked.

Greg's eyebrows lifted towards his hairline. "Wow... and they just - deliver...?"

"The villa is serviced by one of the main hotels," Mycroft explained. He indicated the phone, which Greg now realised was not Mycroft's own. "We have a direct line to the concierge, if you require anything..."

"Anything?" Greg said, his eyes dancing.

"Mm," said Mycroft. "Anything."

Greg grinned. He passed a hand back through his hair, tousling it idly into spikes. "Sounds like a challenge..."

"Whatever you think of," Mycroft warned him, bemused, "they will have had it requested before - both seriously and in jest. And they will supply it. This is Saint Barthélemy. Their main clientele are the undeserving rich."

Greg bit the tip of his tongue. "Like you?" he teased.

Mycroft's eyes gleamed.

"This is my first holiday in three years," he said. "I deserve it. I assure you."

Greg rolled his lower lip between his teeth. "Come the fuck here."

Mycroft lowered his gaze - guarded, and a little playful. He tossed the phone gently onto the bed.

"Considering your state of dress," he said, "I'm a little concerned as to your intentions, Lestrade..."

Greg smiled, relaxing back into the chair. 'Greg' when they were fucking; 'Lestrade' when in control. He wondered how many days it would take to tip the balance. How many hours, if he tried really hard.

"I'm going to hold you on my lap a while," he said - and watched Mycroft's eyes soften at once. "I'm going to kiss you. Put my hands under your clothes. Don't think you'll be able to come again yet, but... I'm pretty sure I can get you hard. And I want you thinking about tonight while we eat."

He watched a shiver course its way from the crown of Mycroft's head right down to the small of his back.

"Tonight?" Mycroft said. "It - already is the night."

Greg held his eyes, waiting.

As Mycroft settled into his lap, Greg reached up for his lips.

"Tonight," he said against them, sliding his arms around the gorgeous bastard's waist, "when I get you on your back in that bed - right there - and do what I've wanted to do to you for months... and watch you blush for me, and beg, while you're writhing on my cock."

He felt the shiver this time - enjoyed the palpable ripple of it right along Mycroft's spine, trickling its long way down beneath Greg's hands.

"God help me," Mycroft whispered. "This - this is - ..."

"I know," Greg murmured. He licked his lower lip. "Kiss me."
Greg allowed himself to be persuaded into clothing just in time for the staff to arrive. As they laid out food, he watched from the lounge with casual interest.

It was amazing to see them react so fluidly to Mycroft - what he wanted, what he expected. These people were the top of their profession, and they could tell at first glance that Mycroft wouldn't be moved by smiles and chat. Instead they worked efficiently, silently, as co-ordinated in their movements as a flock of airborne birds. They adjusted every piece of cutlery to precision. A glass vase appeared on the table with fresh flowers. Candles were lit with a flash of a lighter, which then disappeared up someone's sleeve like a magic trick. It was all done in minutes.

Curious, Greg loitered near the door as they finished.

As they approached him to leave, warm smiles appeared at once on their faces. Their eyes brightened.

"Bon appétit, sir. Have an excellent evening."

"Good night, sir."

"Enjoy your meal, sir."

Greg smiled, opening the door for them. "Thanks, guys. G'night."

They left.

Alone once more, Mycroft laid a nervous hand on the back of a chair. "Shall we?"

The food was fantastic. Greg had suspected it would be - fresh seafood, straight out of the ocean, and spiced like it was meant to be spiced. He'd never had gnocchi before. He found himself pressing his pad of his thumb against the last few scraps, licking them up from the bowl.

He'd had microwaved lasagne last night. Not even good lasagne.

As they ate, the quiet felt fairly content; Mycroft was watching him with gentle bemusement.

"What?" Greg said at last, grinning as he browsed the dessert tray. He didn't even recognise half these fruits. The only thing he knew for sure were the banana coins. He hardly ever ate banana back home - now he couldn't stop eating it.

Mycroft watched him almost fondly, taking a quiet sip of wine.

"You're - a creature of the senses," he said. "Aren't you? Taste... touch. You like - trying things."

Greg picked up another squishy pink piece of fruit. "This is all new to me," he said, bright-eyed. "Don't remember the last time I tried something new... m'making the most of it."

Mycroft smiled to himself, thinking. He lowered his eyes.

Greg watched his fingers curl slightly on the table-cloth - the smallest hint of a thought suppressed.

Greg made a jump of logic, placed a cube of papaya in his mouth, and idly leant back in his chair.
He let his foot extend beneath the table, and brushed his toes across Mycroft's leg - offering that establishing touch - a stroke that said, *I meant it, you know. You can touch me.*

Mycroft's fingers curled again.

Greg stroked gently with his toes, up and down.

*Brought me here to have me, gorgeous. Have me.*

Mycroft reached quietly towards the plate. He took himself a gooseberry as cover for his returning hand to move. It settled without a sound upon Greg's forearm, resting against the table. He laid two tentative fingers on Greg's wrist - and gently, cautiously petted.

The response that curled through Greg's stomach cut his breath.

That careful brushing - fingertips only, light against the vulnerable skin of his wrist - the smallness of it caused something wild and dark and willing to flare beneath his bones. The tiny, shy touches were incendiary. Before he'd even swallowed his papaya, Greg knew exactly what was about to happen.

As he scraped back his chair, Mycroft looked up - a little startled. He withdrew his hand at once.

"Are you - finished?" he said, faltering.

*I've barely started,* Greg thought, getting to his feet.

He moved around behind Mycroft's chair - slow, not wanting to spook him - and placed a hand either side on the table, settling close.

Mycroft shivered at once.

"W-What are you doing?" He twitched as Greg's head bent to the crook of his neck, and began to nuzzle. At the first lick, a gasp left his mouth. "Oh...!"

Greg closed his eyes, every inch of his body thrumming with enjoyment as he breathed in Mycroft's scent. His neck felt like silk against Greg's lips - pale, perfect, soft.

Unmarked.

He kissed the fragile skin, letting the contact linger.

"Be comfortable with me," he murmured. "Please."

Mycroft trembled in his arms; his breathing came slightly measured.

"I want you," Greg soothed, and licked his pretty neck. "All of you. Want you to want me, too. This is okay."

He lifted his eyes to the dessert tray, reached out with care, and picked up the nearest thing. He didn't know what it was. He didn't care - something jewel-bright and pale yellow that squashed with ease in his hand, oozing juice between his fingers.

He rubbed it slowly as he kissed Mycroft's neck, squeezing more from the pulp.

Mycroft's eyes had fallen shut; he hadn't noticed.

"You know something?" Greg let his voice fall low; he let it rumble across Mycroft's neck. "I think
you're a creature of the senses, too. I think you repress it. And I think you shouldn't."

He brought his wet fingertips to Mycroft's mouth.

At the stroke of a thumb across his lips, Mycroft trembled and breathed in sharply - he kissed the
digit, shy. As Greg brushed with more insistence, Mycroft flushed and let his lips part just a little -
offering a timid touch of tongue, acquiescing.

At the tentative lick, Mycroft discovered the juice.

The noise he made shivered straight to Greg's cock. It was a little moan, desperate - just a touch high.
A quiver and a gasp quickly followed, as Greg's fingers nuzzled their way inside his mouth, Mycroft
began to lap at them anxiously, tasting - shuddering as they persuaded him to let them a little deeper -
surrendering his mouth and sucking, trembling in Greg's arms.

Greg stroked the shy pink tongue as it bathed his fingers.

This memory would be making him hard for years to come.

He reached his other hand for Mycroft's shirt buttons, gently undoing the first as Mycroft worked.
He'd opened three by the time that Mycroft realised. He whimpered around Greg's fingers, huffing,
arching a little in the chair.

"Mm?" Greg stroked his lips over Mycroft's temple, slipping open the fourth button. Mycroft was
fellating his fingers with all the fervency he'd sucked Greg's cock, gripping the base of the chair in
both hands, arms pinned to his sides by Greg's hold. "Fuck me up, you're pretty... should've known
you'd love oral... that clever mouth of yours."

Mycroft shook, whimpering. Greg eased his fingers a little deeper, parting two more buttons,
murmuring against Mycroft's ear.

"Tempted just to bend you over the table like this. Let you suck on my fingers while I fuck you
breathless."

Mycroft gasped in desperation around his mouthful. He gave a fervent and frantic nod, pink tongue
curling and pulling and flicking, swallowing.

"There's a 'yes', if ever I saw one..." Slipping open the final button, Greg used his grip on Mycroft's
mouth to ease his head back a little, neck arched, drawn back against Greg's shoulder. Mycroft began
to pant around his mouthful. Greg licked the shell of his ear. "But then, I want you in that big white
bed as well... suppose we only get one first fuck... need to show you properly what you've let
yourself in for, don't I?"

Mycroft's thickened gasp contained an attempt at the word 'please'.

Greg bit his lip, pulling it between his teeth. He splayed a hand on Mycroft's bare stomach.

"Any preference?" he breathed, and licked Mycroft's earlobe again. "You choose, gorgeous. Table
or bed?"

Mycroft heaved in his arms, swallowing. Greg eased his fingers free to let him speak.


"Table tomorrow, mm?"
"F-Fuck - ...

"Mhm. My favourite word." Greg slid his hand downwards, slowly, easing to cup the urgent strain of Mycroft's cock. He was hard as hell. "Oh, darlin'... this really fucking works for you, doesn't it? Is it voice or fingers?"

"It's you - " Mycroft gasped.

Greg let that soak into his soul for a moment. He soothed his lips over Mycroft's earlobe, enjoying the word in his mouth as he rubbed at his swollen cock.

"Me?" he murmured. "Good to hear. Is the fruit coming with us to bed?"

Mycroft panted in quiet panic - blushing, fighting it. He sunk his teeth into his lip.

Greg smiled against his neck. "You don't give yourself what you want that often, do you?"

Mycroft let out a noise of despair. Something in his expression broke.

"Please," he groaned. His hips pushed up into Greg's hand. "Please, the - the fruit - "

"Mm?" Greg trailed his fingertips over Mycroft's lips again, idle. "Want me to feed you while I'm inside you?"

"C-Christ - "

"M'l getting too much?"

"N-No. No, I - I want - ..." Mycroft huffed, heaving, dropping his head back onto Greg's shoulder. "Fuck, just - please, I - "

Greg stroked a kiss over the crook of his neck.

"C'mon," he murmured, let go of Mycroft, and picked up the tray.
As they entered the bedroom, Lestrade switched out the main light. He laid the tray of fruit on the edge of the bed, turned on the lamps, and pulled his shirt off over his head.

He didn't seem nervous at all.

He wasn't hesitant. He wasn't now questioning whether he were some kind of deviant.

He was just shirtless and smiling, quite at ease. He moved towards Mycroft with eyes that glowed more warmly than the lamps - as if nothing was wrong in the world.

Mycroft couldn't breathe.

He'd lost the ability some time ago - though he didn't seem to be suffering for it. He gazed at Lestrade as he came close, trying not to panic, and found himself held safely in those dark and smoking eyes.

Lestrade seemed to understand. He slid his hands around Mycroft's jaw, leant up, and gently claimed his mouth.

The kiss was shocking in its intimacy - a soft but somehow bruising kiss, from a mouth that had already developed a taste for his nervousness. The hands that held Mycroft's face seemed to want every piece of him. Lestrade's tongue was as gently insistent as its master, and something about letting it push between his lips made Mycroft feel feverish and hot and afraid. Lestrade was smashing through all his barriers like a charging bull, caring not a bit for each one, and their fervent rush of relief on the terrace hadn't done a thing to take the edge off this moment.

As the kiss deepened - without a flicker of shame - Lestrade's hands wandered the full length of Mycroft's back.

They cupped his arse, hungrily, and tugged him closer.

Oh!... oh, dear God... what have I done? Mycroft drove his fingers through Lestrade's hair, panting into his mouth. Their burgeoning erections rubbed. Why the hell didn't I do it sooner? Lestrade made a pleased sound into the kiss, enjoying Mycroft's show of arousal, and squeezed his arse through his trousers.

Mycroft's heart reeled, now beating fit to burst.

He tried not to think of the paid company in whose arms he'd sought comfort over the years. None of them had ever squeezed him by the arse. They wouldn't have bloody dared - nor would they have wanted to.

Lestrade seemed to want him to know he was wanted.

It was intoxicating.

They collapsed backwards onto the bed together, grappling a little for purchase, and Mycroft squirmed as he realised he was blushing again. Lestrade sighed into his mouth, gave a shiver, and began to loosen Mycroft's trousers.

Oh, God... oh, oh God...
It didn't matter that Lestrade had already seen him naked. This was pre-coital nudity, and it was wildly different. From every gratuitous warning that Lestrade had given, it was going to be extensively coital. Mycroft flushed to his hairline at the thought, wriggled and stretched slightly to assist.

As he released Mycroft's ankles from the fabric, Lestrade began to kiss his way back up. He trailed his greedy mouth over Mycroft's shins, over his knees, up over his trembling thighs and briefly tended to his cock - a few shameless flashes of tongue that made Mycroft tighten up and whimper - then he leant over Mycroft, eyes burning, and guided Mycroft's hands to his waistband.

Obeying in hope of praise was far easier than facing his own arousal. Mycroft willingly unknotted the linen tie, tugged the material down and gently retrieved Lestrade's heavy cock from inside. *Heaven help me, did this actually fit in my mouth?* Mycroft longed suddenly to remind himself - but he didn't dare just scoot forward and try.

Instead he stroked Lestrade slowly, gazing up at him, watching the man bite into his lip.

"Yes?" he said, tentative.

Lestrade shivered. He pushed down the rest of his trousers, stepped from them naked, and climbed back onto the bed.

"Yes," he snarled. Mycroft's pulse kicked into triple-time. Their mouths met - another blistering, breath-stealing, torrid kiss - and as Lestrade negotiated himself between Mycroft's thighs, rubbing their swollen erections together without hesitation, Mycroft dug his fingers into the man's shoulders and prayed.

He prayed to survive this week - prayed not to come right now, rutting like teenagers - prayed he could make this good for Lestrade. He didn't know how to be forceful. He didn't know how to assert his own longing.

He hoped Lestrade taught him.

He hoped seven nights would be enough.

"This is the part you tell me I was supposed to bring lube," Lestrade murmured, as their mouths brushed. Mycroft hadn't realised he was panting. Lestrade's voice was soft and rough at once, and it made him shake.

"I - ... there are - ... i-in the drawer..." Mycroft suddenly hoped his selection was adequate.

Lestrade looked at once. As Mycroft nervously loosened the covers and sheltered himself beneath, trying not to disturb the tray of fruit or acknowledge it in anyway, he watched Lestrade find the lubricant and examine it.

A wry expression formed, as some pleasing conclusion was reached.

Mycroft hesitated. "I-is it - not...?"

Lestrade swallowed a smile. He met Mycroft's eyes. "This is posh lube."

*Lube.* Dear Christ, the casualness of it.

"How is - 'posh' differentiated from 'normal' - "
Lestrade got into bed, laying the bottle to one side.

"My first clue was the monogram," he said, slid near to Mycroft and leant across to kiss him, pulling him close at once. Mycroft shuddered at the warm press of their bodies beneath sheets. "Only a small bottle?"

_Sweet lord._ Mycroft had worried Lestrade would think him brazen for bringing quite so much.

"We can - perhaps acquire some more, through the - "

"_Please_ let me listen in while you ring the concierge for anal lube," Greg murmured, and began to kiss his neck. "Believe me, that's a memory I'll treasure..."

It wouldn't be the only much-cherished memory from this trip, Mycroft thought, as Lestrade eased on top of him. He let his head drop back into the pillows. He swallowed as the warm mouth toyed with the side of his neck - the sensitive knot of nerves there - licking, gently sucking.

Mycroft's toes curled.

"Fuck me up," Lestrade breathed. "I love the noises you make..."

Mycroft - unaware he'd even been making _'noises'_ - stiffened. "H-Have I - ?"

"Like you'd come in floods, if I just did this long enough... Christ, the shyness is working for me too..." Lestrade lifted his head, glanced across at the fruit tray, and reached out a hand. "I want to watch you suck my fingers again..."

_So easy._ Mycroft thought, in the small part of his brain not immediately fried into a sizzling wreck of desire. _I want to watch. I want to feel. I want to have._

As Lestrade's fingers brought him the gleam of crushed watermelon, Mycroft flushed with mild distress. This was surely perverse. He glanced into Lestrade's eyes, fearing he would see it reflected there - his own licentiousness - but there was only softness, only the warmth of dark eyes that wanted to see.

Lestrade didn't seem to find this abnormal.

It meant the nuzzle of two fingers against his lips was a little easier to take - and as they slipped inside his mouth, Mycroft quivered with the rush of excitement. His eyes fluttered shut at once. Nervous, he curled his fingers around Lestrade's wrist.

"There you go, sweetheart..." The whisper wound its way through Mycroft's soul, coaxing. "Taste nice?"

Mycroft nodded, shivering. He brushed his tongue around Lestrade's fingers, seeking out each flicker of pulp and juice - _God help me, this is depraved_ - he could feel Lestrade watching him, watching him do this. The sugar-tingle of taste, layered over touch, had Mycroft trembling at once - watermelon, thickness, the weight of wanting eyes - he couldn't cope.

_He and I are about to have sex,_ he thought, reeling. _This is foreplay._

He was fellating Greg Lestrade's hand, naked together in a bed in the Caribbean - Lestrade comfortable between his thighs, his sizeable prick lying hard against Mycroft's stomach, 'posh lube' already moved within reach.
"Oh, sweet God."

"More, gorgeous?" Lestrade murmured, slipping free his fingers. Mycroft swallowed, breathing hard, as Lestrade selected a piece of guava carved into a tiny heart. "Here..."

He placed it, tenderly, on Mycroft's offered tongue.

His eyes glittered as Mycroft ate it.

"Are you comfy like this?" he asked, with a fond half-smile. "Lying down?"

Mycroft swallowed. "Y-Yes..."

"'kay..." Pineapple, next - crushed and squashed, leaking, then brought to Mycroft's desperate mouth. As he curled his tongue around Lestrade's fingers, taking anxious hold of his wrist again, he saw Lestrade's other hand reach for lubricant.

Mycroft closed his eyes at once.

Fuck. Oh, God. Fuck. He concentrated on sucking, and on trying not to come.

He concentrated even harder as a gentle hand eased between his thighs, opening them - coaxing them further apart. Christ. The wet slip of fingers. Christ, oh Christ. Just finding him - wetting - stroking there, circling, massaging, spreading the slickness. Christ, Christ, Christ... fingers in his mouth, feeding him the sugar-taste - fingers toying between his legs, relaxing him, gentling - then - oh, fuck...! - breaching - pushing - thick, and tight - melting, nuzzling deeper, slow, gasping around the fingers in his mouth as the finger inside him stretched its way in gentle swirls.

Mycroft clutched at Lestrade's wrist, begging him in muffled moans not to take the mouthful away.

He suddenly needed it. He'd never needed to suck on something so badly in his life. There was no pain - no discomfort - just longing to be filled. Even as one finger eased to become two, then steadily started to rock inside him, Mycroft held tight to Lestrade's hand.

He was panting with enjoyment by the time the fingers pulled free from his mouth. He let them go only with protest, pleading and trying to catch them. They were replaced at once by a hard, crushing kiss, pinning him back into the pillows. Mycroft hissed, gasping; he gripped Lestrade's back with both hands, and let the man's tongue fuck his mouth with urgency.

He almost didn't notice the push from two fingers to three - too aroused, too desperate, too far gone to care.

"Fuck..." Lestrade breathed - panting with him now, shuddering, pupils huge and dark. "Your fucking sounds... Christ, I could come just listening to you..."

Mycroft had barely been aware of making them. It felt too good to filter the stream that poured from his lips - moaning had become like breathing. Greg's fingers were firm and they were thick and they were inside him, fucking him, sliding in and out in the rhythm of his breath, and he'd needed it for weeks, and he needed to moan.

"I want you," he pleaded - whimpered it - wept it - drawing his legs up to try and wrap them around Lestrade, pull him closer, pull him in. "Fuck me..." he sobbed as he stretched. "Fuck me, fuck me - fuck me please..."

Lestrade reached for the bedside drawer.
"Yes," Mycroft gasped, as Greg ripped open the box and got a packet from inside. He tore it open with his teeth. "Oh, fuck... fuck, yes..."

"Don't you dare come," Greg warned him in a growl. He freed the condom from the packet. "Don't you dare. Not yet."

"I - I need to - I need to, please - ..."

Greg withdrew his fingers. Mycroft sobbed in despair at the sudden emptiness, arched and threw his head back against the pillows. As Greg rolled the condom down over his cock, shaking, the sight alone wrenched Mycroft to the brink. All reason fled. There was only this moment, and what he was feeling, and what he wanted.

He pushed up onto his elbows.

He watched - panting, shaking - as Greg gently took hold of his legs - eased his arms beneath them - parting them, holding them - tugging him closer - oh, fuck... - lining up while gazing downwards, breathing slow.

"Ready?" Greg murmured - a flash of dark eyes.

Mycroft bunched his hands tightly in the sheets. He nodded, sinking his teeth into his lip.

The first press - fuck... - the stretch.

_Filling_.

Pushing - breathing, gripping - fuck, fuck, fuck...

Hands at Mycroft's hips, holding him - protective hands - thumbs that stroked in gentle circles. Greg was steel-hard and huge. Mycroft rolled his head back and huffed and pleaded, stretched apart at the seams and desperate - but his panted requests for urgency went unheeded. Greg made him relax into slow. He took it gently. He took his time.

As they finally came flush, the whole world seemed to lurch.

_Fuck._

_Full of you._

Mycroft gazed upwards, overwhelmed. Shocked brown eyes - big and dark, and so beautiful he wanted to die; mouth open, breathing rough; sweat on Greg's forehead; the scruffed silver hair - the man now inside him.

_Seven nights, full of you._

Swallowing - wanting to come, wanting to cry - Mycroft rocked his hips downwards.

"Please," he whispered. He gazed into Greg's eyes, unable to look away. "Please."

Greg's fingers tightened at his hips.

With the first shallow thrust, Greg's expression slackened. He shuddered, sheathing himself again slowly, enjoying the sensation as he breathed.

Mycroft twisted at the sheets.
He could suddenly feel his lungs working again. He could hear his own voice - hear his own fretful moans - feel the night air soft and kind upon his skin. They were fucking. This was happening. It was real.

They were fucking, and it felt like everything he'd dreamed.

The relief rushed every scrap of air from his lungs. He swallowed as he filled them again, shaking, and his lover sank into him a little further. The slow slide of Greg's cock was perfection. He'd never felt this full.

"Oh..." Mycroft whispered. Another slick thrust - pleasure skittered across his lower back. He felt his face twist as he arched, shocked. "Oh - fuck...!"

"Fuck..." Greg's fingertips skated over his thighs, shaking as he held them apart and open - rocking slowly - stirring. "God, you're tight - "


Greg let out a breathy laugh. His eyes glittered, face flushing.

"Y-Yeah? Too much?" He tightened his hold carefully, and began to move like he meant it.

Mycroft's eyes crossed. He cried out, gasping, clenching down on the feeling inside him.

Greg's fingers flexed. "There, gorgeous...?"


Greg's pupils had swollen to the size of coins. "Can you come from this?"

Mycroft sank his teeth into his lip, nodding fervently. He couldn't pull the words together into anything he could express - yes, when it feels like this; yes, if you keep rubbing right there; yes, because you're beautiful, and I like beautiful men, and you're hard for me and I can't breathe, and it's everything to me - please, please - please make me come like this for you...

Greg didn't change. He didn't stop. He just kept rocking, slow and easy, as he stroked Mycroft's thighs with his palms - a comforting sweep of contact, over and over.

Mycroft didn't know if it was minutes or hours.

It could have been seconds.

It didn't matter.

It felt like nothing would ever feel this good again - like it wasn't possible. The ache of Greg's cock, the slip of warm oil and the grip of his hands wouldn't ever be surpassed. It was so easy just to open - just to give.

Greg somehow seemed to know what he needed. He knew that Mycroft needed gentle, shallow at first - just settling him - quietening him, steady, the easy in-and-out in time with his breath so he could feel Greg inside him. Long minutes of easy, and then the rhythm deepened - slick, slow, a little further on each stroke until every nuzzle of Greg's head was followed by the aching, stretching squeeze of his full length, over and over, so deep that Mycroft couldn't cope. He could only tremble and take, lie beneath Greg and pant, quivering as Greg leant over him. His hot mouth took delight in
Mycroft's neck, kissing and nipping gently - wet sounds - soft sounds - the rhythmic pushing inside him.

Greg knew to ignore his cock - to make him enjoy just this, just Greg - get what he needed from Greg - knew to make him whimper and take and find everything he needed in the feeling of his thighs pinned open, Greg between them, filling him, enjoying him.

"You can't hold it, can you?" Greg's voice seemed to come from within. "You don't even know you're doing it..."

Mycroft swallowed, his consciousness flickering. He struggled a moment to recover speech. "W-What?"

"Just... moaning..." Greg's mouth stroked at his neck. "Whimpering..."

Mycroft flushed in desperation, biting at his tongue. Greg's steady thrusts were faultless. They were making him shake.

"Christ," Greg breathed. "I didn't mean stop... moan, gorgeous... moan it out for me..."

Mycroft trembled, digging his fingers into Greg's shoulders as the slow fucking grew a little harder, a little rougher. Yes. God, yes. Have me. Have all of me. Have what you want from me. He was going to come just from having Greg fuck him. Just the thought of it - what was happening in this moment - who was pinning him, rutting into him, breathing hard because he felt good to fuck.

Shaking, he pushed his nervous hands down the muscular curvature of Greg's back. He quivered with his own daring; it felt too good not to.

As he gripped Greg's arse, and anxiously pulled, Greg shuddered against him.

"Mmhm - fuck -" He dragged in a breath, biting at Mycroft's ear. "Pull me into you, sweetheart... pull me where you need me..."


But the feel of Greg grinding inside him was too much - his cock stretching, sliding, rubbing firm against Mycroft's prostate in deep demanding circles that made him want to scream with enjoyment. He wanted to come for Greg. He wanted Greg to fuck him until dawn and he was exhausted and sore and still moaning. He wanted Greg to fuck him until Greg was finished with him, and not a moment before.

It was too much.

Greg knew not to stop as he came - to fuck him through it, slow and hard. Each thrust drove the pleasure deeper and higher and hotter, and Mycroft shook and sobbed and strained with it. He jerked as he felt himself spattering between them, his ignored cock pounding and pulsing out his orgasm as it rolled and rippled through him in waves - and for every moment of it, Greg kept going - kept moving in him - watching him, gazing at him, panting with his own pleasure as Mycroft came, burning up and calling out.

Barely moments after the rush, he felt Greg shudder and jolt against him. He dug his hands into Greg's arse, hard.

With a groan that seemed to wring him inside out, Greg arched into Mycroft's body in desperation. Mycroft held onto him tightly. He moaned Greg's every exhalation back to him, his heart pounding...
with relief as he watched it happen - watched every twist of Greg's face, every gasp, every grit of his teeth.

"Fuck - f-fucking... Jesus - " Greg heaved with it, shocked. "Fuck..." He stiffened, burying his face in Mycroft's neck. "Mycroft -"

Mycroft had never heard his name gasped like that.

Not once.

Never once in his life.

He wanted just to stay in this moment - never leave it - commit every facet of this second to his memory forever, and never know anything else but this: how it felt to have Greg Lestrade between his thighs, panting free of orgasm, shining with sweat, gasping Mycroft's name into his neck.

Seven days wasn't going to be enough.

This was going to smash his wretched life apart.

In this moment, Mycroft wanted it to. What did it matter? What did any of it matter? The public - the nation - the crown. All of them could burn. He felt more alive in this moment than he had in twenty years. He wanted to cry.

As he felt Greg finally coasting free, Mycroft realised they were both trembling. He pushed his fingers through the man's hair as he swallowed.

"Shhh..." Instinct - comfort. His exhausted lover. Tend to you. He stroked Greg, overwhelmed. "Shhh... shhh..."

Arms - strong, sleepy arms - drew around him. They held him, gathering him close against a chest as big and broad as an island.

"You okay...?" Greg kissed his temple - kissed his sweat, panting. "Christ... that was amazing... you're so fucking beautiful."

Mycroft couldn't speak.

He wasn't sure he'd ever be able to again.

He stroked Greg, lost, running shaking hands along his lover's trembling back - and Greg nosed into his hair. He was still inside Mycroft.

"Feel nice, sweetheart?" he murmured - and Mycroft's heart broke open. "Nice to come with someone?"

Don't.

Don't. Please.

Mycroft felt the words as a stab of pain before he'd even registered his barriers were down. It blistered through him, twisting. You don't understand. You don't understand what I live without. He'd never wanted someone to understand so much: to realise what it meant for him to be lying in a lover's arms, stroked with care after climax - listening to gentle words, given like small gifts - close to tears with the thought they could make love again in the morning, and he would not now be left lonely in a hotel room to reflect on the choices he'd made.
It is sex, you fool.

Sex. Not making love.

Obliterate that phrase from your mind this instant. You're overwhelmed, and that is all. The biochemistry is inescapable. You are raw and emotional and for God's sake you are not to use that phrase again.

But he was so weak.

Four-thousand miles. Spectacular risk. Breathtaking expense - all for this moment.

It was worth it.

That was what hurt the most.

Lestrade hadn't any idea. He held Mycroft for the longest time in gentle silence, stroking his hair as their breathing settled, as the hormones eased their stranglehold.

At last, in that voice of warmth and shadow, he said,

"You still in there, posh?"

Amidst the hurricane of grief, a bright flash of humour.

Mycroft smiled with it.

He couldn't help it. He'd permitted too many emotions today not to let himself smile in this moment. His voice came a little hoarse against Lestrade's collarbones, weak.

"I am fine, thank you... bit of rough..."

Lestrade's soft laugh made his soul flutter. "'Bit of rough'?" He nuzzled into Mycroft's hair, humming. "I like it..."

"Good." Mycroft drew a breath, letting the last of the grief disperse to the edges of his mind. He wanted to enjoy this moment. He had the rest of his life to ruminate on his pain. He lifted his head, barely strong enough to do so, and gazed with fogged affection into the eyes of the man who'd just come moaning his name.

Honesty squeezed at his soul.

"You are... astonishingly handsome," he breathed.

Lestrade grinned. God help me. Your smile.

"Was that alright?" Lestrade asked, gentle fingers trailing down his bare side.

In answer, Mycroft huffed and stretched. It caused another laugh.

"Yeah?" Lestrade bit his lip, delighted. "Glad I didn't disappoint..."

As he gently withdrew, Mycroft squirmed. Oh, God... that just happened. We...

It didn't feel real.

He gingerly tried to sit up, and his thighs strained in immediate protest. He twitched.
"Ah - "

"Easy..." Instant care - instant warmth. Greg stroked his cheek, laying a kiss to his forehead. "Easy, gorgeous... that got intense. Go slow."

Detail returned to Mycroft, flood-lit with sudden clarity. "Oh... God. Fruit..."

"What about fruit?" Lestrade's eyes shone. "Everyone involved with the fruit enjoyed it."

"I - I don't - ..." This seemed important to say. "I don't usually - ...

"Oi..." Lestrade reached out. "C'mere. None of this."

As he found himself pulled into Lestrade's arms, Mycroft fought the longing to cling to him.

"If you like something," Lestrade murmured, "don't clam up about it. Alright? You like taste... you like things in your mouth. I like watching you enjoy it. It's fine, posh..."

He smiled - easy and peaceful.

"Give yourself a break," he said. "You're on holiday."

_First you fuck me senseless, Mycroft thought. And now you start making sense._

"D'you fancy a shower, maybe?" Lestrade smiled, watching him with care. "Rub your back for you under the water?"

Mycroft wondered if it were possible to die of joy. He suspected he would soon find out. "That - sounds wonderful. Thank you."

"Kay. I'll go get it started... rest here. Won't be a minute." As Greg eased from the bed, he paused - then leant down to kiss Mycroft's nose. "Don't miss me," he said.

He slipped through the bathroom door.

Alone, Mycroft gazed at the bedroom ceiling. His heart beat gently to itself in the quiet. _The first time._

It felt like it.

The same shock. The same sensation of being somehow changed.

He stirred - the ache of sex, low in his body, far deeper than he usually felt it. He laid a hand upon his stomach, just beneath his navel, and felt his pulse whispering under his skin. _There._

Some part of him was still coming, still echoing with it.

Mycroft closed his eyes.

He'd missed this feeling. _Taken._ He'd missed the quiet warmth that came after sex. He'd missed being this aware of his own body and what he felt. He found himself for a few quiet moments in love with the sheets against his back; the air upon his skin, fond and forgiving; the deep and gentle pulse still washing through his veins in tiny waves. His stomach rose and fell as he breathed.

It was nice to feel it all without guilt.
He wondered if normal people realised they were fortunate.

To have this with someone, night after night... a partner who wouldn't need to detail their sexual history to MI5 before they were officially authorised to care for you. To make love in privacy, whenever you wished...

It was unimaginable.

And no doubt being taken for granted in this moment, many miles away in England - in ten million different bedrooms.

Mycroft settled himself with a breath. *This is not productive thinking*. He asked his brain kindly not to pursue the matter any further, and pulled himself up onto his elbows.

He wanted to shower.

And he wanted to have his back rubbed under the water.
Familiar

Day Two

Greg woke before his alarm.

He laid in the sleepy silence for a while, eyes closed, waiting for it to begin - that cheery little tune from the bedside that he hated. He kept meaning to pick a different one - something less patronisingly perky - then, every morning, as his feet hit the floor, he forgot about it until it was time to wake up again.

He hoped he had a clean shirt in the wardrobe. Have to do some bloody laundry soon. Tonight after work, maybe... buy a bottle of wine on the way home, telling himself it was to cook with... get some washing in. Hoover. Finish the invoices he'd been putting off all week.

Christ, invoices... I was a detective, once. Chief Super was on his back about targets again. It meant he'd have to get on at his division about it, and they'd hate him again for a while. Donovan inching more and more into open insubordination. A few of the team were starting to follow her lead.

Five years ago, Greg might have had the strength to bark them all back in line.

Not now.

Too many invoices. Too many small, strangling realisations throughout the day that maybe this was it - life. Greg had watched his father work his way into an early grave. He'd sworn to himself he'd never do that - never, never - but now he woke up every morning thinking about targets and laundry, and whether a bottle of red wine counted if you put the bottle out with the bins before bed.

Stretching, breathing into the pillow, Greg reflected that at least he'd had a good night's sleep.

And very good dreams.

Bracing himself, he opened his eyes.

Mycroft was asleep on the pillow beside him. It was dawn in the Caribbean; the sun was just rising over the sea. All the colours Greg had been shown last night were back - brighter, more of them, more beautiful than he remembered. The sky in all its glory awaited him over the ocean, its arms thrown wide to him in streaks of gold and green and periwinkle, guava pink and molten orange - all for him - all in honour of this, the first ever morning he woke up here - the first morning he woke up next to Mycroft.

Greg grinned in the half-darkness.

Mycroft had settled with his back to Greg. He was asleep on his side, slightly tilted forward, one knee curved and a hand tucked up beneath the pillow. The sheets had eased down over his shoulder in the night. His hair was ruffled and red in the glow of the sun.

Greg cast his eye across the scatter of pretty freckles awaiting him.
Mhm.

He shifted slyly across the bed, tucked in behind Mycroft, and slipped an arm around his waist.

As he nuzzled close, he caught the first sleepy stir.

"Greg...?"

 Barely a murmur. Barely awake.

Something about his name in that voice shivered through all of his senses. It made him feel hot - a little dark, a little decadent. He wondered how many lover's names Mycroft Holmes had ever whispered, half-asleep and searching for their presence.

And his was one of them.

He began to kiss the back of Mycroft's neck, light and tiny touches of his lips - enjoying this intimate little place that belonged to him for a week. *I get to kiss you like this... get to be here while you sleep... get to feel you wake up for me, all sleepy, all warm for me...*

Mycroft drew a slow breath, stirring with the tiny kisses. "Mhm..."

The heat in Greg's stomach curled its smoky approval. He nestled closer still, and nudged his cock against the small of Mycroft's back.

The noise it earned him was nearly feline.

"Oh - " Mycroft stiffened at once, stretching. "Mmh..."

Greg trailed a hand along his side, down to the pretty curve of his hip. He curled his fingers there - a gentle, hopeful grip.

"Mm hmm?" he rumbled - and began to nibble at the side of Mycroft's neck.

Mycroft's breath hitched. He arched against Greg, trembling. "Mm hmm..."

Gently, Greg coaxed him onto his front.

It was sleepy, shivering sex - no rush, nowhere to go. Mycroft's every restless moan was a plea. He was softer this morning, shyer, resting in what he knew Greg could give him. He bit down into the pillow as Greg's prick nuzzled inside him, and panted out his pleasure on every stroke, begging softly within seconds. As his vocalising raised in pitch, Greg wrapped an arm beneath him, found his cock and rubbed him slowly in time, tightening those pretty groans into whimpers. Mycroft stretched for him, huffing, gasping it out. Heat rolled from his skin in waves.

Feeling pressure and need begin to burn at the base of his cock, Greg brushed his fingers over Mycroft's forehead - then tenderly back into his hair.

He gripped, lifting his lover's head from the pillow.

Mycroft groaned. His throat squeezed around the desperate sound. The rise of his head brought his ear to Greg's mouth; Greg pressed his teeth into his lower lip.

"Yeah?" he murmured.

Mycroft nodded, swallowing again. "Y-Yes..."

"Oh... fuck..." Mycroft's voice cracked in his throat. "Fuck," he whispered, bit down, and shut his eyes in fervent focus. "Fuck, fuck...",

"Was I worth flying four thousand miles?"

"F-Fuck - yes..."

"Good." Greg lowered his mouth to Mycroft's neck. He slid his tongue across his teeth. "Barely started with you yet. You know that?"

As he bit down, marking the pale and pristine skin, Mycroft ground back against him and sobbed. His cock jerked in Greg's hand, leaking wet now with every lazy swipe of Greg's thumb.

"Rough - " Mycroft pleaded, suddenly. He scrunched his fists in the pillow. "R-Rough - please - "

Greg smiled against the bite-mark he'd left. He kept his hips rolling at the same easy and idle pace, licking the soft red blotch in time.

"Ohh - God...!" Mycroft cried out, bucking back against him. "Please - please..."

"You haven't earned rough yet." Greg tightened his grip, hair and cock at once - Mycroft strained between them. "Don't worry, posh. You will. Now close your eyes and moan it out for me. Got a long seven nights ahead of us."

Mycroft quivered, grasping at the pillows.

"S-Six nights..." he panted.

*Passing already.*

Greg nudged the thought aside. He laved his tongue along Mycroft's neck, choosing his next place to bite. Somewhere gorgeously fucking visible - somewhere there'd be no hiding it.

"You can still count, mm...?" He tightened his fist around Mycroft's cock, and began to fuck him through it. Mycroft's cry rippled through his soul. "Let's get that fixed..."

"Did you say you have to work during the day?"

"Mm." Mycroft's fingers traced a pattern on Greg's chest - dazed little waves, drawn through the dark scatter of his hair. "Remote access."

Greg watched his fingertips play. They were still naked under the sheets together, tangled up - salt and sweat and sex on the air - a shared male warmth that made Greg feel curiously safe.

"Can't believe you have to work on holiday," he murmured. "That's crap."

Mycroft huffed. "The pitfalls of being indispensable to the nation..."
"Christ. I love how casually you come out with that."

Mycroft smiled a little, stirring. The gentle waves of his fingertips eased down onto the top of Greg's stomach.

"There are less agreeable places to spend a few hours working," he supposed. "I'll - probably settle on the terrace, if that suits."

"If that suits...?" Greg realised with a flash of surprise. "Do I have to leave you alone?"

Mycroft hesitated. He glanced into Greg's eyes, faltering.

"I - need to concentrate..." he said.

Greg's heart tugged. The thought of making himself scarce unsettled him. All he really wanted was to make himself available - in a very physical way.

"You - won't be busy all day, will you?" he said.

Something like relief flickered over Mycroft's features. Greg wondered what it was. "I don't expect so. No. A - few hours, perhaps."

"Right..." Greg paused. He leant close, and placed a kiss on Mycroft's temple. "Hey. Tell me if I get - ...

"Get - ...?"

"I dunno. Too much. Too familiar."

Mycroft let out a startled laugh. "Lestrade," he said, "we just - ..."

_Lestrade_. Greg shifted.

"I know," he murmured. "If I start bothering you, then... overstepping myself. Getting in the way."

For a moment, it seemed like Mycroft wasn't sure what to say.

"I will," he said. He lowered his gaze, carefully withdrawing his hand from Greg's chest. "You're - free to do as you like, while I'm - ... if you'd like to go somewhere, or do something, please say. I'll arrange it."

"S'fine... should be okay under my own steam." Greg tried a smile. "I might just go exploring. See what I can find."

Mycroft gave a small nod. "As you wish."

There was a pause - not altogether comfortable.

Greg reached out, wrapped his fingers around the back of Mycroft's neck, and pulled him in.

As they kissed, Mycroft touched his jaw with tentative fingertips - responding as nervously as if they'd never done this; as if he'd not just woken up naked in Greg's arms, begged him for rough, come crying out with Greg seven inches inside him.

They kissed until Greg felt him begin to soften - until the movements of his mouth were no longer stiff.
"Call me when you're done working?" Greg kept his eyes closed. He could somehow feel Mycroft's closed, too. He brushed their noses, slowly. "Not had my fill of you yet. Don't think you've had enough of me, either."

Mycroft shivered slightly.

"No," he confessed - a whispered secret. "No, I... I haven't."

"Mm. Good to hear." Greg cosied his hands down Mycroft's back, taking in the long lines of his body - rounding his arse, squeezing. An odd wish arose. "Can I text you today?"

Mycroft hesitated. "You - may find it quicker to call, if you need something... if the line is engaged, though, a text would - "

Greg smiled against his cheek.

"Don't mean if I need something," he murmured. "Just - y'know. Texting. Chatting. Keep you company while you work."

Mycroft arched an eyebrow - new to the concept. "Chatting?"

"Mm. Little things... back and forth." Greg dipped his head to Mycroft's neck, kissing fondly at the biggest of the bites he had left. "I'll show you, posh... s'easy. You'll be a master by the end of the day."

Mycroft gave a little snort, amused. As Greg cosied his teeth into the crook of his neck, his reply vanished and his breath hitched. "Greg - ..."

Better, Greg thought. He gave an approving squeeze to Mycroft's arse, enjoying his stretch and squirm.

"Have I earned my breakfast yet?" he asked, licking gently at the love-bites.

Mycroft shuddered.

"Yes," he whispered. "Yes, I... I think you rather have..."

---

The island had fourteen separate beaches.

Learning this from Google, as he leant on the balcony wall with coffee and a banana, Greg immediately wanted to find his way to all of them - but, supposing that fourteen was an ambitious target, he decided to start with the best, and see how many he could get through in seven nights.

*Six nights*, he reminded himself, taking a sip of coffee.

The timer was ticking, after all - not that the first night had been in any way wasted.

Another six nights like *that*, and he'd be returning to London feeling like a different man.

Google was kind enough to supply him with a *St Barts Beaches Review: your guide to all the best beaches on St Barts*. The blogger had arranged them all by category, which was handy. *Best beach*
for party people. Best beach for relaxation. Best for surfers. Best for romantics. ('Saline Beach' - Greg made a note.) At the end of the list, Best for sunbathers - and Greg's heart jumped happily as he cross-checked a map he'd downloaded, and discovered it was only a twenty-minute walk from here.

A twenty-minute walk to a sun-drenched Caribbean beach - there were worse ways to spend a morning.

He threw a towel, talc and his sunglasses in a bag, picked a more promising thriller from his stash, and filled a bottle with ice-water. Exploring was all well and good, but if he ended up lost on the first day, lying in a dehydrated pile by the side of a road somewhere, Mycroft probably wouldn't be impressed. Greg's creaking O Level French would only get him so far.


Il habite dans une villa.

There was no sign of Mycroft as Greg pulled on his sandals and prepared to go. It looked like Mycroft had already gone down to the terrace - been there at nine on the dot, Greg guessed - laptop out, ready to work.

As he passed the path to the terrace, backpack over his shoulder, Greg paused.

He sort of wanted to go and say goodbye.

He thought about it for a while, biting his cheek. Why not? They were here together. It'd be rude just to get out of bed, hit the shower, grab some breakfast and vanish... wouldn't it? They'd watched each other come three times now. They'd slept all night in one bed. Surely that justified, 'I'm going now' - a quick kiss - a friendly, 'see you later'.

Then again... Mycroft had just vanished.

The last thing he'd said was nearly an hour ago - a nervous request whether Greg minded him moving his toothbrush.

Greg squeezed his hands in his pockets, gazing down the path a moment longer.

He let go of the thought with a breath. Best not. He didn't want to push things. Out of everything, Mycroft's work didn't seem like it was up for negotiation - and he'd not troubled to find Greg for 'see you later'.

It looked like they weren't at 'see you later'.

Mycroft wasn't, anyway.

Greg wondered why it made him feel a little quiet.

He double-checked the map on his phone, and set off.

It was bizarre to think it was January. The air was as warm as the most glorious London July. A breeze from the sea tempered the sun's heat, but none of its brightness. Every colour that Greg looked at seemed to blaze. In a few minutes he found himself happy just to be out and about, walking along a road with the world open around him. It'd been years since he'd just googled somewhere and gone to see it. Alone in London, he often felt held down and tired - like there wasn't a lot of point to the weekend, and Monday would be here before he knew it. Alone out here, he felt
like he was twenty-one again.

He thought as he walked, hands in his pockets, with the backpack slung over his shoulder.

He didn't really know how Mycroft could stand it - staring at a screen, when all this was just down the road.

Did it maybe just get *dull* after a while? This kind of life? Greg had travelled for a couple of years in his twenties. That hadn't gotten dull. He'd only stopped because a job with the police had sounded exciting and worthwhile, and his parents kept telling him how well his brother was doing at the bank these days. *A detective,* he'd thought - solving crimes - *that'd be dead interesting.*

*Wonder where I'd be now,* he thought, *if I'd kept going. Made it to Thailand. Could have ended up owning a bar somewhere like this.*

And somehow Mycroft was back at the villa, sunken deep into his e-mails.

Maybe the pressures of his job really *were* that severe. A week's holiday in three years. No partner - no boyfriend allowed. *Christ.* Greg still couldn't get his head around it. *Are you sure?* he'd wanted to ask, sitting by the fire in The Diogenes. *Not at all? You're just... not allowed?*

*Such an arrangement is beyond the bounds of possibility,* Mycroft had said. *It is not an option.*

From what Greg understood, Mycroft's superiors would be under no illusions as to why he'd vanished to the Caribbean for a week - and with whom - and to do what.

It seemed bizarre that they'd be willing to overlook that, but not let the guy have a boyfriend to come home to.

*Is it about focus?* Greg thought, as he spotted his first sign for Anse de Flamands, and followed it along the road. Maybe - *... MI5? The government?...* - didn't want people like Mycroft having any priorities in life except their work. *Christ* knew Scotland Yard were keen enough to give their employees that impression. It made sense if Mycroft's bosses did it, too.

*But even just a friend to have fun with? Someone to help ease the stress?* Surely government officials blew off tension in more dangerous ways than having a bloody boyfriend. Apparently cocaine, corruption and taking bribes from foreign powers were fine, but having someone to cook your dinner and go down on you when you were tired was not.

Then again, the powers-that-be rarely made a lot of sense.

Greg knew it well enough. He spent three days out of five doing paperwork now. They only ever dragged him from his office for the weird cases - the ones that made no sense - it was no wonder he spent so much time driving round to Baker Street.

Realising he was in the middle of paradise, and his thoughts had somehow drifted onto work, Greg shook himself and took a look around. *Nuts to work.* Work didn't exist for a week. He didn't even know what Mycroft had said to Scotland Yard - where everyone would think DI Lestrade had suddenly disappeared to. *Gossip* would be rife already.

DI Lestrade didn't care.

He was going to the beach, to nap by the sea and read his book.
Christ...

It was like a fucking postcard.

Shocking blue sea, and sky without a cloud. White sand, sugar-soft - and the second Greg stepped on it, he needed to lie down on it.

There wasn't another person around.

Where the hell is everybody...? Greg chose a spot near a palm tree, wondering if he'd strayed by accident onto some billionaire's private property. It didn't look like it - there were hotels nearby, and bars. He laid his towel out, and sat down on it, and looked at the fucking sea, so blue he couldn't bear it. Jesus, this is happening. He quietly unbuttoned his shirt, wriggled out of his trousers and laid back in his swimming trunks upon the sand. His heart was pounding just to be here. As he settled, the sun melted over his skin like warm oil, and he bit back a groan at how good it felt.

This was paradise.

Fuck. Fuck, yes...

Oh, fuck... why aren't you here?

Why aren't you lying here with me, posh?

He could even have brought the bloody laptop.

Greg wasn't planning on prattling at him like a parrot, asking what he was working on. Just lying here, warm...

Just... be near each other.

Nuzzle close for a kiss, now and then.

Bloody hell, what have I gotten myself into? Last night, holding Mycroft quietly in the shower, stroking mandarin-scented foam across his back and feeling him tremble, he'd had the feeling this would all be easy. They'd be napping in a hammock together from dawn until dusk every day, dozing in the sun, talking and kissing, then sleeping very little at night. They'd just be together, constantly - close.

He hadn't imagined he'd be spending the best hours of the day alone.

There were worse places to be alone. Far worse. His desk at work, for one. His quiet flat. Chopping vegetables by himself in his kitchen.

It would be nice, though - more than sex.

And Mycroft had seemed to want that, last night.

Hadn't he?

Tangled together in the sun lounger. I want everything. Please. Everything you'd wish to give. He'd kissed Greg almost like he loved him - like they'd be lying here right now, enjoying every second of this week - just talking - talking about everything.
Christ, Lestrade... the guy's not brought you here to talk... Greg's heart strained, as he realised he'd hoped that they would. It was their last chance, after all.

Never again, next week.

An unsettling whisper of regret arose in his mind. They'd talked for hours on New Year's Eve, just lying on Sherlock's couch together, drunk as hell. Now this was their final week of ever knowing each other. Maybe if I'd said no... we could... at least friends, right? Could have... met for coffee, just... but would Mycroft even have wanted to know him, after saying no? Greg's chest ached with it.

He frowned at himself, shifting with discomfort on the sand. He was in paradise for a week of explosive sex with someone gorgeous, and all he could do was lie here and grieve that they'd never be able to talk about puff pastry again?

Sighing, Greg opened his eyes.

Endless blue gazed down at him.

He laid his hands on his stomach, lacing his fingers quietly, and gazed back up at the blue.

Three times, he'd now watched Mycroft come apart in his hands - three gorgeous times, each prettier than the last, gasping Greg's name and whimpering like he'd never been touched in his life.

Three times, he'd watched Mycroft nervously ease away.

The minutes right after Mycroft came were perfect - soft, honest minutes - and then the nerves seemed to set in again. It was like he suddenly remembered where he was. Fretting about fruit... what's to be scared of?

Reaching for his water bottle, Greg wondered how long it had been since Mycroft had given himself what he wanted. All of what he wanted - not just a bite. Sherlock said Myc had been a chunky kid. Joked about it, quite a bit. The taste thing might lean in that direction, too - but Mycroft definitely wasn't a chunky adult.

Self-control, Greg thought. Denial.

And now a job that told him to take his filth out of the country, fuck like hounds for a week, and come back prepared to put his selfish human needs for sex and comfort aside.

Greg sat up, drank from his bottle, and watched the waves lap over the sand for a while.

One week.

One perfect week, then game over - for good.

He knew what he'd heard in Mycroft's voice last night. He'd heard the truth. Mycroft did want more than sex this week. He softened when Greg kissed him, and he settled, and he opened just a little - just for a while. He needed to be shown it was okay, and not just when they were making love.

Jesus Christ... 'making love'? It's called sex, Lestrade... you're not someone's fussy auntie.

Not just when they were having sex, then.

Mycroft looked so sad whenever he caught himself getting comfortable. Greg couldn't bear it. Like he'd just been nabbed with his hand in the biscuit jar.
Nobody should have to feel like that - cut off from what made their life feel good.

Especially someone like Mycroft.

Clever, gorgeous, interesting... it wasn't right.

Greg capped his water bottle, biting the corner of his lip. He imagined again that warm feeling: having Mycroft sitting here beside him, working quietly in the sun. He imagined them walking somewhere together, having dinner out in a restaurant - Mycroft laughing with him, reaching for his hands. Opening up to him.

Getting a little close... while they still could.

Greg realised with a pang how much he wanted it.

That was end game, then - to leave here feeling like he'd finally met Mycroft Holmes. After this week, they wouldn't get the chance to meet again. He didn't want to spend it sitting here alone.

And he didn't just want to fuck and go home.

Greg glanced down at his bag, turning his water bottle quietly in his hands.

*Sex is easy,* he thought.

*Now let's give chatting a try.*

He turned onto his front, stretched out in the sand, and reached for his phone.
In theory, work should have been easier today. Travelling was over; arrangements had gone to plan. The nervousness Mycroft felt towards Lestrade's impending arrival had now been taken out of the equation, and it left him with no decent excuse to feel unsettled.

And yet he did.

He found himself disinterested in minor tasks, and reluctant to begin important ones. He worked his way vaguely through his e-mails for an hour, most of which had perfectly obvious answers that he resented being forced to explain. He directed his assistant's attention to a few matters that he could not deal with remotely. He received a report he'd needed last week, back when he had time to read the bloody thing and it had mattered. He then turned down a supposedly urgent request for a Skype call - sitting here as he was in the very loosest linen shirt, his hair fluffed and curled to hell, and with no less than three spectacular love-bites in various locations at his throat.

The Skype call could suddenly wait until next week.

"For heaven's sake..." Mycroft muttered, rubbing the back of his neck. He let his eyes close for a moment. He knew, all too keenly, why he was experiencing so much resentment today - why he was so quick to incline towards annoyance, and so eager for distraction. None of this work was out of the ordinary. None of these annoyances were anything new.

But he didn't want to think about work. He didn't want to think about London, or his responsibilities to the nation.

He wanted to think about Greg.

He wanted to lie in this lounger, close his laptop, and remember the coaxing fingertips that had crept up his chest here last night - remember the soft, wicked things that had been breathed in his ear - the weave of shaking fingers as they sought through his hair, petting him, encouraging him to suck.

God help me.

He'd suspected Greg would be a playful and memorable lover. He hadn't realised he'd be left unable to think of anything else the next day.

My decision is justified, at least... if he'd attempted to find relief in a single night with the man... dear God. And it would now have been over. His opportunity to indulge, been and gone already. One night, and they would have reached the bitter end. An utter disaster. Mercifully averted.

If only he could now concentrate.

And stop gently touching the bites. Marked... God almighty. Ravaged, fucked on all fours, and marked.

Reluctantly, Mycroft conceded it was no wonder he didn't give a damn about work. The usual tide of inane and unnecessary questions seemed like torture, compared to Greg's confident and intimate care. He had a report to finalise before Friday. He was the only person in the country who could possibly write it. Without it, the cabinet would be clueless on how to act, and would inevitably make the worst possible decision - and it would then be up to Mycroft to deal with the mess.

And yet all he wanted was to rest in the sunshine, and remember.
Last night... oh God, last night. Two fingers in his mouth, wet with fruit juice; those dark eyes burning as they watched; three fingers deep between his thighs. Did it truly happen? Greg's tender, faultless care, soothing as an ocean breeze, sweeping him along. And... again, perhaps... tonight...

Assuming, of course, that he...

And that I make progress on this wretched report, Mycroft added inwardly, with a sigh. We must complete at least the first section today. He'd not had to negotiate with himself to complete work for many years. This was unbearable. He only hoped it eased as the days - and the nights - began to pass.

As he opened a new document, Mycroft's phone gave a short vibration in his pocket.

He paused.

Anthea, he told himself. An update on the Marcus Renley situation.

He forced himself to type for fifteen minutes, then finally retrieved his phone from his pocket. He peered at it over the top of his glasses.

New Message from Lestrade

Mycroft opened it, ignoring the slight squeeze of his heart.

Forgot to check. If you need sun cream, big bottle in my suitcase. keep your pretty freckles safe ;) xx

Mycroft hesitated. Was Lestrade being sarcastic about his freckles? He'd always been rather sensitive about them. His mother had insisted on dressing him in shorts far too late into childhood, with the result that he came to think of his legs as pale, chubby, and covered in ludicrous little marks that could be seen from outer space. His schoolmates had been all too happy to aid him in this impression.

As Mycroft recalled the fervency with which Lestrade had kissed his freckles last night, he blushed - and decided to trust that it was a harmless remark.

He typed back with care, unused to the medium of text message. This felt like inadequate e-mail.

Thank you. I intend to stick to the shade, but it is kind of you to offer. M.

He sent the message, put the phone aside, and returned to his report.

Half a paragraph in, his phone sounded again.

Mycroft paused. He raised an eyebrow, and reached across with a frown to retrieve it.
no worries... I'm at flamands beach. Gorgeous here. Think I might be coming back with start of a tan xx

Mycroft wondered dimly why he needed to know this information. He would surely have become aware of any change in skin tone upon Greg's return to the villa.

This was chatting, then - 'back and forth', as Greg had put it. The information shared was not as important as the act of sharing.

Mycroft took a moment to put something together to say, and typed out his reply.

Do let me know if you require a car at any point. Though I'm glad your exploring has been a success. M.

He'd barely put the phone back down when it vibrated again.

You really don't text often do you? :P Hows work going? xx

Mycroft hesitated, glancing at his open report. Work was not going at any speed - and would not do so, he thought, unless he concentrated. Not that concentration has led to progress so far, he thought dully.

One more message.
To be polite.

Very well, thank you, he typed. He suspected some enquiry in response would be fitting. I hope the beach is enjoyable? M.

The reply, when it arrived some minutes later, was a picture message. The security software on Mycroft's mobile blocked it by default.

He tapped the message, authorised it with his thumbprint, and watched it download.

A self-taken shot from above - Lestrade, lying on white-sugar-sand and grinning in his sunglasses - topless, at the very least. The crop of the photograph prevented Mycroft from ascertaining the severity of the situation. Dear lord, he thought. Potentially my first nude. A momentous occasion.

Even sealed in a photograph, Lestrade's grin was infectious. He was, in purely biological terms, a sublimely attractive man - from the scruff of his hair to the slight touch of stubble, Mother Nature had excelled herself in Greg Lestrade. His eyes were unbearably appealing. Dark, mischievous. Inviting.

Oh, sweet Christ... I spent the night with this man...

Mycroft bit into his lip, for a moment unable to believe it. The memories were too vivid to doubt them. He'd seen this man orgasm. He was wearing this man's love-bites at his throat. And tonight, there was a very high likelihood that this man was going to fuck him rather roughly across a dining table.
Mycroft shifted in his sun lounger, unable to repress the heat that bloomed across his face - and elsewhere. He keyed in a reply, his laptop balanced open on his knee.

It occurred to him he would have to delete the photograph before his return to England.

He would do it later, though. He had the report to finish, after all.

_Very enjoyable I see. Don't let me disturb you. M._

He'd settled back into work by the time the response arrived. He told himself, firmly, that he could attend to the lure of his mobile phone when they had completed this section. This report was not going to draft itself, and there had been quite enough procrastination already. He returned to typing.

_Coffee, Mycroft thought, a minute later. Quite certainly due coffee._

He took his laptop and mobile with him back to the villa - the laptop, because it contained a number of countries’ nuclear codes; the mobile, for something to occupy him as the water boiled.

_when you're done with your work you should come join me... :) its bloody beautiful here. bring your laptop. Won't bother you I promise. Just be nice to have your company xx_

Mycroft hesitated.

He didn't know what to say - how to turn that request down. Before he could compose a reply, he watched the typing bubble appear.

Lestrade was saying something else.

_I just met ethan sterling!!! xx_

_Who the bloody hell...? Mycroft resorted to Google. The kettle stood boiled, ready and ignored as he typed in the name, then hit search._

As images of a rather rugged Hollywood actor filled his phone screen, Mycroft's face dropped into an immediate frown.

"Heaven help me..." he muttered, typing.

_Goody. St Barts is popular with that sort. M._

He didn't care to say anything else. Day one, and Greg was drawing the attention of professionally
attractive men. This was not an ideal turn of events.

Greg's reply pinged through as Mycroft poured the kettle.

It was far too chirpy for Mycroft's liking.

*He was really nice! got a picture and everything :D xx*

Mycroft bit the inside of his cheek.

He mulled his reply as he headed back down to the terrace, then settled in the lounger with his laptop still closed.

*How exciting. Sharing a parasol now, are you? M.*

Greg didn't reply immediately.

Mycroft found himself watching his phone as he drank his coffee, annoyed and unsure why. He wondered precisely how enthralling the rugged Mr Sterling was currently being at Greg. Mycroft googled the man again, just to check - and he was indeed as aesthetically-formed as the first search had suggested.

At last, just as Mycroft rebuked himself for his continued lack of focus, and opened up his laptop, a reply came.

He shut the laptop with a snap and grabbed for his phone.

*No just chatting :) He's been here loads of times. Says we have to go eat at Shellona. Apparently its great there xx*

Mycroft realised he was now biting the inside of his cheek rather hard. He relaxed his jaw, soothed the imprint with his tongue, and sat back in the lounger to respond.

*And when are you going to 'Shellona' with Mr Sterling? So I can make other arrangements. M.*

Greg's reply was almost instant.

*Wait what? I meant me and you :) xx*
Mycroft stared, pained, at the jaunty smile - the two kisses - those words, ‘me and you’. They made something swoop strangely in his stomach.

He didn't like it.

He didn't like that he was relieved to see the words, and he didn't like that his stomach squeezed at the thought of dining out with Greg. He didn't like that he'd now sat here for half the morning without working, boiling alive inside at the thought of Greg chatting happily with some amiable and handsome man - just the sort of person Greg should be paired with - the kind of man he should have here for company - someone gregarious and relaxed and at ease, who didn't have an entire country's miserably tedious problems sitting on his shoulders.

And he didn't like that he felt powerless to intervene.

Annoyed, Mycroft set his phone to Do Not Disturb. He pushed it out of reach, took a stiff breath, and returned to his report.

For the next hour, he forced himself to work without pause. He caught his phone's quiet flashing now and then, but ignored it. Why would you wish to talk to me, when you have adequate company already? And he could hardly complain, after all - had no right - no claim on Greg whatsoever. On Lestrade.

The fact they'd been intimate this morning - and twice last night - might have suggested to Lestrade that Mycroft was... fond of him, and that Mycroft expected - ...

Not expected, perhaps, but... hoped for a certain amount of at least temporary loyalty...

At noon, Mycroft returned to the villa. He made himself a small lunch in utter silence, ate it in the kitchen, and then took his laptop to the couch in the lounge.

Telling himself he was checking for calls from his assistant, he unlocked his phone.

Only if you want to I mean... you seem like a restaurant person? might be fun anyway :) xx

means we could sit and talk... get to know each other xx

Hey come back :) xx

Um... probably wrong but... look you're not jealous... are you?? If you are... you know you shouldn't be? xx

Oh jesus, you are... I'm sorry. Thats not what it was. You know I was just chatting don't you?? xx
Okay you're mad... I get it :( Please don't be. I've come here with you. As if I would now be hitting on random blokes at the beach

sorry :

For some reason, it was the loss of the two tiny Xs that prompted Mycroft to reply.

He wanted them to come back.

*Apologies. I was working. I am not jealous. You can speak to whomever you want, I don't have ownership of you. M.*

Greg responded at once. Mycroft’s heart lurched as the message came through.

*You kinda do this week? :( I thought so, anyway...*

Mycroft realised his hand was in danger of forming a claw around his phone. He loosened his grip, shifted, and typed with an unsettled ache in his chest.

*Hardly.*

He stared down at the pathetic single word. He didn't know what else to say. Any further words would say too much. *I am meant to be working,* he thought, added his initial, hit send, and put the phone aside.

A minute later, he picked it up again.

*Well... last night you wanted everything I could give... That includes me not being a douche and hitting on other people :\ Only one person i'd want to flirt with if he was here.*

Mycroft's chest tightened. *Oh, God. I think he means me. How to check?* There was no subtle way. Busy agonising, he almost missed the arrival of the next message.

*(I mean you... xx)*
Mycroft breathed in very hard.
He finished his cold coffee in one swig, saved his report, shut his bloody laptop for good, and replied.

*I didn't mean to accuse you of anything. M.*

As soon as he'd hit send, he realised it was tantamount to a confession of jealousy.
"Damn," he breathed, wincing. "Damn. Damn."

Greg's reply was unbearably gracious.

*I know posh. No worries xx*

FYI... considering myself "spoken for" while we're here... hope you do too. might only be a week but its your week... xx

"Oh, God..." Mycroft mumbled. He wasn't prepared for this. Sex had somehow been easier than texting. Greg's gentle, coaxing dominance in the bedroom made him feel on some deep-seated level terribly safe. Submitting - giving Greg his body and his skin - was easy.

But he was now alone, and very much on the spot, and Greg was waiting for him to reply.
Biting his lip - telling himself that even teenagers managed this - Mycroft gathered together his courage.

*I'm glad. For what it's worth... I also consider this "your" week. M.*

Mycroft sent the message, grimacing at his own ability to be both depressingly curt and sickeningly overblown in a single message. It was the ellipsis, he thought. It was too coy. Too much. *Dear lord, this is not my forte.*

Greg didn't seem to notice.

*Cool :)*

*And listen... so you know? after last night?*

*There is no way on earth I could want any one else right now... xx*
"Oh... dear lord..." Mycroft felt his skin prickle softly as he re-read it. *This is flirting*, he thought. He tried to imagine what he would say if Lestrade were sitting here next to him, and had soothed such a thing in his ear. His initial reaction was the same strangled blasphemy.

*At least the medium permits the luxury of thought and self-censure*, he thought, typing a reply with a furrowed brow.

*You are very charming,* he wrote - then hesitated, wondering how incautious he dared to be. He supposed their messages were secure. He bit his lip, adding, *Last night was also memorable for me. This morning, too. You are very attentive. M.*

Attention? <3 easy to be attentive to you. You're beautiful. Its good seeing you relax a bit... xx

Mycroft caught himself smiling as he replied. *You seem to have a talent for relaxing me. M.*

*You finished with your work? you could come down here... I can relax you some more if you like. Lie in the sun with me for a while :) might be nice... xx*

*I'm afraid that won't be possible. But thank you for the offer.* Mycroft hesitated, considering the message. A little sparse, he thought. He added: *Your help might be appreciated in relaxing later. M.*

*Really quiet here if it helps persuade you... hardly seen another soul... xx*

*Except the predatory Mr Sterling? M.*

*Ok you're probably gonna go silent on me again for this... but... kinda digging the jealous a little?... :P You gonna have him arrested on drug charges or something? :P detained at the airport...? xx*

*I'm sure Mr Sterling will be more than happy to spend a few hours of his holiday cooperating fully with Her Majesty's customs officials. M.*

*Christ!! you're joking... right? :P God I can't even tell if you are... xx*

*When I decide if I am, I shall tell you... M.*
why does that give me shivers... Where are you right now? xx

I am in the lounge. The heat is quite fierce on the terrace at this time of day. Why do you ask? M.

just picturing you :) Linen again yeah? xx

Yes? It is ideal for the climate. M.

white? <3 xx

I suppose it is off white, yes. Why do you want to know what I'm wearing? M.

Told you Posh. Picturing you :) what you look like... cause I dont think you're gonna send me back a selfie... :P xx

Were you otherwise at risk of forgetting what I look like? M.

no :) Your too gorgeous for that. won't ever forget what you looked like last night... not ever xx

*You're. M. x

;) yyssw... xx

Excuse me? M. x

"yeah yeah sure sure whatever"... xx

I see. M. x
:) is a smilie... drop your head to the left and you'll get it... xx

I'm aware of the mechanics of "smileys" thank you. What is meant by less than three? M. x

wtf? (What The Fuck)? xx

You enquired if I was wearing white, less than three. M. x

xD yeah. I'll let you figure that one out in your own time... Btw... (By The Way) how do I persuade you to come to the beach tomorrow? what have I got to do to you tonight? xx

I'm not sure a beach is conducive for me to work. With regret. M. x

You know I'm just reading my book...? Its quiet here. peaceful. waves... Find a tucked away corner, do your sun cream for you. Just means we'd get a bit more time together... seeing as we don't have a lot. xx

I will consider it. M. x

do you actually mean that? :P xx

I do, as it happens. Not likely to be a revelation at this stage but I enjoy your company. I will decide if it would make up for a loss of focus. M. x

ok :) Listen... know you should be working now. So I'm gonna let you concentrate... to prove to you I can... how about I come back to the villa in 3 hours? will that be cool to get stuff done? Then you can put the laptop away and focus on chilling with me :) xx

Yes. Three hours will be ample... that might work excellently. Thank you. M. x

cool :) xx
I appreciate your consideration. M. x

no worries :) xx

Though if you require anything in the meantime do let me know. M. xx

stop texting me and do some work Posh... country wont run itself ;) xx

You beast! I am attempting to do so. M. xx

shhhh now... ;) Play with me later. Concentrate xxx
A surprisingly productive afternoon.

Two sections drafted in their entirety, and a third outlined. A phone call with the Prime Minister, who was sorry to hear that Mycroft's childless great-aunt in Lyon was so unwell, but glad that she had Mycroft by her side.

Mycroft expressed his thanks in as few words as possible.

He informed Anthea that he would not be available for anything below Category Four for the rest of the day - and only Category Four if it involved loss of life or Boris Johnson - then secured his laptop in the safe, made coffee, and tried to relax.

The villa was too quiet. He tried the television, which worked for about a minute before its inane drivel started making him oddly nervous. He frowned at his hair in the bathroom mirror for a short while, and tried to bring himself to frown at the love-bites - but couldn't. He finished his coffee. He made another, checked his phone, turned the television off, and checked his phone again.

He then took a bottle of white wine from the fridge, and two glasses, and headed out to the terrace.

The sun had reached a perfect warmth, eased of all its midday ferocity, just starting to soften with the first touches of the evening. It felt like the day had begun its outbreath. Mycroft followed its lead, letting the heat unwind his shoulders as he walked the hillside path.

He made himself comfortable on his sun lounger, poured a glass of wine, and drank it very slowly.

_Day two_, he thought.

_and the approach of night two._

In that time, three rounds of sex - one shared bath, one shared shower - a meal together, one instance of holding hands, a small outbreak of jealousy, a crash course in texting, and depravity with a fruit platter.

Mycroft's wrist shook slightly as he took another drink.

He had a feeling the week would continue in similar fashion - or perhaps even escalate, as Lestrade grew more comfortable. _Not that the man was ever uncomfortable_, Mycroft thought, remembering his particular greeting of the previous evening - and the night that had then followed. And this morning. _Dear lord. Less than twenty-four hours._

_We are going to share a bed tonight._

Hot prickles, anxious and enjoyable, coursed up Mycroft's arms at the thought. They tickled into his neck. _He will sleep beside me._ He stretched, fortified himself with wine and laid his head back against the lounger, feeling the sun settle fondly on his bites. Lestrade might kiss them tonight. He would take Mycroft's clothes off, let Mycroft touch his skin - all of his skin. _God on high._ Into Mycroft's mind flashed the thought of riding Lestrade - that magnificent body, supine in their vast white bed as Mycroft worked for his pleasure - and immediately he longed for it, with a ferocity that made his inner thighs almost ache.
This craving, Mycroft thought, breathing against the edge of his wine glass. Where has it come from?

He hadn't craved sex so fiercely in all his life - not even as a young man, when he'd have had the freedom to indulge without restriction.

The thought arose from nowhere.

I didn't know him, then.

Mycroft paused. He drank, holding the realisation in his mind.

Not all that startling, he told himself. Lestrade is a highly attractive man. And, he added, drinking, he'd now discovered that Lestrade was a very confident, skilled and tender lover, who seemed to delight in pleasing Mycroft as much as he enjoyed being pleased. Naturally this will have inflated the craving - temporarily. Until it is sated.

And indulging it with vigour would exhaust it sooner.

Nobody, he thought, could have seven solid days and nights of exhaustive sex and then want more.

Physical affection was like cake.

After a certain point, the novelty would wear off. It would become sickly and uninteresting. Mycroft hadn't let himself reach that point with cake for many decades, knowing his... capacity for the stuff was perhaps afforded by nature a greater tolerance than most people, and knowing also the consequences that would swiftly befall him should he start trying to familiarise himself with that capacity. But he recalled the sensation of over-indulgence - 'nnhh, too much' - and he was quite certain it applied to any pleasurable pursuit. You could not play tennis solidly for a week, and still want to play tennis. You couldn't drink solidly for a week and still be happy to drink. He couldn't possibly make love with Greg for a - ...

Have sex - with Lestrade - for a week, and still crave it.

Mycroft finished his wine in one silent gulp.

It is only day two, he told himself. It is the second night. It is good and normal that I remain restless and want sex very much. I would be advised to relax.

As he contemplated a second glass of wine, footsteps finally reached his ears.

Mycroft's heart jumped inside his chest.

He resisted the urge to bite his lip, reached for the bottle and calmly unscrewed the cap. As he pulled the second glass beside his own, he glanced up as casually as he could.

Lestrade had been correct about the tan.

He somehow looked as if he'd been here for a week already. There were sunglasses hooked in the crest of his shirt buttons, and Mycroft was in no doubt that the tan did not finish at his collar. Flip-flopped, at ease, and visibly hiding a smile, Lestrade came along the path in full awareness of what was now being recreated.

Mycroft lowered his eyes, quietened his own smile, and filled both glasses with all the coolness he could muster.
Greg reached the terrace just as he rescrewed the lid on the bottle. He passed the pool, hands casual in his pockets, his forearms bronzed to magnificence and somehow arousing Mycroft in a way that forearms never had before.

Greg reached the foot of the lounger, still biting on his smile.

As he lowered himself down, placed a knee between Mycroft's legs, and a hand on each arm of the chair, Mycroft's feeble attempt at composure shattered.

The expression that broke through was a grin, and he knew it.

The flash of delight in Greg's eyes only made matters worse.

"H'lo," Greg murmured, lowering his head.

Mycroft shivered, still grinning. "Hello..."

Greg's forehead pressed to his. He smiled into Mycroft's eyes from a breath away, fond, his weight comfortable and easy.

"You done all your homework?" he murmured. "Been good?"

_God have mercy on my screaming soul._ "I've - finished work for the day," Mycroft said, wishing he could sound just a little less breathless. "Yes..."

Greg's eyes glittered.

"Good," he hummed. His eyes flicked to Mycroft's mouth, watching with the greatest of interest.

Mycroft realised he was biting at his lip. He stopped at once, and flushed.

Greg's gaze softened.

"Come to the beach tomorrow," he said. "Please."

Mycroft's heart strained. Before he knew it, honesty had pulled itself out of his mouth.

"I haven't been to a beach in - ..." He paused, shuttering. "I've - not yet decided if I can - "

"Come as you are," Greg said, gently. He lifted a hand, and stroked his fingers over Mycroft's cheek.

"Shirt, trousers... just lie next to me and work. I'll keep you safe, posh."

Mycroft's heart squeezed. He wasn't sure why that should affect him so much.

"Nobody knows who you are here," Greg went on, his voice soft. "Just some guy on holiday with his - ... whoever. Nobody'll care."

His deep brown eyes warmed.

"'Cept me," he said. "_I'll _care."

Mycroft's pulse quickened in response. He realised he wanted that.

His throat contracted as he swallowed.

"Then... perhaps, I'll - put some serious thought into it."

Mycroft's mouth quirked. *Damn you. Damn you, stop commandeering my face.*

"I'm being sincere," he protested. "It - would be pleasant, I'm sure."

"I'd pick us a quiet beach..." Greg stroked his nose against Mycroft's, coaxing. "Somewhere more secluded. Just you, and me, and the sea..."

Mycroft's stomach tugged. He grappled with the word in his mouth, longing to say it - and truthfully, he didn't know what kept it behind his lips - only a vague sense that he should be conducting his work in reverent solitude, not lying beside a lover's bronzing body on a beach.

Greg's eyes gentled, watching him struggle. He brushed his fingers over Mycroft's jaw.

"I won't tell MI5 if you don't," he soothed.

Mycroft's mouth disobeyed him yet again. "I - do not work for MI5."

Greg grinned, playfulness shining in his eyes. "D'you have to shoot me now?" he said. "Revealing state secrets."

*God almighty. You are incendiary when you smile.* Mycroft squirmed, trying to make his growing erection a little less noticeable. "I'm afraid so. Kindly stay here while I call the concierge for a firearm."

Greg's eyes gleamed more brightly than the midday sun upon the ocean. "Do I get one last request?" he asked.

Mycroft shivered, overcome. *Oh God, would it truly matter? Just for once. For once in my life. Decades at a desk... just once, on warm sand.* He breathed out with it, giving in. The rush left him reeling.

"Yes," he whispered. *Why does that feel so good to say?* "Yes, I - will come to the beach with you tomorrow..."

Greg's smile made his very soul writhe a little.

"Thank you, posh." A curious pride softened his expression. "I'm really glad... it'll be fun."

Mycroft's heart fluttered.

"You are welcome..." He paused. "... bit of rough."

Greg's grin widened.

"Mmhm... I still like that." His gaze dropped to Mycroft's lips as he stirred, a flicker of something beguiling in his voice. "What d'you want to do now?" he asked.

Mycroft said nothing, feeling his treacherous cheeks answer for him.

Greg's eyes smouldered as they watched him blush.

He reached across to the table, and picked up a glass of wine. "This your second?" he enquired.

Mycroft nodded, mute.
Greg drained the glass without a sound. He shook his head, inhaled, and set it back on the table.

"Get comfy, gorgeous," he soothed, and eased his way down the sun lounger.

Mycroft's concerned 'For what?' was answered before he could ask. As Greg pushed up his shirt, kissed his bare stomach and began to untie his trousers, his stomach flipped itself inside out. He bit down into his gasp, jerking.

Greg smiled against his navel.

"What?" he murmured, stroking another kiss across the pale skin of Mycroft's stomach. "You've worked hard all day, darlin'... need a reward..."

_Oh, Jesus._ As Greg divested him of underwear and trousers in a single dexterous sweep, Mycroft acknowledged to himself for the first time that he _might_ not have been wholly prepared for Gregory Lestrade. He wriggled, flushing, now half-naked on a sun lounger for the second time in twenty-four hours, and Greg began to kiss his way from ankle upwards.

"Oh... God..." Mycroft's heart tightened, jolting as Greg reached his knee. "God almighty - _Lestrade_ - "

There came a huff of breath against his knee. Greg's teeth grazed there, gently - a little ghost of a bite.

"Do something for me?" he hummed.

Mycroft shivered, blushing. "Y-Yes?"

"It's 'Greg', gorgeous. 'Specially when I'm about to go down on you."

_Oh, sweet lord._ "I - ... i-if you're certain..."

"Mm hmm." Greg lifted his leg gently, and twined his tongue in a lazy coil behind Mycroft's knee. "I belong to you this week. Means my name belongs to you, too."

Mycroft's heart heaved; the force of it took his breath for a moment. Greg glanced up into his eyes, his gaze a dark and softened glitter.

"So call me Greg," he murmured - and kissed along Mycroft's inner thigh. "Call me it loudly."

"Oh - _Christ_..." At the first lazy lick of his cock, Mycroft's brain sparked and fused. "_Greg_ -"

"Mm... just like that." Greg mouthed a kiss across the head. "Quick and dirty, baby? Or soft and slow?"

'Baby'. _Sweet lord God in heaven._ "I - I h-have no -..."

Greg laughed, his wicked eyes flashing up again.

"You _have no preference_," he said, delighted. "Like I'm offering you red or white." He splayed both hands on Mycroft's stomach, soothing them up beneath his shirt. "Shut your eyes for me, posh."

Mycroft obeyed without thinking. His eyelashes fluttered - the sun, the sky and the ocean vanished. There was only the warm slide of Greg's hands across his chest, and the pleasurable rumble of his voice against Mycroft's cock.
"Imagine for me," Greg said, soft. "Option one - I find out how fast I can get you to come down my throat. Option two - I find out how desperately I can make you beg for it. Run those through your mind, darlin'. Take your time. Which sounds nice right now?"

This is how I die, Mycroft thought. Offered a choice of oral sex by Greg Lestrade. His throat had sealed itself shut; no words would come. His body burned with what it wanted, but his mouth locked down in desperation. Why can't I speak? Why in hell does this happen to me? What could I possibly fear?

One stroking hand left his chest, and moved to his own where it gripped the arm of the lounger. Greg unwound his fingers slowly, slipped between them, and held.

He gave Mycroft's hand a quiet squeeze.

The curious, gentle reassurance was enough to startle Mycroft's mouth into sound.

With a surprised shiver, he breathed, "S-Slow. Please. M-..."

Greg's tongue convolved the head of his cock. Mycroft stiffened at the lazy swirl.

"Make you beg...?" Greg murmured, brushing his mouth. Mycroft felt every sound. "Take my time for you, darlin'? Then that's just what I'll do... lie back."

Mycroft gripped Greg's hand, hard. He swallowed as Greg began to lick him - small, soft, light little flicks of sensation just below the head. Greg's other hand wandered down his chest, wrapped around his shaft and stroked with gentle tugs, pulling ripples of enjoyment from base to tip towards his mouth, soothing with the flashes of his tongue. Mycroft stiffened, arched back his head, and pleaded with his heart to slow down. His cheeks were already ablaze.

Oh, God... oh God, how can this feel so good? He couldn't remember the last time someone had done this for him a second time. He couldn't remember anyone ever offering him this slowly. He realised he'd started to moan already, little sounds of excitement stealing from his lips, and he bit down on them in annoyance. He closed his eyes so as not to see - not to gaze at the soft scruff of grey hair, nor long to brush his fingers through it.

Greg's thumb began to roll a slow circle against his palm.

"If you want this everyday," he murmured, and the sound of his voice somehow steadied Mycroft's breath, "I'll do that for you. All this week, when you're done working. Relax you like this. Come kneel here for you, let you lie down... help switch your head off... look after you like this for an hour everyday, if you'll let me."

Mycroft's teeth sank into his lip in desperation.

The weeks he'd spent since New Year - tiring, joyless days at work, distracted and miserable inside his own skin, getting home and throwing his briefcase upon the bed. What he'd have given, to have this. Sun on his face, hands on his skin. A gentle voice, offering him that.

Greg's mouth slid around him, gathering him in, and began to suck.

Mycroft's heart wrenched against his ribs like prison bars.

Fingers trembling, he touched Greg's head. Is it true? An hour? Mycroft wouldn't last that length of time. Nowhere near. But the thought that he could feel this for as long as he wished...

He gripped the hand that held his own, and nervously began to pet Greg's hair. In response, Greg
took up a slow pattern of sliding back and forth, humming with a quiet enjoyment that Mycroft understood. He'd felt it last night, sitting here and doing this for Greg. *Contentment*, he thought. *Being allowed. Being - trusted.*

He wanted to feel that tonight.

The thought returned - the flash of longing - sitting astride Greg's lap, working for them both. Feeling Greg breathe. Watching him enjoy it.

For now... it was just nice to feel this.

Mycroft stroked Greg's hair, still shaking finely, and watched his lover fellate him.

Every lonely fantasy through the years stirred in the back of his mind. He tried to suppress those tragic elements that made it all quite so pathetic, once the hormones had ebbed. When he laid in his bed at night, quiet, and imagined someone to settle him to sleep, he needed to imagine they'd been for dinner together - to imagine there would be arms to sleep in, after. He imagined them doing things like this. Just for him - a lover who knew he liked this - a lover who was patient. An unsettling shadow of realisation passed his mind, as he became aware that his future fantasies would be reaching for *this* memory to wrap themselves around.

He'd be imagining a voice that murmured, *lie down. Let me help switch your head off.*

A hand that eased into his own, and held as long as he wanted to hold it. *You've worked hard all day, darlin'. Let me look after you.*

Fond words on a screen. *Play with me later.*

Mycroft swallowed the lump in his throat.

He curled his fingers in Greg's hair, dropped his head back, and gazed into the unbroken stretch of blue above them.

Greg's patience never wavered. From the foot of the lounger he seemed to monitor Mycroft's every response, reading his breathing, his whimpers and the rocking of his hips, never letting him tip into urgency. Each time Mycroft grew restless, Greg slowed and gentled the movements of his mouth - at one point drawing back, resting his cheek on Mycroft's stomach and talking softly to him for a while, playing with his fingers as he panted away his urgent need to come. Telling Mycroft he loved it here - that Mycroft had picked a gorgeous place. Greg started again only gently, carefully, the lightest little kisses and blowing cool air over Mycroft's swollen cock. He built Mycroft's orgasm from the beginning four times - and each time, let it cool.

Mycroft would never find out how desperately he begged. By the fifth approach, he had lost all awareness of his own response, barely coherent in Greg's hands. The trembling that had seized his body threatened to shake him apart. He whimpered with it, panting and pleading, and with each frantic glance downwards the sight of Greg's devoted ministrations only made him more desperate to come. Greg was still holding his hand, stroking his palm - the same reassuring circles with a thumb - and in Mycroft's mind, as climax finally blistered its way through his body with a force that he knew had him crying out, it was the gentle rolling circles that brought him through. Round, and round, and softly round again; pleasure spiralled and eased and swelled and broke in him over and over, peak after peak, a hand tight in his own, soft hair between his fingers, a rumbling hum that lulled his every fear into nothing.

When the surge began to ease, he found Greg in the lounger with him - holding him against a now
bare and sun-bronzed chest. He was stroking Mycroft's back, crooning gentle nonsense against his temple. There, baby. That's it. Shhh... there you are, darlin'... coming back to me?

Mycroft panted against his shoulder, overcome.

Greg gently removed his shirt for him, easing it up over his shoulders. The flutter of linen against his hyper-sensitive skin made him gasp. As Greg pulled it over his head, Mycroft shuddered and softened at once into his arms - hot, warm muscle - sunkissed and soft, wrapping around him, curling around him, and he begged every ruling power in the universe just to let him melt - now, this moment, melt into nothing, and let it happen in Greg Lestrade's arms.

Greg dropped his shirt off the edge of the world somewhere - somewhere beyond the sun lounger, where things perhaps still existed.

He kissed Mycroft's shoulder, rumbling still.

"Look how beautiful you are..." Mycroft's heart swooned and died in his chest. Greg hummed, mouthing idle kisses over his freckles, and reached a hand between them to his trousers. "Help me get these off, sweetheart? Want to feel you properly..."

Mycroft could barely move, boneless with his afterglow. He wriggled, reached down and did what he could to help Greg undress, finding it was easier to lift a foot and assist with his toes. Some shifting, some stirring, and Greg's clothing left the world as well.

They wrapped together, naked.

Mycroft breathed the air deep into his lungs.

He'd never been bare-skinned to the sun before. They'd come close, last night - but somehow the loss of a thin linen shirt was like losing steel-plated armour. He'd never felt so bare, nor so fragile in his life - nor so oddly safe. Greg's hands brushed his back with easy and gentle sweeps, warmer than any clothing, more protective than any steel, and they spread the sunlight over his skin like massage oil. Greg's shoulders were hot beneath Mycroft's fingers; the muscles there were firm. He smelt of sand, and sweat, and sun-cream.

Mycroft closed his eyes.

"You know you're fucking gorgeous when you come?" Greg whispered. Mycroft swallowed. "When you're all relaxed... just feeling, just... Christ, Mycroft. You're magnificent."

Nobody has ever called me 'magnificent'.

Oh, God - someone could come across us... find us like this... any moment...

Oh, God.

Let them.

The thought rippled through Mycroft in absolute silence, changing him forever.

Let someone appear. Let them blunder into this moment, uninvited - and let Greg turn on them, and snarl at them to leave - and let the peaceful intimacy continue. Let it not matter. Let there be this.

He nuzzled in silence into Greg's shoulder.

It's alright that I imagine your protection. That I would want that.
I am emotional. And you are kind, and I'm making the most of an opportunity.

It's alright.

Greg began to kiss his neck, gently.

Trembling, Mycroft lifted his head for more.
Name

Not bad, for day two...

Greg jutted out his chin, flashing himself a little grin in the bathroom mirror. A few more hours lying in the sun tomorrow, and they'd be getting somewhere. It never took him long to tan, but it always lasted better if it built over a few days - and he wanted it to last.

Tugging a towel from the pristinely-aligned stack on the countertop, Greg wrapped it around his hips, then padded into the bedroom in search of after-sun lotion.

After a minute of rooting through the debris of his suitcase, Greg gave in with a sigh.

Surely I didn't... he could have sworn he'd packed it. He remembered it there on the bathroom windowsill, next to all the others - and he remembered asking himself if he seriously thought any of these bottles would be going so much as a mile closer to the Caribbean.

Maybe Mycroft brought...?

Greg wandered into the lounge, still damp.

"Posh?" he called. "By any miracle, have you got - "

Four serving staff, busy laying out the table for dinner, looked around. Spotting the flimsy towel - and then the rest of Greg - there came a stifled gasp and four pairs of eyes were quickly averted.

Greg gave a sheepish grin, shying back a few steps into the bedroom.

"Oops - ah - sorry, guys..."

Mycroft came smoothly from the direction of the kitchen, his face a masterpiece of discretion and composure. He ushered Greg into the bedroom, shut the door behind them, and leant against it.

"Yes, bit of rough?" he said. "You called?"

Greg bit down into his grin.

"D'you have any after-sun lotion?" he asked. "Sorry. Didn't realise food was on the way."

"I took the liberty. And yes, of course..." Mycroft moved to his side of the bed, sought through a drawer, then produced a turquoise bottle with a monogram.

As he handed it to Greg, he spotted the strange look it earned him.

"What is the matter?" he said.

Greg glanced down at the monogram, trying even harder not to grin.

"This is posh after-sun," he said.

"Posh - ... oh, for - ... it is ordinary after-sun. The presence of a monogram on a bottle gives no indication of social status. The fact that I prefer toiletries which match has no bearing whatsoever on - "
"Why?"

Mycroft blinked. "What - 'why'?"

"Why matching?" Greg said, amused, feeling his heart bubble. Christ, your eyes are magnificent. "What, do you pick toiletries to go with your decor or something?"

Mycroft's expression flattened.

Greg's heart leapt.

"Shit!" he said. "They do!"

Mycroft flushed in desperation. "And?"

"You buy lube that matches your wallpaper," Greg said, now grinning from ear-to-ear, "and you're telling me that's not a posh thing to do?"

"Well, how do you go about selecting a - ..." Mycroft realised he was speaking at volume, glanced at the door, and lowered his voice. "... this is quibbling," he said, his eyes dancing. "There is your after-sun, inspector. Now I suggest you stop teasing me, and avail yourself of it. You've quite clearly over-exposed yourself - and not just to the serving staff."

"What... sun, you mean?" Greg gestured at his chest. "This is day two, posh. Two of seven. I've barely started."

"Heaven help me." Mycroft took a second to compose himself. "Tend to your after-sun," he said, "and then dinner should be ready." A small smile flickered across his face. "I hope you've no objection to steak."

Greg groaned with longing. "Posh steak?"

"No, Greg. I specifically asked for peasant steak, so you would feel more at home. Tomorrow we shall have fish fingers and chips."

Greg's face opened into another grin. "I'm gonna have you for that."

Mycroft cocked his chin.

"You've just gleefully mocked my after-sun," he said. "Turnabout is fair-play."

Let's edge it into foreplay, Greg thought. You gorgeous posh bastard.

But then... steak.

"Have you - ordered dessert?" he asked.

Mycroft said nothing. His eyes flashed, and he let himself out of the room.

Christ, life is good. Greg removed his towel, tossed it into the bathroom, and cracked open the after-sun lotion.

When he emerged from the bedroom ten minutes later, wet-haired and dressed only in an open white towelling robe, he found Mycroft sitting at the dining table. Wine was uncorked ready; food waited under silver serving covers. The staff had gone, and they were alone.
At the sight of the open robe, Mycroft's expression quirked. He pulled his eyebrows back down, and kept his gaze firmly north of Greg's neck.

"Was I meant to dress nice for dinner?" Greg asked, smiling, as he took a seat. "Tux and bowtie?"

He placed his phone beside his plate.

Mycroft glanced at it, but did not comment.

"You can dress however you wish," he said, mildly, as he poured Greg a glass of wine. "Did you bring a bowtie?"

"Not sure I even own a bowtie. Your after-sun smells amazing, by the way. What is this I now smell of?"

Mycroft restrained a smile. "Gardenia," he replied, "and vanilla."

"Yeah?" Greg eyed him playfully. "M'I gonna be soft?"

"I imagine we'll find out in due course." Mycroft set the wine bottle aside.

As he picked up his glass, Greg reached for his own.

"Cheers," Greg proposed, his eyes bright.

Bemused, Mycroft clinked their glasses together. "Cheers..."

They drank.

One-handed, Greg unlocked his phone.

"So..." he said. Mycroft glanced up from removing the serving covers, one eyebrow lifting. "In a spirit of getting to know each other, I've googled 'first date questions' and found us a list of two hundred. I hope you're feeling conversational."

"First date questions?" Mycroft looked unsure if he should be concerned or not. "I - hadn't realised I'd be attending a first date."

"Well," Greg said, smiling. "Texting all day... dinner... posh steak. I think it could be. Don't you?"

Mycroft smiled briefly against the rim of his wine glass. He took a drink.

"Before I agree to answer them," he said, setting the glass down, "what manner of questions constitute 'first date questions'? And I assume I have the right for my lawyer to be present?"

"Ha ha ha. No, Holmes. This is off the record. No lawyer - nothing's gonna be used in evidence against you - and there's all sorts of questions." Greg reached for cutlery with a smile. The food looked amazing - marinated steak, dauphinoise potatoes and fresh salad. He hadn't realised how hungry he was.

"Things to help us learn about each other," he said. "You know... insightful stuff. See if I can figure out the real you."

Mycroft's eyes gleamed in the candlelight. He'd barely glanced at his food.

"And there are two hundred of these, you say?"
Greg grinned, cutting himself a first piece of steak. "Figured we can pick and choose. You don't have to answer all two hundred."

"I see." Mycroft picked up a small salad leaf with a smile, resting his chin on one hand. "In that case... with a mild to moderate level of concern - do proceed."

Greg loaded up the list on his phone, chewing.

"Okay... let me think how we'll do this. Question one is 'what's your name?', which I think we've covered. You know what? Give me a random number. Between one and two hundred."

Mycroft answered at once. "Twenty-eight."

Greg blinked. "Blimey, that was - ... why twenty-eight?"

"It is a perfect number."

"It's a - ... what?"

"A perfect number," Mycroft said. "A positive integer which is equal to the sum of its proper divisors. The smallest is six; the second is twenty-eight. The third is four-hundred-and-ninety-six, and your list won't permit that one. So: twenty-eight."

Greg was sure some of that had been English. He scrolled along the list as he placed another piece of steak in his mouth, trying to keep his face under control at the taste. *Fuck me up, this week is going to ruin food forever...*

He read the question, masked a smile, and said,

"Right. Question twenty-eight: *do you have any siblings?*

Mycroft covered his eyes.

"No," he said. "Not this week. And your next insightful question?"

"Hang on," said Greg, grinning. "You've not asked me."

Mycroft raised an eyebrow, his food still barely touched. "Asked you?"

"The question."

Mycroft cottoned on.

"Oh... I see." He lifted an eyebrow. "*Do you...?"


"Mm? Older, or younger?"

"Neither," said Greg, reaching for wine.

Mycroft's other eyebrow lifted too. "You're a twin," he said, genuinely surprised, and Greg grinned as he drank.

"So are my nieces," he said. "Two of them are, anyway... Chloe and Izzy. Megan came along last February. Holly couldn't believe it. Twins just started secondary school... I don't think she's quite
forgiven Dave yet."

Mycroft seemed curiously fascinated.

"Are you the older or younger twin?" he asked.

Greg found himself enjoying this game already. "Guess."

Mycroft searched his face, his eyes soft.

"Older," he said, at last.

Greg nodded. He wondered why he liked that Mycroft had guessed right.

"Eight minutes," he said.

Mycroft smiled.

He glanced down, and found himself in possession of a plate of food. He took his fork, ate a single potato, then said,

"What happens now? Do we select another question?"

Greg slid his phone across the table. "My turn to pick," he said. "Okay... let's go with a hundred and nine."

"Any reason?"

"Nope. First one that came into my head."

Mycroft took his phone with care. He scrolled down the list, taking a sip of wine as he read. His brow contracted.

"What in God's name is a 'spirit animal'?" he said.

Greg laughed aloud.

"It's an animal you think is a bit like you," he said. "An animal that sort of - represents you. Erm... maybe a dog? I don't know. I kinda like dogs. If I didn't work such long hours, I might get one. What about you?"

Mycroft paused, finally cutting himself a small piece of steak.

"More inclined to cats," he said. "They're - rather more independent. Not quite so destructive."

"Cats are nice, too." Greg smiled, swirling his wine. "Is that what you'd pick, then? As your spirit animal?"

"This seems a ludicrous concept." Mycroft placed the steak in his mouth and chewed. When he swallowed, he reached for his glass. "Yes. Let us say 'cat'."

He returned the phone across the table.

"Am I now to pick another number?" he said.

"Yep," said Greg. "Any you like."
Mycroft mulled on it for a moment, sipping his wine. "Eleven."

Greg scrolled.

"Okay..." he said. "Question eleven... if you didn't have to sleep, what would you do with the extra time?"

Mycroft huffed.

"Work, no doubt." He paused, glancing down at his food, and lifted his wine glass. "Perhaps read. I tend to buy books, but never - ... there is a stack on my bedside. I suppose I could start working through those."

Greg's heart tugged, thinking of the thrillers he'd flown four thousand miles.

"D'you ever find - ... you're there in the shop," he said, "and you read the back of one that looks good, and... you get this image of yourself - sitting in a comfy chair - glass of wine, no worries - "

Mycroft's mouth was already curving.

"Whenever I buy a book," he said, "I am trying to buy the peace and quiet in which I might read the book."

Greg grinned, looking down. Christ.

"And what would you do?" Mycroft asked, returning his glass to his mouth. "If you never had to sleep, that is."

Greg thought about it. He had the strangest urge to say 'fight crime', and imagined himself standing on a London rooftop in a cape - patrolling the streets for muggers - and he didn't know if he wanted to laugh, or lament that he'd once thought police-work would actually be like that.

In the end, he said,

"Just... relax a bit more. Watch films. I don't know. Maybe cook more. I used to be quite into it, and I liked taking the time to - ... but - you get in from work, and it's already seven... if something takes an hour to prepare, an hour to cook..."

Mycroft smiled faintly. "Life is too short to enjoy it," he said.

Greg returned the slight smile.

It hadn't always been, he thought.

He didn't really know when that had changed. Just slowly, maybe - day by day in tiny, weary moments.

He reached for the wine bottle.

"My turn to pick?" he said.

"Mm." Mycroft retrieved the phone. Something about Mycroft holding his phone so casually, gazing at the screen, made his stomach tighten. "Go ahead."

Greg cast about in his mind for a number that felt good.
"A hundred and... twenty-eight."

Mycroft cast him an almost fond glance. He scrolled, read the question, and seemed to pause.

"Might we try another?" he asked, and reached for wine.

Greg's heart squeezed. He wanted to know - but he didn't dare ask. This was going well, and he didn't want to mess it up. "A hundred and sixty?" he offered, instead.

Mycroft scrolled, read, and winced slightly. "This is perhaps personal. And a little mawkish."

"Go on," said Greg, intrigued. "I can do personal."

Mycroft picked up another small salad leaf. "Who inspires you to do your best?"

Greg thought about it.

"My nieces," he said. "They - just look at me like..." He hesitated, and poked a potato with his fork. "Hero Uncle Greg. Can't bring myself to tell them it's mostly paperwork and e-mails. Nice to think that they believe in me, though. Nice to be a hero, you know?"

He looked up into Mycroft's eyes - surprised to find some sadness coming back at him.

He tried a smile.

"What about you?" he asked. "Who inspires you to do your best?"

Mycroft was quiet for some time.

"I'm - not sure I have a - ... the needs of the nation usually provide me with most of the incentive I need. Though I suppose it's less a case of inspiration, and more a case of avoiding economic and political collapse..."

Greg grinned. "Shall we try for a lighter question?"

Mycroft held out the phone. "Let's."

Greg took the list, scrolled through as he ate another piece of steak, and spotted a good one.

"Would you rather go hang gliding," he asked, "or white water rafting?"

"I would rather strangle myself bare-handed on the riverbank than engage in either of those activities."

Greg laughed. "Really? You wouldn't like to fly?"

"I'd rather like not to die."

"Yeah, but if it was all safe... might be fun. Try everything once and all that."

"I advise you to google 'hang gliding fatalities 2016,' Mycroft said, his eyes glinting, "before you say another word on the subject."

Greg grinned.

"Okay, okay... let's not schedule any hang gliding for the rest of the week. More questions... hmm, you don't watch much TV, do you?"
"Not as such."

"That's no good then. Okay, here we go - *what kind of art do you like the most?*

Mycroft thought about it. "I suppose I enjoy sculpture," he said. "You?"

"Christ. I don't really know much about art... oh - photography, maybe? Black and white stuff? Always kinda nice."

Mycroft smiled against the edge of his wine glass, pleased.

"Is my solo interrogation almost complete yet?" he asked.

"Nearly," said Greg. "Okay, here we go. If you were the crazed dictator of a small island nation, *what laws would you* - ... wait. Hang on. You already do that. That's the UK. Okay, question twenty..."

Mycroft hid his smirk behind his glass.

"You misjudge my profession," he said, sleekly, and pushed his tongue across his teeth. "Carry on."

"Give me a number," said Greg. "I like the randomness."

Mycroft pulled at his lip, wincing. "Fifty?"

Greg scrolled one-handed, picking up another piece of steak with his fork. He'd almost finishing the thing without even noticing.

He reached number fifty, and read it. "Oh... nice."

"Mm?"

He looked up with a smile. "*What's your middle name?*

Mycroft glanced down at the table, huffing. He took a drink of wine.

"It is 'Mycroft'," he said.

Greg blinked.

"You - ... wait - so 'Mycroft' is your middle name?" he said. "The one you go by?"

"Mm." Mycroft's eyes looked curiously blue in this light. "To distinguish me from my father. We - share a first name."

Greg waited, raising his eyebrows.

Mycroft took another drink, smiled, and held out a hand for the phone. "I believe it's your turn to answer some of these."

Greg grinned, withholding it. "*What's your name?*

"That is not a number."

"C'mon," Greg said, eyes sparkling. "Tell me."

Mycroft bit his lower lip. "I do not use it, Lestrade."
"So? I still want to know." Greg gazed at him, hopeful. "Tell me, posh. I'll tell you my middle name."

Mycroft raised an eyebrow. "Your middle name is Noel."

"... how - did you - ?"

"I had security checks run on you," Mycroft said, bemused, and without the faintest flicker of shame. "When you began your association with Sherlock. A Christmas Eve birthday? Unusual."

"You remember my birthday."

"Mm. Thus the middle name, I assume... and a twin named Holly."

"Alright," he said. "You know all my names... and my birthday - so cough up, So-Called Mycroft Holmes. Who am I actually now having dinner with?"

Mycroft turned his smile into his wine glass once more, taking a sip. He said nothing.

"Why don't you want to tell me?" Greg asked. He reached a foot beneath the table to stroke Mycroft's ankle. He'd never needed to know something so badly in his life.

After a pause, Mycroft's foot curled quietly about his own.

"Partially a fear that you shall tease me with it," he said. "As seems to be a developing hobby of yours..."

Greg's heart squeezed. "I'm not gonna tease you," he said. "Unless it's 'Marjorie' or something."

"God help me." Mycroft finished the last of his wine in one. "Purely to prevent you from now dubbing me 'Marjorie Holmes'," he said, "and mocking me mercilessly for a week for it..."

He put his glass down, aligned it with the candle holder, and said,

"I am... 'Edward Mycroft', by birth certificate." He glanced into Greg's eyes - rather tentatively. "My father was Edward Augustus."

A warm, quiet sensation stirred behind Greg's ribs. He found himself still looking into Mycroft's eyes, moved.

He didn't know why he liked it so much.

"Suits you," he managed, after a moment.

Mycroft frowned, gently. Confusion edged his gaze. "Please do not start calling me Edward..."

"I won't, but - why?"

"I've never been known as Edward in my life. Only my mother ever used it. It means about as much to me as 'Marjorie'..."

Greg couldn't hold his quiet smile. "Edward Mycroft Holmes."

Mycroft eased his lower lip between his teeth.

"I am - Edward Mycroft Pentridge Holmes," he said.
"Jesus Christ. "'Pentridge'?"

"My - mother's maiden name." Mycroft gave him a half-smile, his gaze wary. "Please do not call me Pentridge, either."

Greg reached for the wine bottle.

He filled Mycroft's glass, quietly trying it out in his mind.

"You don't look like a 'Pentridge'," he said at last.

Amusement touched Mycroft's expression again. "But I look like an 'Edward', do I?" he remarked, somewhat soft.

Greg's heart flushed.

"You look like a 'Posh'," he said.

Mycroft laughed, startled. He picked up his glass, and glanced into it with a nervous smile.

"Mm... 'Posh Holmes'," he murmured. "A certain ring to it. And unquestionably descriptive."

He took a sizeable drink - then without comment, extended a hand.

Greg grinned, tightening his grip around the phone.

"You're gonna punish me now... aren't you?"

"Turnabout is fair-play," Mycroft reminded him. "Though I'll give you the option of numbers or my choice."

Greg's stomach stirred.

"I want your choice," he said, and handed over the phone.

"Brave man." Mycroft scrolled with his thumb, taking a neglected salad leaf from his plate. "If you could turn any activity into an Olympic sport," he read out, chewing, "what would give you a good chance at winning a medal?"

Greg bit down into a smile, saying nothing.

Mycroft raised an eyebrow. "I have no challenge to make," he said, coolly. He scrolled onwards. "What takes up too much of your time?"

"Work." Greg hesitated, fearing he'd answered that a little quickly. "Maybe hoovering? Never should've got a place with a cream carpet."

Mycroft fought a smile, reading.

"What do you wish you knew more about?"

You. "Erm - history. 'Cause my nieces are doing World War Two at school, and I don't have a clue. I have a horrible feeling they think I was there."

"What is 'the best way to start the day'?"

"Where would you spend all your time, if you could?"


Mycroft cast him a restrained smile, his gaze wry and fond. He glanced back at the phone, scrolling. "What place do you never wish to return to?" he read.

"Oh, Christ." It came out of Greg's mouth before he could stop it. "Derby."

Humour glittered in Mycroft's eyes. "Why?" he asked. "What horrors befell you in Derby?"

"Erm - Jesus, I probably shouldn't be telling you this.... I - went there with Angela, when we were trying to - sort things out. Ended up having a massive row in a Holiday Inn. By the time we left, we'd... decided to -"

Shit, shit. You don't want to hear this. Greg reached for wine.

"And it turns out Derby's crap anyway," he finished. "Next question?"

Mycroft bit his lip, proceeding with slightly more care. "As the only human left on Earth," he read out, "what would you do?"

Greg hesitated.

"Throw myself off something tall?" he said. "That'd be unbearable. I - couldn't cope just - ... next question?"

Mycroft scrolled. "What is your favourite scent?"

"Gardenia and vanilla," said Greg, without pause. "Next?"

Mycroft smiled, flushing. He found a final question, and looked up into Greg's eyes.

"What would you do," he asked, "if you learned you had a single hour left to live?"

As Greg thought about it, he fell quiet - then realised he wasn't actually thinking. He was just trying to change the answer that had come to him at once. It left him reeling a little.

He looked down at his empty plate.

He couldn't not say it.

"Honestly, I'd... probably be fine like this." He hesitated. "Maybe take a minute to ring my sister. Tell her I love her. Tell the kids to be good for their mum. But... otherwise, I - ... good food. Good company. Somewhere beautiful. Suppose I couldn't really improve on that." He ignored the sudden thumping in his chest. "It's - all I ever really want."

He glanced up into the silence.

Across the table, Mycroft's face had changed. He seemed suddenly younger, quieter. There was something fragile in his eyes that Greg hadn't ever seen there before - not even when they were fucking.

Greg's heart twisted strangely.
The question left his mouth before he even realised he'd thought it.

"How many people know your real name?"

Mycroft didn't speak for a moment.

"Work - obviously know everything about me." He hesitated. "And - family, but... socially, I..."

Greg didn't speak.

For a moment, he couldn't even move.

He then pushed back his chair.

As he came around the table, Mycroft's pupils grew to twice their size. A strange, sudden intensity flooded his face. He sat up, inhaling sharply, every muscle tensing.

Their mouths met in a crush.

Mycroft's moan rippled through Greg's blood. Slim fingers buried themselves at once in his hair, gripped and dragged him closer. He braced a hand on the back of the chair as he pushed his tongue into Mycroft's mouth, shaking, demanding, glorying in the whimper that it caused. Mycroft kissed him back in a frenzy. He panted into Greg's mouth as he struggled, hands scrabbling at the back of Greg's dressing robe for purchase.

As he got hold of Greg's shoulders, gripped and locked into place, Greg grappled both arms beneath him.

Plates, glasses and cutlery scattered across the ground.

Mycroft's frantic gasp was lost against Greg's mouth. He arched as Greg laid him on his back against the table, and the last few things were shoved aside.

As he rid Mycroft of his trousers, Greg wondered for a second if this was too much - too far - if this reckless, sudden need to stop talking and just fuck like animals was actually shared - then Mycroft's legs hauled around his waist, pulled him in and held onto him, and he stopped worrying.

Heart thundering, he reached for Mycroft's mouth again. Mycroft hissed, panting, and bit at his lower lip. They ground together and kissed until Mycroft filled every single gasp of air he was permitted with a plea, until Greg's jaw and his cock both ached, until he couldn't bear another minute in two separate bodies.

He reached into the pocket of the dressing robe, retrieved the lube he'd had there all through dinner, and uncapped it with his thumb.

"We're going to need more of this," he snarled against Mycroft's mouth, his chest heaving, as he flooded his palm with the gel. "A lot more."

"Oh - fuck - " Mycroft arched up against him, gasping. "Fuck, yes - "

Greg's pulse quickened. He took a step back.

"Turn over," he said. "Now."

Mycroft scrabbled to comply. As he pressed his cheek flat to the table, panting, Greg stepped close once more - ran a tender hand over the curve of his arse, appraising, digging his fingers in gently. He
then slipped his other hand between Mycroft's thighs.

Mycroft cried out. He spread his legs, squirming, and started to whimper as Greg rubbed firmly at the tight knot of muscle. It contracted at his touch.

Greg wondered when the hell he'd started shaking.

"Relax for me, gorgeous... I want to fuck you. I don't want to hurt you."

Mycroft let out a whine. He arched, rutting back against Greg's touch.

_Mm, sweetheart... I thought so. Could have guessed you like this way._ Greg smiled, bent low, and stroked a rough kiss in the centre of Mycroft's back. He could feel Mycroft's pulse whispering through his skin.

"D'you know how bad I wanted you at New Year?" As he murmured, his voice low and soft, he pushed a first finger smoothly into Mycroft's body. His heart jumped as the muscles there gripped him hard. "I want you more right now. _I want you._"

"Please - " Mycroft gasped, his hands splaying across the smooth surface in frustration. "More, Greg - now - "

Greg stirred his finger slowly - feeling, breathing, spreading the slickness. _You're not in charge here, darlin'... I'll decide 'now'. You just take for me._

"If nobody else had been there," he whispered between Mycroft's shoulders. "If I could've persuaded you upstairs... bent you over the first thing we could find... just _fucked_ you... fucking _had_ you..."

Mycroft let out a cry, his body clenching.

"Relax, baby..." Greg laved his tongue over the back of Mycroft's neck, delighted as Mycroft squeaked and thrust against the table. "Relax and I'll give you two, sweetheart..."

Mycroft panted, fingers tensing against the smooth wood. He swallowed, breathing with it; forceful calm flickered across his features.

Greg raised an eyebrow, pressing with his second finger. "Mm?"

Mycroft shuddered, nodding. "Mm - "

Greg watched him feel it - watched him tense and then relax, then tense again with enjoyment, whimpering, bearing down, colour blooming in his cheeks.

"Fuck me up," Greg whispered. He couldn't help it. "You're so fucking pretty..."

Mycroft panted, open-mouthed. He gazed back over his shoulder at Greg, his eyes dark and flashing and desperate.

His expression creased.

"Fuck me," he begged. "Please." He shook, his body tightening as he swallowed. "Please. Hard. I - I don't know if I can c-come - I just - ... I w-want to feel - ...

_I want to feel._

Greg's stomach twisted itself into a knot.
He leant over Mycroft, took his jaw in his free hand, and turned his head gently over his shoulder - lifting his face. Mycroft whimpered in submission and twisted willingly, his back arching to give Greg what he wanted.

As their mouths stroked, Mycroft trembled underneath him - breathing hard in time with the thrusts of Greg's fingers. Mycroft kept the kiss as long as he could. When he broke it at last he gasped, hanging his head over the table and letting out a sob of enjoyment, rutting against the flat surface in despair. His thighs shook against Greg's.

He was close to coming by the time Greg slipped his fingers free. The cry of desperation cut Greg to the heart.

"Hey..." Greg breathed, kissing his trembling shoulder, stroking his forehead with the other hand. "Shhh, gorgeous... shhh now... m'gonna grab a condom, okay? Stay here for me. Don't you move."

Mycroft hesitated, his hands tensing on the surface.

"I - ..." He turned his head again; a flicker of those desperate blue eyes. "C-Clean. If - if you - "

Greg's stomach swooped. He'd been tested back in summer; all fine. No-one since.

"You - sure, darlin'?"

Mycroft blushed.

"Yes," he breathed, laying his head back down. His eyes closed in submission. "Yes, I - I want - ..."

_Fuck._ Greg swallowed, wrapping his cock in his hand. He stroked himself, tight and slow, forcing himself to fucking breathe.

"You comfy like this?" he asked, leaning over Mycroft, bracing his weight on the table. He realised his voice was suddenly hoarse.

Mycroft shuddered, his voice dropping into a groan.

"Greg," he whispered. "Greg, please. Please just fuck me."

_Christ..._ Greg turned his face into Mycroft's neck, nosing at his love-bites, and guided his straining cock into place.

The first slick push took his breath away. Mycroft's moan hitched into a cry. He twisted against the table as Greg filled him, clawing at the surface, trembling harder and harder with every inch. Greg gripped his hips, and held them firmly as he sank deeper and deeper - hot, _tight_, Mycroft's body squeezing around him, molten and slick and snug. Mycroft's legs shook as he kept them spread apart. He looked like a fallen fucking angel - pinned in submission beneath Greg, pretty and panting, whimpering to be fucked. With an imploring gasp, and a desperate curve of his back, Mycroft tried to rut backwards for more.

Greg shuddered; he couldn't resist. He dragged in a breath, grazed his mouth across Mycroft's teeth, and sank in his teeth as he began to move.

"Oh - fuck...!" Mycroft's cry seared at his soul. He'd never heard someone calling out like that. He'd never heard someone who wanted to be fucked so badly, never heard someone needing him this much. Mycroft sobbed, stretching, writhing between the driving slam of Greg's cock and the biting at his neck. "Fuck, fuck - fuck, please...!"
This wasn't going to last long.

Greg knew it. This wasn't about drawing something out. This wasn't about teasing. It was about having, and he was all too happy to give. He drove himself hard, slamming, pounding, fucking Mycroft like he meant it, and every longing cry burned its way through him in ecstasy.

*Don't you dare forget this, darlin'... ever.* Had anybody ever fucked Mycroft like this? Had anyone ever pinned him to a table like this, made him cry out like this, seen him weak and desperate and pleading like this?

*Maybe not.*

This wasn't a first fuck.

Mycroft only ever got first fucks.

He never had someone to ask. Never had someone to give. Someone he could trust enough to treat him a little roughly, knowing that they'd treat him gently after. Even as he bit down into Mycroft's neck, held him still and felt him writhe for a count of ten hard slams, half of Greg's heart was already carrying him to bed - laying him back against the pillows, murmuring to him to breathe - kissing him all over, blowing cool air across his skin - holding him, stroking his hair, telling him he was so good, telling him he'd taken it so well, telling him he was fucking beautiful and his new bites were so pretty.

Mycroft didn't have someone to care about him like that.

And he wouldn't.

Ever.

*Fuck.*

*Fuck, don't get sad.* Mycroft needed to be taken through this safely. *It doesn't matter. It's fine. The man's a bloody millionaire. He's not brought you here to get sad for him. He's brought you here to fuck him.*

*As if you're even the first.*

*He'll be here with someone else in six months. Don't kid yourself.*

Mycroft was about to come. That high-pitched panting could only mean one thing. He was struggling, straining beneath Greg in desperate need of more, whimpering in submission as he took. His shoulders shook with every thrust.

*Don't forget. Fuck. Please don't forget.*

*I don't care who comes next. I don't care.*

*Just don't forget me.*

Mycroft's eyes closed - a soft glitter beneath his auburn lashes. A strange, fragile relief swept over his face as he seemed to give in, surrendering to something. In its wake, pleasure flooded his features. He bit his lip, moaned softly on his out-breaths, and just took.

Greg's heart battered against his ribs.
He shifted his weight, placing a hand between Mycroft's shoulders to hold him down.

It was all Mycroft needed. His quiet ruptured into a sudden cry. As he came he bucked and stretched, wracking against the table in desperation. Greg held him there, and fucked him through it - and tried to cope with the two thoughts now ripping him in half down the middle: the thought that Mycroft would someday be here beneath someone else; and the thought that Mycroft would never feel this again.

*Christ, man... stop thinking. You've drunk too much. You've had too much sun. You're not here to think.*

*No more thinking today.*

He shouldn't have told Mycroft about Angela. He shouldn't have pushed him about his bloody name. It didn't matter that his mother had called him Edward, and he was now panting beneath Greg like he'd never breathed before, his cheeks seashell pink, his body trembling, his eyes flashing desperately over one shoulder in need of comfort. None of it mattered.

Greg withdrew from him slowly, and turned him over.

Mycroft's arms went around his neck at once.

He was so easy to lift - shaking, winding his fingers through Greg's hair, relaxing as Greg carried him away from the wreckage. He let himself be held. In Greg's arms, his height seemed to vanish; he was just warm skin and a heartbeat.

As Greg laid him with care on the bed, Mycroft reached up to kiss him at once.

Greg eased on top, ignoring the thudding of his heart. He parted Mycroft's lips gently with his tongue.

They fucked half the night. Even though he'd come, Mycroft still wanted to have sex - still wanted to be touched. He wanted Greg to stroke his chest and his back and kiss him, and murmur praise to him as they kept going. His shy moans of exhausted enjoyment were heaven. As he rode Greg for the first time, just after midnight, he started getting hard again. He gazed down at Greg in the darkness as they ground together, slow, panting, his eyes a gleam of sex-soaked grey and his moans tight and faint. Pink patches had bloomed all over his chest; the look on his face was of utter longing. His pretty thighs trembled on every thrust.

He rode Greg like he'd dreamed about it all day.

No condom - just close. Just rocking, and groaning, and pulling Greg's restless hands to his waist and his chest. He didn't want his cock touched. He didn't want to finish. He just wanted to fuck. He was gorgeous - and for this week, he was Greg's - and nothing mattered.

It was almost another hour before Greg let him come again; all fours and arching like an alley-cat, twisting at a fistful of pillow, gasping as Greg took him from behind.

"Come in me," he begged, as Greg groaned between his shoulders. "Please, please. I want it. Please."

Greg slid his fingers down Mycroft's arms, found his hands and gripped them, tight.

As they came, they came together - heaving, huffing and swearing - one straining, stretching, gripping form, Mycroft whimpering and pleading, Greg burning up with need, sinking his teeth into
the side of Mycroft's neck to hold him still.

One o'clock in the morning; a ceasefire was called. Mycroft was no longer able to form sentences, and Greg's back and shoulders ached like he'd built the villa himself from scratch - carried every brick up the hill. He felt like he was drunk. He felt alive.

Between kisses, Mycroft managed to beg a moment in the bathroom. Greg didn't want to let him go. It seemed too far, all that way across the bedroom - too long to be away. He didn't want their skin to come apart.

Watching Mycroft slip from the bed was almost painful.

As the bathroom door closed, and he found himself alone, Greg pushed his hands backwards through his hair. Mycroft had scraped it onto end; it was damp with sweat. His pulse was still racing.

_Fuck, if we were twenty... if we could have the last twenty years back..._

He realised suddenly he was thirsty. He wouldn't sleep without a drink - some replenishment of fluid in his system.

With a wince, he eased out of bed.

The wine had somehow survived the disaster. Greg drank it straight from the bottle, standing by the table and surveying all the mess in the dark. There was food and cutlery everywhere. They'd have to clean it up before the staff arrived in the morning.

Something about making other people tidy up their sex debris just didn't feel right. This scene said, far too clearly, "We fucked here. Hard. For some time."

It'd make Mycroft feel embarrassed. Greg didn't want that.

As he drank, his chest heaving, a thought fluttered through the hormone-soaked murmurings of his mind. He took the bottle from his mouth, glancing across the table.

His phone was lying beneath a fallen candlestick.

He half-expected to find the screen smashed - but it was alright. Greg thumbed a spatter of salad dressing off the case and unlocked it, squinting at the glare through the gloom.

He scrolled his way quietly along the list that appeared.

When he hit a hundred and twenty, he slowed down and searched.

_128: What would your ideal partner be like?_

Greg let it sink into his chest.

For a short while, everything in the world fell quiet - and Greg was alone with it, and it hurt.

Then he heard the bathroom door unlock.

"Greg...?"
Greg closed the app.

He put his phone back down on the table, and left it where it was.

As he headed back through to the bedroom, his heart twisting, he told himself six nights could still feel like a lifetime.

What mattered was how you spent them.
The trill of his mobile phone pulled Mycroft from his sleep. He had it in his hand before he'd even registered he was awake, answering it with a numb swipe of his finger.

He held the phone to his ear.

"Yes?" he muttered. His lower back ached as he sat up in bed, wincing. Oh, God... last night...
"What is it?"

His assistant explained calmly, and without preamble, that there had been an unexpected development on the Montenegro situation - the deal had been rejected.

Mycroft's brain lurched as it tried to keep up.

Squinting at the clock on the bedside, he discovered that it was five in the morning.

Rubbing his forehead, and despairing that he had not become a plumber, Mycroft quietly checked several details.

It seemed the situation was not beyond repair. He told his assistant not to amend the deal, but to put pressure on Radulović himself, and remind him that Mycroft's assistance would be rather vital when certain contracts came up for renewal early next year. She understood, apologised briefly, and hung up.

As Mycroft returned his phone to the bedside, massaging the bridge of his nose, there came a quiet shift beside him in the darkness.

"Who's Radulović?" a voice asked, sleepily.

Mycroft almost smiled.

"Forgive me," he murmured. "A work call."

A gentle hand reached out to stroke his bare thigh. "All okay?"

_Those hands._ There was nowhere on his body Greg hadn't now touched - nowhere the man hadn't kissed and bitten and drowned in pleasure. Mycroft felt fundamentally changed. He'd never experienced anything like last night before in his life. He hadn't known sex like that existed.

He recalled, with a dazed flush, that Greg had asked him a question.

"Yes," he said, tired. "Yes, it's - fine."

"Time is it?"

"Unspeakably early. Go back to sleep... I didn't mean to wake you."

Greg shivered with a small yawn.
"Lie down, posh," he mumbled. "Come cuddle... I'll get you back to sleep."

Mycroft's heart gave an ungainly flutter. He suppressed the sensation, reminding himself of his duties.

"I - should monitor my emails, in case of - ... but you should sleep." He shifted, pushing back the sheet. "I'll go to the lounge, to let you - "

Greg intervened.

"Don't you dare," he rumbled, snaking an arm around Mycroft's waist. Mycroft's soul squirmed. "Don't go sit in the dark on your own, darlin'... stay here... you can read e-mails and cuddle, can't you?"

Why does that appeal so much? I am not a child. I should not want that.

But it was five o'clock in the morning - and Mycroft was weak.

As he found himself settling back down, he lamented his pitiful reserves of self-control. He knew he should be stronger than this. His lover hummed, pleased, and curled around him without a worry. Greg was sleepy, and he was hot-skinned and he was naked - and last night, he'd fucked Mycroft both harder and more gently than he'd ever felt in his existence. He'd fucked Mycroft roughly until he came, fucked him slowly until he wanted it again, then fucked him until he fell apart.

As Greg pressed a kiss into his hair, Mycroft's brain abandoned its protests - crumbling at once into dust.

"There, darlin'," Greg rumbled, his voice as dark and delightful as molasses. He wrapped Mycroft up in his arms. "All cosy again..."

Oh, God. Somehow the man was even more appealing at five in the morning. As a gentle hand admired the pad of his rump, fond, Mycroft could barely restrain a shiver.

"Forgot something," Greg murmured. "Last night..."

Mycroft almost dreaded to think. "Mm?"

"What was dessert meant to be? You?"

Mycroft huffed. As if he would have arranged such a crude and transparent seduction - Greg was so talented in the art that Mycroft didn't need to resort to such horrendous tricks.

"Pavlova," he replied, dimly. "Caribbean fruit..."

"Pavlova?" Greg was still stroking his arse - light, easy circles. "The thing with - meringue and cream and stuff?"

"Mm." It was a wonder they hadn't ended up eating it from each other. "Still in the fridge..."

Interest peaked Greg's tones. "Really?"

"We could have it tonight," Mycroft offered. "If you wish."

Greg gave his arse a gentle squeeze. "Alternatively..."

And so Mycroft found himself at five o'clock in the morning, eating pavlova in bed from a bowl
balanced on a lover's chest.

"Jesus, this is fantastic..." Greg licked the spoon without a care in the world, coiling his tongue around it like he wanted to hear the thing beg. "I could bathe in this stuff..."

Mycroft watched the gesture from Greg's side, trying not to be affected. His brain informed him, flatly, that if they attempted any more sex, there was a very high likelihood that they would die.

His heart - and with the backing of some other places - said they were willing to take the risk.

He quietly fed himself another spoonful of pavlova, wondering if death by coitus might be worth the awkward newspaper obituary.

"It - is rather nice, isn't it?" he said.

Greg teased a piece of passionfruit free from the heap of meringue.

"Why do things just taste better at night?" he wondered, licking the spoon again. "It's like how things taste better outside... picnics and barbecues. It's just a fact."

Mycroft had never noted this phenomenon. He suspected the thrill of five AM pavlova could be attributed to its forbidden nature - that delightful things were far better consumed in private, where one could enjoy them at length.

He tried not to dwell on the thought.

As a spoonful of cream appeared at his lips, he looked up in surprise.

Greg looked back at him, smiling. His eyes sparkled in the darkness as he offered the spoon.

"For you," he said.

_Oh, God._

Mycroft tried to suppress the swoop of his stomach as he let Greg feed him the cream.

Greg's eyes warmed.

"M'glad you're coming to the beach today," he murmured. "It's going to be great."

Mycroft passed his tongue quietly over his lower lip. "I - will be working," he said, with care.

"I know, darlin'. It'll still be good."

_Darlin'.

_I must stop enjoying 'darlin'. '_

"What - do you intend to do, while I...?"

Greg smiled. "Lie next to you," he said, scooping up a little more pavlova. He offered it to Mycroft's mouth. "Sleep. Read my book. Might go swim for a while, if you're there to hold our spot... d'you think the concierge would throw together a picnic for us? Few sandwiches?"

_Dear lord._

Mycroft swallowed his mouthful of cream. "I - really do need to work," he said, tentatively. "I'm -
not sure if a picnic - ...

Greg's eyes flashed with amusement. He rested the spoon carefully in the bowl. "Can I blow your mind, posh?"

Mycroft waited, nervous.

"Whether you're here working on your own," Greg said, regarding him, "or you're working on a beach - taking a five minute break now and then, to have a sandwich and a hug with me... your evil overlords won't know. They won't care. So long as it's done, right? S'why you've been allowed to come out here with me."

Mycroft hesitated. 'I'm - not sure 'allowed' is the right - ... it's been - 'tolerated', perhaps, but - "

All the same, it was a factual statement. As long as the work was completed, its manner of production mattered little to the needs of the nation.

Mycroft glanced at Greg's lips, and imagined it briefly - pausing now and then in his work to reach over for a kiss. To see his lover's skin, lying beside him in the sand; skin that last night had belonged to him entirely. Everywhere he wished to touch, everywhere he wished to lick - all of it, his. Just for a while.

His heart thumped in response.

"I'll - call the concierge," he said, his gaze flitting into Greg's. "I imagine a picnic isn't such an uncommon request."

Greg smiled.

He picked up the spoon again.

"Shame cream is a bad choice for a beach," he remarked, as he scooped a fat cherry out of the pile. "Otherwise, I'd just feed you this all day..."

Mycroft gazed at the cherry, hoping.

Greg held it out for him to eat.

Halfway through rinsing his hair, the swish of the shower door made Mycroft jump. He looked around, blinking through suds, and was surprised to find himself being joined.

"Oh! I - "

Greg smiled, sliding shut the shower door.

"Bored without you," he said, and drew Mycroft into his arms.

"Oh," Mycroft said again, startled. "Oh, I - see." Dear God, man, must you be quite so attractive? Greg's chest was sublime - his dark hair, those damn shoulders - and as he hugged Mycroft, his neck smelled like last night.
Mycroft found his resistance melting away like shower foam.

He shivered as Greg guided his head to one shoulder, coaxing him to rest there.

"That okay?" Greg hummed, as he reached up to detach the shower head.

Mycroft was curiously unable to protest. He looped his arms around Greg's waist, tentatively. "Yes, I - ... of course..."

Greg's fingers stroked over the back of his head.

"Good," he murmured, directing the shower spray to flow through Mycroft's hair.

As Greg rinsed his shampoo for him, Mycroft's eyes fluttered nervously shut. It seemed so easy, just to stand and be held. Greg was utterly gentle. He washed Mycroft's hair with a tenderness that waved every word out of his head, and left in their wake an almost cozy quiet. After a minute, Mycroft dared to tighten his arms a little; Greg kissed his forehead in response, and kept on rinsing.

The shampoo must be long gone by now.

Mycroft couldn't bring himself to say. The gentle tingle of the showerhead was divine. Greg's fingers - rubbing, circling and easing against his scalp - made him want to purr.

"Nice?" Greg murmured at his ear, low and soft.

Mycroft hesitated, blushing.

"You're - very kind," he said. "Thank you..." It felt selfish somehow to let this continue, when he knew his hair must be clean. "You - can probably stop, if you - ..."

He felt Greg's lips curve against his forehead.

"You forgotten last night so fast, darlin'?"

Mycroft wouldn't forget it as long as he lived. He tensed slightly, nervous. "I - I don't - ..."

"If something feels good," Greg whispered, fingers carding through his hair, and Mycroft's breath caught with the sheer sensation of it, "that's all the reason I need in the world to do it for you. And to keep on doing it."

Mycroft felt his cheeks heat.

"If you're certain..." he whispered - and let Greg coax his head back against his shoulder.

"Mm hmm." Greg kissed his wet hair. "Certain m'certain. Now let me be kind to you... I want to."

Mycroft closed his eyes, breathing in the scent of his skin. Perhaps a minute more. He hadn't realised how much he liked Greg's lower back. The very shape of it beneath his hands was enjoyable. There was a little dimple at the base of his spine, and it was boundlessly satisfying to stroke.

After a while, Greg began to wash his shoulder for him.

"Eat breakfast with me today?" he said, softly, kissing Mycroft's earlobe.

Mycroft wondered why. They were quite capable of showering and breakfasting independently - but
Greg wanted to do them together, as if there were something to be gained from sharing the time. Mycroft couldn't think what.

Then Greg began to massage his back with the showerhead, directing the flow with a large, gentle hand, tender fingers sliding over his wet skin - and Mycroft decided there was no harm in having company for once.

They had fruit, toast and cereal together in the kitchen. Greg laughed at his every clumsy attempt at wit, grinning and stroking his arm as they ate. He made Mycroft an earl grey tea; he talked about the terrible coffee at Scotland Yard.

It was hard to put it from Mycroft's mind that he'd spent most of the night with the man inside him - the man now flirting with him over breakfast; the man with whom, against all odds and reason, he would now be spending the day at the beach.

Deciding that his mind was his own, and that thoughts alone were rarely capable of damage, Mycroft allowed himself to remember.

By nine o'clock, a car was on the way.

He checked his laptop nervously, hoped no other beachgoers took notice of his love-bites, and waited for Greg by the door.

Greg had chosen the Anse de Grande Saline - certainly secluded, with no buildings or residences in the immediate area. The attractions on offer were simply ocean, beach, and the green hills that cradled the bay within their arms.

As they arrived, the slender crescent of white sand was almost deserted. A young woman was performing yoga by the shore, entirely nude and facing out across the sea.

It rather tightened Mycroft's heart that Greg paid her not a glance, reaching instead for his hand.

"Apparently it's quieter towards each end," Greg said, with a grin. "C'mon. Let's go claim a spot."

Mycroft let their fingers link, trying to look a little less desperately pleased. He followed Greg along the shore to the western end of the beach, where after some consideration of the sun's path throughout the morning, Greg eventually picked a place to stake their beach umbrella.

"There," he said, kneeling in the sand to spread out a large towel beneath its cover. "How's that?"

Mycroft glanced uncertainly at the limited shade cast by the umbrella. It covered the towel perfectly, but would not accommodate a second one.

"Is there - some way that I could share the...?" Ugh. This is mortifying. "I'm afraid some of us tend to burn rather than tan. And - my laptop is liable to overheat, if - ..."

Greg squinted up at him; he smiled on a slant.

"You know this is your towel..." he said, "don't you?"

"Oh, you - " Mycroft blushed. "I see. That's - ... th-thank you."
Greg produced a second towel from the bag with a flourish, and laid it out in the sun next to Mycroft's.

"As if I'd risk frying your gorgeous skin," he said, flopping back on his towel with a grin, and immediately unbuttoning his shirt. Mycroft's stomach squeezed at the sight. "Come and get comfy, gorgeous. This is home for the day."

Mycroft tentatively settled himself beneath the umbrella, sitting with his knees triangled to his chest.

It was admittedly rather beautiful, he thought, looking out towards the sea - and the shade was very welcome. The sound of the waves was soothing.

Perhaps this would be nice.

Greg wriggled on the towel next to him. Mycroft glanced aside to find him shrugging out of his shirt, tossing it casually into the sand beside their bag. The sight of Greg's bare chest was rather stirring - the chest that, last night, he'd laid his hands upon to steady himself as he rocked. For heaven's sake, is it really so thrilling that you've had intercourse with the man? Surely the novelty should be wearing off by now...

Greg laid back on the towel, unbuttoning his trousers.

Mycroft busied himself quickly with his laptop case. He hoped Greg had opted for loose bathing shorts, rather than anything tight. Otherwise, it might be an unproductive day.

As Mycroft opened his laptop, balanced it on his knee and logged in, Greg shuffled on the towel beside him. Trousers were finally flung casually into the sand with a flump, and Greg made himself comfortable. A contented sigh was taken.

As he loaded up his report, Mycroft risked a discreet sideways glance.

He almost swallowed his tongue. Air rushed the wrong way down his throat. As he started to choke, Greg sat up in immediate concern and began thumping him on the back.

"Hey - you alright? Water in the bag - here, posh, let me - "

Mycroft coughed, gesturing desperately that he was fine. He rummaged in the bag for water, and gasped some down while averting his eyes.

At last, trying to breathe normally, he managed,

"Why are you - nude? This is a public beach!"

"On a French island." Greg settled back on his elbows with a grin. "And it's well-known on this beach. I looked it up on the internet this morning." He stretched a little; the bare planes of his body stirred in the sun. "Relax, posh. 'When in Rome'."

Mycroft covered his eyes with a hand. I shall give you 'when in Rome'.

"If I end up having to intervene," he said, "because you are arrested for indecency - "

"I'm not going to get arrested," Greg laughed, took mirrored sunglasses from his bag, and unfolded them with a click. "Seriously, gorgeous... don't worry. Nobody's going to care." He slid the sunglasses on, then had a thought. "Erm - before you get settled - can I have a brief hand with sun
"cream? Then I'll let you be, I promise."

"Oh my God -"

"On my back!" Greg said. "Christ, not - ... I'll do there."

Mycroft buried his face in his hands. "Oh my God."

"I'll do yours?" Greg offered. "Sun cream, I mean."

"I don't intend to expose eons of myself to the sun," Mycroft said, in despair. It didn't matter how intimately acquainted with Greg Lestrade's cock he might have recently become - the sight of it on a public beach was still too much to bear. "My face and arms have adequate sun protection already. Thank you."

Greg was shuffling over onto his front, getting comfy on the towel - shoulders, back, his delectable bare arse and those muscular bloody thighs. Mycroft was quite certain his heart had stopped beating.

"Just up high on my back?" Greg said, hopefully. "I can reach the rest."

Oh, sweet lord. Mycroft bit down on his tongue. "Where is the bottle?"

"In the bag." Greg laid his head down on his arms, watching rather soft-eyed as Mycroft reached for the bag. He sought through it, found the sun cream and reluctantly put his laptop aside.

"I still do not approve of this," he muttered, squeezing a dollop of the lotion into his palm.

Greg's eyes sparkled over his sunglasses.

"You'll approve when I'm all tanned tonight," he purred.

Heaven help me.

"As it happens," Mycroft retorted, in a valiant attempt at reserve, as he knelt astride one of Greg's thighs, "I don't hold sun-tanned genitals to be an enormous priority in a - partner. But how kind of you to consider my sensibilities."

As he began to spread sun cream across Greg's shoulders, in as functional a manner as he could, he caught Greg's rather sly smile.

"There's a full length mirror in the bathroom, isn't there?" Greg said.

Mycroft frowned. "I believe so. Why?"

"Just checking," Greg shifted, stretching his shoulders hopefully as Mycroft rubbed the sun cream in. "Mm. Harder."

Mycroft stopped at once. "For heaven's sake."

"There's no-one here..." Greg gazed up over one shoulder, his glasses now slipped to the end of his nose. "Please, posh."

'Please.'

Those damn eyes.
God on high, if you were mine... I'd never deny you a thing. Mycroft hesitated, glancing sideways up the beach. The young lady doing her yoga remained the only person in sight. She was so distant that her state of undress couldn't even be seen.

He then looked down at Greg - the man who'd kept him in ecstasy until one o'clock in the morning, then woken up with him at five to cuddle.

This was surely improper.

It was excessive, he thought. It was frivolous, and irresponsible. It was - unnecessary. This wasn't about easing his inconvenient sexual cravings; this was about something else - and he wasn't even certain what.

He felt somehow like it should unsettle him.

Like it shouldn't matter that there was nobody around to see.

But then, he thought - there would be no rubbing sun cream into a lover's back next week. There would be no company in the shower - no lying awake at five AM, eating pavlova simply because it was there to be eaten. Propriety and decorum might seem like sorry prizes, compared to this. Mycroft wouldn't know with any certainty until it was all over.

And when it was over, there would be no chance to go back.

With a steadying breath, he told himself that the damage left by UV radiation would certainly last longer than this week. It was a basic courtesy to protect Greg from that.

And it was not illegal to touch a man's shoulders on a beach.

And when he was eighty, and alone, the memories of what he once did would bring him far greater comfort than relief for those things he did not.

He resumed rubbing in the sun cream - pressing a little more firmly, letting his hands move in longer sweeps.

Beneath him, Greg stirred. Without a word, he closed his eyes.

It took some time to reach the middle of Greg's back. If I'm going to do this, I should be thorough. As Mycroft began to knead just beneath his ribs, Greg gave a first soft moan. His shoulders flexed.

Mycroft bit into his lip. Wretched man. Naked and moaning on a beach. He skimmed his hands to the very small of Greg's back, the little dimple he'd acquainted himself with in the shower this morning, and began to rub firm circles with his thumbs just above it.

Greg groaned, pushing his hips into the sand.

"Christ," came the muffled sigh into the towel. "Please. There."

A flicker of mischief arose in the very back of Mycroft's heart. "Quite certain you need sun cream everywhere, Greg. Not just there."

"Nnh... please."

That word. Mycroft reached for the bottle, dispensing more cream into his hand. He slicked his palms together, coated the rest of Greg's back, then rubbed the little spot he'd found for a few minutes more - enjoying the tremors it caused, and the bulking in Greg's shoulders - then, with a
further discreet glance up the beach, he moved onto Greg's arse.

The stiff groan was rather tantalising. Greg arched a little, lifting up.

"Do stay still," Mycroft said, coolly. "I may miss somewhere. Heaven forbid you end up with an imperfect tan."

"Myc... don't tease me." Greg shuddered. "How many people are around?"

"'Myc', excuse me? I think I'd prefer Marjorie."

"Is it just the girl doing tai chi?"

"Yes," Mycroft remarked, amused, as he massaged perhaps more thoroughly than was needed.

"Which way is she facing?"

You utter rogue. "If you think I'm giving you so much as a nanosecond of sexual relief on a public beach at half past nine in the morning, you can very much think again."

"So - I can have a nanosecond of sexual relief on a public beach at some later point in the day?"

"No," Mycroft said, trying his very hardest not to smile. He worked his hands down Greg's left thigh. "You can have UV protection. And if you behave, and let me work in peace, you can also have a sandwich and a packet of crisps. Content yourself with those."

Greg groaned into the towel. He wriggled slightly, then consented to lie still.

When he'd finished Greg's thighs, Mycroft returned to his arse once more. He decided to add a second layer of sun cream, just in case. One couldn't be too careful with sun damage.

"Hey," Greg said, as Mycroft massaged, voice strained with something a little breathless. "Out of curiosity - "

Mycroft tried not to find the breathless note so affecting. "I think we had rather enough curiosity yesterday evening, didn't we?"

Greg shifted. "I've - got some more."

"I see."

"D'you - ever top?"

Mycroft's stomach flipped. He moved onto massaging Greg's lower back, gently kneading the muscles there.

"On a public beach at half past nine in the morning?" he said. "No."

"In - non-public places," Greg said into the towel, muffled. "At other times."

Mycroft wasn't sure what answer he could truthfully give - that he liked to be fucked until he'd fucked enough to feel playful, at which point he liked to play - that it had been well over a decade since he'd reached that sort of comfort with someone. He couldn't even remember the last time.

A blur of half-recalled faces - friends at university - other agents during the early years of his training - a few boyfriends when he was younger, who always seemed to end up getting in the way. Signing
up for a lifetime of service to the nation hadn't seemed that much of a sacrifice, at the time.

As he rubbed up between his shoulder blades, Mycroft wondered where Greg Lestrade had been fifteen years ago - and why it couldn't have been a little closer to him.

"I'm not sure you should be contemplating the subject on a beach," he said, permitting himself a moment of playfulness. "Nude sunbathing is already circumspect. Doing it with a significant erection definitely bridges the gap from faux pas to felony."

"Erm - I wouldn't say 'significant'..."

"Mm? That's why you're now arching your hips, is it?"

"Nnh."

"Have you satisfied yourself yet that this was a poor idea?"

Greg huffed

"Let me see the tan tonight," he said, "then we'll call it. In the meantime... might get some sun on my back first. Stay like this a while, y'know."

"How sensible." Mycroft climbed neatly off his back, and reached for the water bottle to wash his hands. "Do flip over when you're in a slightly less scandalous state. Until then, may I tend to the needs of the British people?"

Greg chuckled, repositioning his sunglasses on his nose. He shot Mycroft a look of mischief across the top of them.

"You've been tending to them all morning, haven't you?" His eyes glittered. "And all night."

_Damnable man._ "One of them in particular," Mycroft supposed, settling on his towel. "In depth."

"S'Alright, posh... I know I'm your favourite." Greg stretched out in the sun, laying his head back upon his arms. His eyes closed in lazy contentment. "Don't worry. I won't tell anybody."

Mycroft pulled his laptop onto his knee.

He realised he was smiling.
It was an unusual experience, to note the passage of time by the reappearance of somebody's cock - but Greg's system of flipping over every half an hour divided the morning rather neatly into sections.

Mycroft was sure he'd done stranger things in his life.

"Keeps it even," Greg explained, the first time Mycroft cast him a quizzical sideways glance. He reached for the sun cream with a wink. "Serious business, sun worship."

Mycroft felt the corners of his mouth curl.

"I see," he remarked, continuing to type.

Greg sat up on the towel, cracked open the sun cream and squeezed some into his hand. He started with his forearms, worked up to his chest, across his stomach, and then diligently along the front of each leg.

Mycroft tried his very best not to watch as a blob of final sun cream was dispensed. The slowed pace of his typing caught Greg's attention.

"Yep," Greg said, lying back on the towel.

Mycroft bit down into a smile. "I don't believe I said anything."

"Not in words. You wondered, though. And the answer's yep." As Greg casually applied sun protection to his cock, he flashed Mycroft a grin. "Unless I want it to burn."

Mycroft shook his head, trying not to imagine the unique misery of having a sunburned phallus. This week has been quite the learning experience. And more than half a week left.

"For what it's worth," he said, coolly, "I remain astounded by your desecration of public morals. A man of your profession should know better. And if law enforcement arrive, you and I have never met."

"I don't have a profession this week," Greg said, still grinning, as he got comfortable again on the towel. He pushed his glasses up into his hair, shutting his eyes to the sun. "Just a happy idiot lying on a beach. Now stop distracting me from my business, posh. Get on with your homework."

Mycroft bit into his tongue so hard it hurt. It didn't work; a smile still broke through his expression.

"You are a rogue," he muttered, typing. "I should have known better than to bring you here."

Greg huffed. He laid a hand on Mycroft's leg for a moment, fond, and rubbed him gently. Mycroft felt his stomach squeeze. The hand then returned to its owner's beach towel, and peace settled between them once more.

By the time Greg flipped over again, Mycroft had finished drafting the third section of his report. He found himself surprised. An hour to complete a draft was remarkably good. It seemed he was in a productive frame of mind today.

"You had something to drink lately?" Greg murmured, settling on his front with his book.
Mycroft had not. He reached for the water bottle, uncapped it and drank. He then offered it aside.

Greg accepted it, grateful.

"What are you reading?" Mycroft enquired, eyeing Greg's paperback as he drank. Greg disengaged his mouth from the bottle; the plastic gasped.

"Thriller," he replied. "S'called The Ninth Window. Crap so far." Greg propped himself up on his elbows, bent his book open again, and removed the KitKat sleeve he'd been using to mark his page. "If it turns out to be the ex-gardener," he said, "'cause of the problem he had with the sister, I want my six quid back."

Intrigued, Mycroft glanced at the battered cover. "You read crime fiction?"

"Mm."

"Seems an unusual choice of recreational literature," Mycroft noted, "for a detective." He'd have thought crime was the last thing Greg would want to contemplate outside his working hours.

Greg huffed, still reading as he spoke.

"Don't remember when I last solved an actual murder... s'all paperwork - reading reports from the people who did solve them - or it's having the same three arguments about red tape, over and over and over. Legal procedures. Cotton fluff..." He tossed the water bottle back across to their bag. "Or," he added, with an arched eyebrow, "it's something so mental that nobody knows what to do, and I have to drive round to Baker Street so your brother can call me an idiot."

Mycroft fought a smile. He found himself oddly moved by the man's reading preference, and didn't know why.

"Real life is rarely as clean as fiction," he supposed.

Greg smiled a little, rubbing the corner of his book. "Pity," he said, and stretched.

Mycroft watched, trying not to admire the muscles as they moved in his back. He really was a spectacularly-formed human being. How any woman had ever brought herself to divorce Gregory Lestrade was beyond him.

"How long have you known it's the ex-gardener?" he enquired, and caught the curve of Greg's mouth.

"Page fourteen... first paragraph he was introduced. Claiming he was late 'cause of his alarm." Greg frowned, reaching up to slide his sunglasses down from his hair. He balanced them at the tip of his nose. "Murder was committed in a tight time-frame - had to run like clockwork, around the train leaving the station - so presumably he changed the alarm to nine-thirty on the day he did it. Forgot to change it back, then it woke him up late for the funeral. No other reason it'd be mentioned."

Mycroft realised his eyebrows had lifted. "And you reached this conclusion by page fourteen?"

"Ninety per cent sure by then, anyway. Ninety-nine per cent now."

Mycroft smiled a little. By reputation, the man was the best that Scotland Yard had to offer; and for all of his brother's dismissive attitude towards them, they were not buffoons.

"Perhaps you should write your own," he remarked, watching Greg idly turn the page. "It sounds as
if you'd do a far better job of it."

Greg snorted.

"Maybe when I'm retired." He glanced sideways, raising an eyebrow. "You meant to be busy with something?" he checked. "Trains all running on time today, are they?"

There was something about being teased by Greg Lestrade that delighted Mycroft on an almost cellular level. He didn't think he could ever explain it, even if he had a lifetime to do so. The glint in the man's eyes was simply glorious.

"As it happens," he said, feigning hurt. "I've made excellent progress on my report. And my assistant seems to be making amends for the early start by fielding my e-mails with some diligence. I've had a remarkably successful day."

"S'good." Greg's eyes glittered. "Make some more progress, and I'll turn over for you again."

_Wicked man._ Mycroft carefully controlled his expression.

"The sight of your cock is a reward now, is it?" he said.

"Why? Is my arse not doing anything for you, darlin'?"

"It's keeping my blood pressure high," Mycroft replied, "with the potential that we'll spend the rest of the week incarcerated."

Greg visibly restrained a smirk. "Fine," he said. "Work another hour for me, and I'll think up some better reward. How's that?"

Mycroft's stomach squirmed. "One within the confines of the law, I hope."

"Mm hmm." Greg's brow furrowed. "Weird," he remarked. "I still can't hear typing."

"You - ..." Mycroft bit his cheek. He returned to his laptop, told himself he was a professional, and decided he would not be distracted by another moment of this blatant teasing.

Smiling, Greg settled back into his book.

After another half an hour, he turned over again. He laid the book aside, had a drink, spent a minute checking his phone, then rested his arms up behind his head with a sigh.

Stealing a surreptitious glance at the man's biceps, a few minutes later, Mycroft realised that he'd fallen asleep.

He smiled quietly and kept typing.

He found himself curiously aware of Greg as he napped. He could see him breathing just in his peripheral vision, slow and deep; it evoked a strange, protective feeling in the back of Mycroft's chest. As he worked, astonished to find himself within finishing distance of yet another section of his report, he felt as if he were somehow keeping an eye on Greg - ensuring his safety, safeguarding his peace in some way.

The thought, of course, was lunacy.

Mycroft could hardly defend Greg from some disturbance - nor offer much more security than if Greg were here alone.
All the same, it was nice to feel him sleep. His presence at Mycroft's side was oddly calming.

It felt good to be trusted, Mycroft realised.

It was almost half eleven, and the sun was at its peak. The later hours of the morning had brought a few more people to enjoy the scenery, though not many. Those who were here had mostly settled further along the shore, and seemed to be occupying themselves in much the same manner as Greg - sunbathing, reading, relaxing on towels. The noon heat was beginning to swell; a few people had taken to the water to cool off.

As Mycroft reached the final sentence of section four, finishing it with a rather pleased full-stop, he chanced to glance up over his laptop screen.

One of the swimmers had strayed to this end of the beach. He was just striding from the water, raking his hands back through his hair. Mycroft registered with an absent-minded glance that he was male, around forty and athletically built - the sort of affluent tourist that St Bart's attracted in abundance - before a typing error in his last sentence retrieved Mycroft's attention, and he returned to his work.

He fixed the error, then wondered if the sentence could use a little clarification. He supposed it couldn't hurt.

As he typed, he became aware that the swimmer was now walking up the beach.

Mycroft kept his eyes down, hoping Greg's nudity hadn't offended some member of the public, now on his way to upbraid them.

Then a genial British voice called, "You must be Mycroft?"

Mycroft looked up in alarm.

The man was striding towards them, smiling. His wet skin and black swimming shorts gleamed in the sunlight. Mycroft was at first quite certain he'd never seen this man before in his life - and then a strange flash of recognition crossed his instincts, from some point of origin he couldn't place. He had a feeling they'd met recently.

He didn't recognise the voice. The sight of this man was familiar, but the sound of him was not.

The pieces slotted suddenly together.

Mycroft kept his expression as neutral as he could, regarding the gentleman with a nonplussed civility - even as his heart commenced an immediate impression of a snare drum.

_He told you my name._

_He told you about me._

"Forgive me," he said, coolly, to the square-jawed and very symmetrical specimen of humanity now grinning at the foot of his towel. "I - don't believe we've been introduced."

Ethan Sterling held out a hand.

"Ethan," he said, as Mycroft reluctantly took hold of it. A firm, lavish handshake ensued; a very clean white smile was offered with it. "Ethan Sterling. Met your Greg yesterday. Is he asleep?"

_My Greg._
"Ah - yes," Mycroft said, with a sideways glance, as he dried his now damp hand on his trousers. He wished more keenly than ever than Greg was a little less utterly naked. "Yes, so it seems."

"Long night?" Sterling said, grinning. He turned his gaze up the beach with a heady sigh, admiring the lazy sweep of sand. "We were at Casa Club until gone one, then back at the hotel... barely been awake an hour. Wild night. Absolutely fantastic."

Mycroft regarded the man with composure, as he recalled what he and Greg been doing at one AM.

An incendiary part of him quite wanted to say it. *Fucked furiously over a table to start with, and then a continuation of the theme... the man's a beast, Mr Sterling. He really is. Frankly surprised I can walk today. How charming of you to enquire.*

"A quiet dinner, I'm afraid," he answered, restraining a smile. "I'm - not so much a member of the nightclub scene."

Ethan Sterling nodded. With the sun's glare behind him, it was difficult to see precisely where his eyes laid.

"Got any plans this evening?" he asked. "You and the mister?"

Mycroft's mouth opened with uncertainty. *Why do you wish to know?*

Before he could answer, movement at his side caught his eye. He glanced across to find Greg finally stirring, pushing his fingertips beneath his sunglasses as he stretched.

With a broad grin, Ethan Sterling said, "Morning, sleepy..."

Mycroft decided at once that he'd never loathed someone so much in his existence.

Greg pushed up his sunglasses, blinking - then with a crinkle-eyed huff, said, "Alright, Ethan. How's tricks?"

"Wrecked," Sterling said, with a smirk, hooking his thumbs into the pockets of his shorts. "Up with friends 'til four. I was just telling your fella."

Mycroft's heart squished inside his chest.

It seemed for a moment as if Greg had started to smile. There was something almost calculating in his gaze; he was working something out.

"Yeah?" he said. "Surprised you're up and about."

"You know how it is," Sterling said, pulling his lip between his teeth. "Never miss a minute."

Mycroft's fingers curled tightly into his palms. *Damn it. Stop eyeing him that way, you lascivious moron. I'm sitting here, for heaven's sake. The man is quite clearly attached.*

"Was just saying," Sterling said, tilting his head. "You got any plans this evening? Having a party at the hotel. Cool if you could both come along - meet some people. Make some friends."

Mycroft's stomach gripped.

Before he could even begin bombarding Greg with a psychic stream of *no, please no, please do not make me endure some shallow social gathering with this horrendous man*, Greg had given Sterling a regretful half-smile. It didn't quite reach his eyes.
"Sorry, mate," he said. Behind his deadpan expression, Mycroft's heart collapsed with relief. "Old-fashioned romantics. Thanks for the offer, though."

"Really?" Sterling raised an eyebrow. "You sure?"

"Yeah." Greg reached aside for his book. "You have fun, though. Maybe we'll catch you around."

"Suit yourself." Sterling gave Greg a final smile, and cast Mycroft a flickering glance. "I'll be around, if you change your mind. Either of you. We're up at Eden Rock. I'll give your names to the desk."

He strode away up the beach, the sun glistening on his back.

Mycroft realised after a moment that Greg was not actually reading. He was watching Sterling leave over the top of his book, with a decidedly unimpressed stare.

Mycroft waited. He had the distinct sensation that he'd missed something.

"How long was he here?" Greg asked at last, glancing over his shoulder. "Did he give you trouble?"

Mycroft blinked. "Trouble?"

"Yeah. Hope he wasn't hassling you for long."

"Hassling me in regards to what?" Mycroft said, bewildered. "And - what did you mean, 'old fashioned' - ?"

Greg gave him a gentle look over his sunglasses.

"C'mon, Mycroft."

"You have lost me," Mycroft said. "Entirely."

"A party?" Greg checked, with care. "In a big hotel?" His eyebrows raised. "And we're both invited?"

Mycroft searched his face, no wiser than ever.

Greg's expression softened.

"Christ," he said, his voice a murmur. "It - doesn't even occur to you, does it? That's kinda nice, actually..."

"What doesn't occur?" Mycroft snapped, now oddly distressed, and unsure why.

Greg bit his lip.

He turned onto his side, pushed his book away across the sand, and said,

"Posh, he was... asking us to spend the night at his party."

Mycroft's brow furrowed. "If the man's routinely up until four," he said, "then I'm sure he - "

"Oh, God. Darlin' - just..." Greg lowered his chin, gazing at Mycroft earnestly over the sunglasses. "Look. We wouldn't have been playing musical chairs and eating mini quiches, alright? It wouldn't have been that kind of party."

Mycroft stared at him. "Why do I have the feeling you're suggesting something salacious?"
"Because I am," Greg replied, flatly. "He was - asking us to go to a sex party, posh. As a couple. You know... partner swapping? 'Meet some people'? 'Make some friends'?

Mycroft's jaw nearly hit the sand. "You can't be serious."

Greg hesitated. He nodded, slowly.

"Why - why would he - ..." Mycroft could barely process it. "With both of us?"

Greg's face suddenly fell.

"Jesus," he said. "Did you want to go?"

"No!" Mycroft burst out, in alarm. "No, I did not. I just - ... I can't comprehend why - ... the man had only just met us! A sex party?"

"Did you - not know that happens?" Greg said, pained. "Holiday places like this? I mean - so far as I've heard, it's pretty common..."

Mycroft couldn't understand. "But - we are - ..." A couple.

Greg heard the words he didn't say.

"Some - couples do." He hesitated, gazing at Mycroft with protective concern. "Go off on holiday, meet people... I - s'pose what consenting adults do is up to them. To each their own, and all that." He took a moment. "You really didn't know, did you?"

Mycroft's heart ached. "Why would you - go away with someone, only to - ..."

The very thought of it made him nauseous. Having a partner - having someone of your own, someone to whom who were special - someone who had chosen you, above all others - bringing them here, and sharing them with a stranger after a single conversation at the beach. It made his throat tighten with discomfort. Were ordinary people really so swift to do that?

Having a partner was, to him, an impossible miracle.

And yet it turned out there were Hollywood actors, combing the beaches in hope of couples casually bored of each other - inviting them to join him for anonymous sex.

As Mycroft swallowed around the lump in his throat, a hand laid on top of his.

He looked up, unsettled, to find Greg watching him with care.

"We're not going," he murmured. "I'm - not into that. Never have been. We're going to be at the villa, just you and me. Alright?"

Somehow, the reassurance that Greg was disinclined to such practice made things momentarily worse. The man had just turned down a famous actor in order to stay by Mycroft's side. Even within a single week's arrangement, even when propositioned by a man whose face alone could sell everything from shaving cream to cars, he was loyal.

Old-fashioned romantic, Mycroft thought.

Is that what I am?

He'd thought he was merely deprived. Now it transpired he was also devastatingly unaware of the
"Hey," Greg's voice said, worried - and as Mycroft surfaced once again from the tumult of his thoughts, Greg sat up on his towel. "Don't get locked in there. I know what you're doing... please don't close up."

He reached across, took Mycroft's laptop and shut it - a laptop whose very existence was meant to be known to Mycroft only. No-one else in the world was meant to lay hands on it.

Greg put it safely into their bag, then returned for Mycroft.

As his bare arms encircled Mycroft's shoulders, pulling him into a hug, Mycroft found himself too weak to move.

Greg's fingers wound into his hair.

"Forget it," he murmured, his voice low and soft. "Doesn't matter." He brought Mycroft's head onto his shoulder, and held it there. "People do all sorts to feel okay. I drink and read crap crime novels. You work. Celebrities fuck as many people as they can, so they feel loved. It's 'cause their parents didn't give them any attention when they were kids. Doesn't matter. He's pissed off now, and I'm still here. It's all fine."

Mycroft shook. Greg's arms were gentle, hot-skinned from the sun; they surrounded Mycroft perfectly.

"I..." Greg smelled like their bed. Or the bed, perhaps, now smells of him. "I-I'm - alright, Lestrade. You needn't worry. Surprised at people's liberties. That's all."

Greg was quiet a moment; he held Mycroft a little tighter.

"That's why you're calling me Lestrade again, is it?" he said.

Mycroft shut his eyes.

"We - ... it seemed a - ..." For God's sake, man. Speak. "I'm - m-moved by your loyalty. Even - even if we cannot - ... a-after this - ..." Christ, man! Stop speaking.

Greg began to rub his back like a distressed child.

"Nothing to worry about," he murmured, and kissed the linen that covered Mycroft's shoulder. "Nothing at all. That was weird, okay? But him and his ego'll leave us alone, now we've turned him down. How's your report going?"

What report?

"Oh." It took Mycroft a moment to recall. "W-Well. Very well. Thank you."

"Yeah?" Greg pressed a gentle kiss against his jaw. "Ready for a break? Maybe get some food and water in you?"

Mycroft hesitated. In truth, he was enjoying being held. He'd forgotten in his entirety that Greg was naked; only his arms and his chest seemed to exist. The waves were stirring somewhere, and the breeze brushed across the back of Mycroft's neck - as if it wished to help Greg soothe him. Greg's hands were gently palming his back, and nothing else particularly mattered.

He couldn't bring himself to say.
Greg seemed to understand, all the same. He gave a gentle half-smile, his lips curving against Mycroft's jaw.

"Come lie down," he murmured. "Reward you when we're home... 'kay? Any room you like. Any way you like. For now, let's have a sandwich and a cuddle."

A sandwich and a cuddle.

God almighty.

Invited to some manner of sex party by a chiselled demi-god - and what you want is a sandwich and a cuddle.

With me.

Greg settled onto his side. He adjusted the edge of his towel over Mycroft's, protecting them from the sand. As Mycroft nervously lowered himself down, an arm went around him and drew him nearer.

It was like being held in bed - just with a breeze, and the waves, and the hot shine of Greg's skin.

"Right," Greg said, tugging the bag towards them across the sand. "Let's see what the concierge has rustled up... better not all be egg mayo."

Mycroft hesitated, gazing at his face.

You are so comfortable.

So easy.

You act as if there's nothing at all wrong with me.

"Here," Greg said, gently, passing him the water bottle. "You're not drinking enough... finish that off. We've got another one in here for this aft."

I have paid people to act this way for me. To give this to me. Normality.

They can barely sustain the fiction for a few hours.

"Okay... looks like we've got BLT, ham and cheese... tuna salad, I think - and tomato and cheese." Greg smiled at him, bright-eyed, an arm still wrapped around his back. "What d'you fancy?"

Mycroft's throat squeezed.

"The - tuna." He hesitated. "If you - "

Greg passed him the tuna, with a kiss to the forehead.

"There y'go," he said.

Mycroft began to unwrap it, carefully.

"Should warn you," Greg added - and Mycroft paused, glancing at him. "There's some sort of fruit skewers in a box at the bottom. We can eat them - but don't go getting depraved ideas on a public beach at half eleven in the morning."

Oh - you -!
"You are naked!" Mycroft reminded him, shocked from his distress at once. "Only one of us has been having 'depraved - "

"Yeah, but... I know what you're like, posh. You and your rampant carnal longings." Greg began to unwrap his sandwich, his eyes sparkling. "A few pieces of watermelon, and I'll be fending you off with the skewer."

Mycroft stared at him. **You absolute, utter scoundrel.** Greg continued to unwind the film from his sandwich, suppressing a smirk.

Mycroft's stomach curled.

**Right.**

Lestrade was expecting some pithy remark.

It was why he let out a yelp as Mycroft pounced him into the sand, crawled on top of him, and kissed him in a fury.

He struggled for all of two seconds, before the facts of the situation became apparent to him. His grin was quite the prettiest thing Mycroft had ever kissed - and as their mouths sealed, and Greg's arms wrapped tight around his back, warm hands rumpling his shirt with longing, Mycroft eased his tongue between the bastard's lips.

Greg groaned against him, stiffening.

Mycroft cupped his jaw and kissed him harder. His heart pounded, his blood hot in his veins. **Mine, damn it. Mine.**

*I only get seven days.*

*I'm not sharing you for a moment.*

The sand felt warm beneath his knees. It felt good; Greg's body strained against him gently as they kissed, and the rasp of stubble across his jaw sent shivers up and down his spine. Greg's hands stayed resolutely above his waist - gripping at his back, restless and protective and fond.

After a minute, his grasp suddenly tightened. He groaned into Mycroft's mouth.

"M'crof-"

Mycroft inhaled. "Shhh..." he soothed, and slipped his tongue inside Greg's mouth again, shaking. **Mine.** Greg let out a small whimper. He let Mycroft enjoy his mouth for a few more moments, then began a muffled protest, wriggling.

Mycroft finally released him to breathe.

"What is wrong?" he whispered.

"You're - g-going to have to stop." Greg stared up at him, flushing, his expression entirely serious. "Or we're gonna have a problem... alright?"

Mycroft's eyes flashed. "I see no problem," he murmured, and stole another kiss.

Greg's expression flattened. He held Mycroft's gaze, his pupils huge, and gave a single upwards thrust of his hips - demonstrating the precise nature and extent of the problem very clearly.
Mycroft's every nerve fizzled with delight. The urge to thrust back, to grind in search of pleasure, was overwhelming.

"Can you - reach my trousers?" Greg asked, his breath a little tight. "They're over there. By the bag. Need to cover up."

Mycroft bit his lip.

"Possibly," he said. "I'm not sure I'm inclined to find out. Rather comfortable here."

Greg groaned.

"Myc," he begged. "Don't. Please. I have to try and read like this. I have to let you concentrate. I'm doing well so far. Don't make it harder for me."

Mycroft raised an eyebrow, saying nothing.

"Christ..." Greg took a breath. He searched Mycroft's eyes, his gaze pleading. "S-Seriously, posh. I can't hide being this turned on."

"Do you regret the nude sunbathing yet?" Mycroft asked, and licked gently at his lower lip.

Greg jerked. "Myc - "

Mycroft's fingers flexed into the sand either side of his head.

"If you call me that once more," he breathed, caught Greg's lip between his teeth and tugged, wrenching forth the single most delicious sound he'd ever heard, "then upon returning to the villa, I will make Ethan Sterling's horrid sex parties seem like a meeting of the Cheltenham Ladies' Institute. Have I made the matter clear?"

Greg shuddered, now struggling not to pant. His cock was straining against the front of Mycroft's trousers.

"This is cruel," he gasped.

Mycroft took a final kiss from his soft, beautiful mouth.

"No," he hummed, and sat up slowly, planting both hands on the man's magnificent pectorals. "This is cruel."

And he rocked his hips downwards, just once.

Greg twitched. He sucked in a breath, scrabbled for the edge of Mycroft's loose white shirt and pulled it free from his trousers, gathering the crumpled fabric down to hide his erection.

Mycroft gazed down at him, smiling - quite sure he'd never enjoyed himself so much on a beach before.

"I could rest my laptop on you like this," he remarked, mildly. "Continue my report... might work rather well for me."

"On my face?" Greg said, startled from his panic by a laugh. "C-Christ. I thought we were friends."

Mycroft cast a subtle glance up the beach.
Nobody seemed to have noticed. They had better things to care about than two distant lovers, taking a moment to be playful in the sand.

He leant forwards just slightly, letting the fabric of his shirt sway forwards to hide the entire lower half of Greg's stomach.

He then slipped a hand discreetly beneath it, and caressed his fingers over the cock pressed so desperately against his groin.

"We are friends," he murmured, idly tracing its length.

Greg dug his fingers into the sand at once. He took a sharp breath, his eyes shuttering. "Fuck - "

"Mm." Mycroft wrapped him in a hand, slowly stroking. "Stay quiet."

Greg's mouth dropped open. "Fuck!"

Mycroft shivered, rubbing Greg's cock against his own through the thin layer of linen. Greg quivered beneath him, fighting to stay still, his expression wide with shock and his eyes dark.

"This is illegal," he warned - then gritted his teeth as Mycroft eased back his foreskin with a thumb. "Fu-u-u-uck."

"Precisely why you should stay quiet..." Mycroft circled his thumb through the slick of pre-ejaculate, spreading it, toying with Greg the way he'd toy with himself in the early stages of this. "Mmhm. This is entirely your fault, you realise? Your insistence upon me coming to the beach."

Greg panted, his stomach rising and falling quickly as he stared up at Mycroft in a mixture of panic and desperate relief.

"Don't t-tease me," he whispered. "Seriously. I'm n-not kidding. If you stop - "

"Why would I stop?"

"To torment me. To make me l-lie here - " Mycroft squeezed his cock, fisting tightly up and down. "... - f-fuck," Greg whimpered, struggling not to arch. "M-Make me lie here all afternoon, h-hard - fuck. fuck - turned on - "

"That would be cruel," Mycroft agreed - and stopped his hand. "But then... you have teased me all day."

"S-Shit." Greg shuddered, swallowed, and brushed the sand off one of his hands. "Shit, shit..." He reached beneath Mycroft's shirt, found the waistband of his trousers, and restlessly pulled it down.

Mycroft bit into his lip, staying perfectly still as Greg freed his cock for him. God almighty, this is wicked. This is filthy. He wanted it more than he wanted to continue breathing. Greg wrapped their erections together in a tight fist, stroking roughly at once beneath Mycroft's shirt. Relief rushed across his face.

"Shit..." he whispered again, shaking, hips arching up the barest inch.

Mycroft buried his fingers into the sand, breathed, and looked down into Greg's eyes.


Greg's expression contracted. "Fuck." He did as he was told, quick and steady and tight. "C-Can't do
this for long. Someone'll notice."

Mycroft's heart thudded with longing against his ribs. He wanted to come. He'd worked hard all morning, sat all day with the man lying there beside him, gorgeous and naked in the sun, fending off obnoxious celebrities, and now he wanted to come - hidden by a crumpled shirt, panting tightly to each other, Greg's fist working them both, fast and firm and without elegance.

He hoped Ethan fucking Sterling had seen them kissing.

"Yes," he whispered, letting the sound ease its way decadently from his throat. "Yes... yes - more..."

Greg faltered. "A-Are you - ... c-can you come quietly?"

Mycroft swallowed, moving his grip from the sand to Greg's shoulders, digging his dusty fingers into the delicious slab of muscle there. \textit{God help me, I want to ride you like this. Open air. Ocean.}

"Nobody's near to us," he breathed, biting into his lip.

"You're loud," Greg warned, his eyes wide and his breath now short. "You shouted half the island down last night."

"I'm loud when you fuck me," Mycroft gasped, his expression twisting with enjoyment. The nuzzle of Greg's frenulum against his own was sharp and shocking and delicious, the tight tugs of Greg's hand just perfect. "Now make me come."

"Oh - Jesus - " Greg swallowed; his grip tightened. His prick pulsed against Mycroft's as they both fought not to groan. This was sublime. It felt somehow better for the need to stay quiet. Greg was right - last night, Mycroft had called out with pleasure until he was hoarse. He'd moaned as they fucked as if he'd never get another chance. Now, the only outlet was to breathe and tremble - to grip Greg's thighs with his own, and pin his shoulders to the sand, and give tiny slight rocks of his hips as his balls began to draw tight. He could feel Greg struggling to restrain himself, too. Every gentle jerk and every stiffening sent excitement rippling through Mycroft's groin. Greg was gazing up at him, his expression tight and intense, pupils as he watched Mycroft muffle his moans.

Before long, the pressure in Mycroft's stomach began to twist itself tight as a knot.


"Y-Yeah?" Greg dragged in a breath, speeding the restless motions of his fist. "M-Me too."

\textit{Oh, God. Together. Both of us. Now.} Mycroft dug his teeth into his lip, grasped Greg's shoulders and ground against him, hard - once, twice, feeling the raging heat start to break on the third push, feeling Greg arching up beneath him. \textit{Fuck, fuck, fuck...} he didn't know if he was making noise. He didn't know if he'd flung his head back and howled. It was too good. Too much. He couldn't cope. He gripped Greg with his thighs and forced himself to hiss it out, his chest heaving, his heart hammering, kneading Greg's shoulders desperately with his hands as the pressure flooded from his cock into Greg's grip.

A single, whimpering grunt was all he heard from Greg. Greg's face contracted tightly, his hips bucked, and an answering rush of fluid spilt into the mess of his hand.

Mycroft groaned softly at the sight. He let his head fall forwards, panting; his shoulders shook.

The relief was glorious.
"J-Jesus..." Greg whispered, staring up at him in shock.

Mycroft's heart burned. His pulse was pattering in his throat, Greg's hand still curled around their softening erections. "H-How - how do we - ..."

Greg shivered.

"S'baby wipes," he murmured. "I-In the bag..." His head fell back into the sand, chest rising and falling hard. Sweat gleamed on his forehead. "Thought for - picnic... tidying up. Can you reach it?"

Mycroft could barely move, let alone reach.

"Stay still," he managed, breathless, as he leant over sideways for the strap. "Don't - ... m-my shirt - if you can."

Greg grinned.

"Christ," he whispered, his body shaking with a gasp of laughter. "Christ, you - ... you're wild, posh. You know that? That was so fucking illegal. You bastard."

Mycroft's heart strained with delight. "It's only illegal if it's noticed..." He hefted the bag across the sand and looked through it, relieved as he spotted the pack of wet wipes at the bottom. At least they wouldn't have to return to the villa spattered in body fluids. He glanced up the beach, checking for any horrified distant observers - there were none. "Was I - ?"

"No." Greg flashed him a smile, his eyes soft and wild. "No, darlin'. You were quiet... you were fucking gorgeous. All tight and shaking for me."

Mycroft huffed, feeling his heart squirm.

"Small miracles," he murmured, peeling open the baby wipes, and taking one.

Greg stirred beneath him; his eyes glinted. He eased his sticky hand from around their cocks, and grinned as Mycroft attended to it with a baby wipe.

Their fingers tangled, happily.

"Knew you'd enjoy the beach," Greg said, dropping him a wink.

Mycroft's heart gave a quiet flip. "Rather more a case of enjoying you."
A few minutes after four, Greg dropped shut his book in disgust. He pushed it away across the sand, laid his head on his forearms, and sighed.

"The gardener?" came the voice from beside him, amused.

Greg didn't know if he was more disappointed or offended. "Four hundred and twenty pages."

Mycroft chuckled. "Commiserations, bit of rough."

"S'alright, posh... I'll get over it in time." Greg turned his head to peer upwards, smiling against the crook of his elbow. "How's yours going? Better?"

Mycroft looked for a moment almost bewildered, his mouth upturned in a smile.

"Remarkably well," he confessed, and finished off a sentence with a smooth tap of keys. He turned to Greg, his expression warm and his eyes bright. "I'm very pleased, all in all... I find myself ahead of schedule."

The small smile caused an interesting curl somewhere deep in Greg's abdomen.

"Yeah?" Greg bit his lip. "Is that you done with work for the day?"

Mycroft's gaze glittered. "I think it might be."

Good, Greg thought, smiling. Now get your bloody clothes off, and get on top of me again.

"How's my tan coming along?" he asked.

Mycroft cast his eye along Greg's naked back in appraisal.

"It's certainly deepened," he replied, and closed his laptop with a soft click. "Hard to tell to what extent, in the bright sun... I can give you a more accurate assessment later if you wish."

Mm. "Help me with my after-sun?"

Mycroft raised an eyebrow, sliding his laptop away into the bag. The spark in his eyes was magnificent.

"I suppose I've made a half-decent job of your UV protection," he said. "Only fitting that I do what I can to maintain the results."

Greg grinned. He couldn't help it. The man's capacity to be serious was nearly legendary; seeing him relaxed and playful was like coming across some gorgeous rare animal, knowing no-one would ever believe you.

As Mycroft smiled back, circling his arms loosely around his knees, his eyes crinkled at the edges. They were peaceful and full of fondness.

He looked good in the sunshine, Greg thought - like he'd been here a week already.

"Hey..." Greg eased up onto his elbows. "You might not be cool with this. S'fine, if you're not... but I was wondering something."
Mycroft's smile curved. "Are you about to invite me behind a rock?" he asked.

You delicious bastard. "No, but - that sounds fun too. Let's start with that."

"And what was your original plan?" Mycroft enquired, amused, laying his chin upon his knees.

Greg wriggled a little nearer, and kissed his elbow. "Just thinking about dinner. Did you have plans for us?"

"Not particularly." Mycroft searched his eyes, smiling still, his pupils big. "Why?"

Greg held his gaze, brushed his mouth over Mycroft's elbow, then caught hold of the linen and tugged. The grin it caused made his heart flash like silver in the sun.

"Let's go out," he murmured. He nosed along Mycroft's forearm, slow and playful. "Try a restaurant together... what d'you think?"

Hesitation and delight crossed Mycroft's expression at once.

"Makes a nice reward," Greg offered, kissing at his wrist, their noses a few inches apart. "Seeing as you're ahead of schedule, darlin'... we can relax, have a drink... chat. Take it easy."

Mycroft huffed. "Are you going to interrogate me again?"

"Nah, Eddie. Don't worry." Greg winked. "You're safe tonight."

Mycroft's expression creased. "Beast."

"Mm hmm." Greg raised his eyebrows, his gaze still locked on Mycroft's. "Come for dinner, gorgeous. We'll be eating anyway, right? Might be nice to go out."

Mycroft considered him for a moment more, torn. His eyes then lowered.

"I - haven't been to dinner with someone in - ..." He shook his head, exhaling. " - some time."

Greg's heart gripped. He kept it from his face.

"S'just like at the villa," he said, his voice soft. "Nice food appears. We eat the food. We try talking, end up flirting, get each other all wound up, then I do my best not to put you across the table and fuck you. We're on a fifty per cent success rate so far. Promise I'll try my hardest."

Mycroft's mouth twisted.

"Shame," he remarked.

Greg's grin widened. "Come for dinner."

He saw the very moment that Mycroft gave in; it was marked by a soft huff and a smile. "Very well," he said, and Greg's pulse picked up. "On condition," Mycroft added, his eyes flashing into Greg's, "that you never refer to me as 'Eddie' again. Or 'Myc'."

"Or 'Marjorie'."

"Or 'Marjorie'," Mycroft said, fighting a smirk. "None of them."

"Fine. Condition accepted." Greg wriggled closer still, and kissed him on the tip of the nose. "Can
you get someone to pick us up, if I find us somewhere to eat on my phone?"

"I'll have to return my laptop to the villa first," Mycroft said. "If it fell into the wrong hands, my life would no longer be worth living. I'll - relax more, knowing it's secure."

"That's okay." Greg brushed his lips over the back of Mycroft's hand, soft little strokes between words. "How about you drop me in Gustavia, then? I'll get us a table somewhere."

"Very well..." Mycroft glanced at his lips, smiling. "How will I know where you are?"

"I'll text you." Greg leant up, pressing their foreheads together. Mycroft's eyes were so bright they took his breath for a second. "Keep your phone on."

"I will." Mycroft hesitated, taking a second. "May I kiss you?"

It was like watching someone on a swing, Greg thought - sometimes, playful and happy enough to pounce Greg into the sand; sometimes, hardly daring to believe he was allowed to lay a hand on him.

But the shyness was growing smaller, and the playfulness was growing stronger - and the time between them was getting longer and longer.

You're learning gorgeously for me, darlin'. Opening up. I'm so proud of you. We'll ease you open a little more tonight... teach you how to have dinner.

Make you some more happy memories for you to take home.

"You can kiss me as much as you like," Greg murmured, his voice as soft and warm as the sand. "Any time you want... you're gorgeous. I love being here with you. And I'd love you to kiss me."

Mycro flushed at once, desperately pleased. "Truly?"

"Mm hmm. M'having an amazing week." Greg smiled, brushing his nose against Mycroft's. "Always knew we'd get on nicely... didn't realise it'd be this good, though. You're fantastic company."

Mycro shivered. His breath audibly caught, and he reached for Greg's lips.

Greg moved them playfully out of reach.

Mycro leant for them again, hopeful, with a tiny sound of plea. Greg couldn't keep the game up. He grinned, caught Mycroft's mouth, and gently coaxed him backwards onto the towel.

Mycro's fingers wound through his hair as they kissed. He stirred beneath Greg, kissing him as if he'd longed for it all afternoon - shivering, breathing, wrapping Greg's tongue with his own. The motions of his mouth were slow and soft and needy, and the flimsy layer of linen between them felt whisper-thin. Their bodies were meant to be together, Greg thought. Their skin was meant to be touching. Mycroft hooked an ankle shyly around his calf to keep him there, and the soft sounds soon coming from between their mouths made his stomach flutter restlessly.

He wanted to hear them tonight, just like this - sheets instead of a beach towel, no linen between them. Slow tonight; a cosy meal, the sun going down over the sea, maybe a bath together.

Then just like this - hear Mycroft moan quietly into his mouth. Feel him stir.

As their lips came apart, Mycroft gazed up into his eyes. Deep, peaceful affection softened his gaze - it was the look of someone quite at ease, who knew he was in safe hands.
It crossed Greg's mind that, if they'd been in love, this would have been a moment to whisper it.

For half a moment, it looked like Mycroft had had the same thought. He lowered his eyes, bit his lip, and said,

"Thank you for coming here." He hesitated, looping his arms around Greg's waist. "You - can't imagine what you've given to me. Already."

Greg's grin opened itself from ear-to-ear.

"S'alright, gorgeous... thank you for bringing me." He winked. "Still got five nights to go. Not going to get bored of me, are you?"

Mycroft shivered. It looked oddly like relief.

"I - doubt that somehow." A quiet mischief brightened his eyes. "You're a creative individual, after all."

"Can't help it. I like seeing you enjoy yourself... suits you." Greg gently licked his lower lip. "One more kiss," he said, "then car?"

Mycroft's chest expanded beneath him.

"Mm," he hummed, stroking his fingers longingly across Greg's scalp. "One more kiss..."

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**hey you :) found us somewhere. Its called "tamarin". Food looks incredible and gorgeous. All open walls and green plants... got us a balcony table xxx**

**Excellent. I shan't be much longer. M. x**

**you on your way? Want me to get you a drink? :) xxx**

**No, not quite yet. I'm very nearly ready. M. x**

**ready? What for? xxx**

**For dinner? M. x**

**Unless I've grievously misunderstood you. M. x**
Christ Are you getting all poshed up?? Don't. Come as you are xxx

In a crumpled shirt with traces of semen on it? I dread to think what manner of restaurants you usually frequent. M. x

nobody could tell. you looked gorgeous just as you were <3 xxx

Don’t you dare rock up here in a full fucking suit. or I'm gonna have to make adjustments xxx

I'm delighted to say that I dare you to try. M. xx

Tell me what that means. M. xx

what what means? xxx

Less than three. M. xx

Is it cherries? M. xx

I don't see what else matches the shape. M. xx

why would I randomly send you cherries??? xxx

Why would you randomly send me 'less than three'? It makes no sense. M. xx

I suggest that you tell me Lestrade. You're delaying me in getting ready for dinner. M. xxx

Jesus you ARE turning up all swanky. No wonder you've been ages. get your gorgeous self down here Holmes however you are <3 xxxxx

Moments after Greg put the phone down, it began to ring. He took a sip of his mojito, licked the smile off his face, and flipped the phone to find an unexpected name.

He answered, settling his elbow on the table. "H'lo?"

The voice in his ear was bright with a grin. "Alright, Greg," it said. "Success?"
Greg bit down into his smile. "Are you for real? You nearly got me in trouble."

"Why? I thought it went fine. He was kissing you furiously enough straight after."

"Yeah, no thanks to you. He got really upset." Greg caught the straw of his cocktail with his mouth and took a sip, keeping an eye on the door in case of Mycroft. "Thought he was gonna close up on me again... I said 'low key flirting', didn't I? I didn't say 'invite us to an orgy'. Some actor you are. What would you've done if he said yes?"

Ethan laughed in his ear. "Impromptu?" he said. "I don't know."

"You'd have improvised an orgy? Christ. You're not even gay, are you?"

"Straight as a plank, mate."

"So when the two of us turned up at Eden Rock to have sex with you," Greg said, "we'd have had a problem on our hands, wouldn't we?"

He realised he was now getting a scandalised look from a nearby table. He shot the nice family an apologetic hand-wave, then hid his smile in his mojito as Ethan replied.

"Psssh..." the voice said in his ear. "It worked out fine - I saw you writhing around together. Did he agree to dinner?"

Greg couldn't hide his grin. "Yeah... yeah, he did. Just waiting for him now." He paused, smiling as he ran his thumb along the edge of the glass to catch the water droplets. "We had a really good day."

"There we go," Ethan said, brightly. "Success. You're welcome, Greg."

Greg gave in. "Alright," he said, with a grin around his straw. "Thanks, Ethan. I owe you one. I'll put in a good word to the Oscars committee, yeah? A 'sterling performance'?"

Ethan laughed. "Just get me a pint when we're back in London."

Are you serious? Greg nearly said. Mycroft will kill me.

He then realised, with a jolt, that Mycroft wouldn't be there to get upset.

Greg wouldn't be his, then; it didn't matter who he drank with, who he saw. Mycroft wouldn't even know.

He pushed the thought aside, took a mouthful of mojito to wash it on its way, and said,

"A pint it is. We'll do the Wimbledon Eight some time, yeah?"

"Fighting talk," said Ethan Sterling. "You're on."

Greg smirked, chewing on the straw. "Technically the Wimbledon six now," he said, and fished a mint leaf out of his glass. "They closed The Brewery Tap and the Prince of Denmark, but good news. It means you'll have some chance at keeping up with -"

As he glanced across the restaurant, his heart nearly stopped.

Mycroft had arrived. He was following a waiter between the tables of other diners, looking immaculate and gorgeous in a suit of mid-blue-grey. He wasn't wearing a tie; the pristine white shirt was open past his collarbones, offering a pretty triangle of pale skin and freckles beneath. He looked
as cool and effortless as if he'd just breezed out of a magazine ad for luxury air travel.

As he met Greg's eyes across the room, and spotted Greg's open mouth, he visibly hid a smirk.

Greg felt his groin tighten at once beneath the table. He shifted, abandoned whatever sentence he'd been halfway through, and said,

"Gonna have to go, Ethan. Cheers again."

"No problem, mate. Happy to help. Have a good n-"

Greg hung up. He put down the phone as Mycroft reached their table, and realised immediately what was about to happen. It was something in Mycroft's eyes. It felt right - his heart pounded with it. As Mycroft stepped close, and reached up to cup his jaw, Greg's arms wrapped themselves around his waist.

Mycroft kissed him, slowly. He stroked Greg's cheek.

Like we've not seen each other in days. Like you missed me. Greg ran his hands longingly over Mycroft's back, feeling the crisp white cotton and the curve of the body beneath it, shivering a little as Mycroft's tongue slipped into his mouth. Christ. All these people and you're kissing me.

You're so fucking beautiful.

Mycroft had dressed up, just for dinner with him - a pretty suit - one with colour. He'd seen Mycroft Holmes wear every shade of grey and muted green under the sun, but never blue. Doesn't wear it often. Special. Greg's heart strained against his ribs. Just for me.

"Who was that?" Mycroft asked against his lips.

It took Greg a second to remember there'd been a phone-call at all.

"Holly," he replied, and brushed Mycroft's mouth with another kiss. "Just seeing how I am."

Mycroft's lips curved. "And how are you?"

Greg grinned, stroking his hands down to Mycroft's waist.

"Better than I could tell her about," he said. He could feel himself shining slightly, silvered by Mycroft's glow. "You look fucking amazing."

Mycroft's eyes glittered. "Thank you."

"Honestly, you're... you're just gorgeous. You're beautiful."

"Mm..." Mycroft wasn't letting him go. "And are you going to make any adjustments?"

Greg's stomach squeezed.

"Not right now," he said. "Maybe later." He held Mycroft's gaze. "See how it looks scattered across the bedroom floor."

Mycroft's chuckle was so quiet that he felt rather than heard it. "We're in public."

"Don't care." The urge to cup him by the arse was overwhelming. Greg fought it, barely. "Done more than just flirt at you in public today. Might have to withdraw my promise about not throwing
you across the table."

"This is a nice suit," Mycroft said, smirking, and finally stepped away. Greg's hands ached with the loss of contact. "You'll do no such thing. Have you ordered?"

"No, 'course not. Wanted to wait for you. Menu looks amazing, though." As Mycroft took a seat, Greg hesitated. This was the first time the subject of money had come up. "It's - a bit pricey, but..."

Mycroft huffed, taking up the menu.

"It's St. Barts," he remarked, glancing across the entrées with great interest. "And actually rather reasonable, for what it is..." He gave Greg a smile. "Order what you wish."

Greg flushed. "You sure?"

"Mn. I'll remind you this is my first holiday in three years - I don't intend to scrimp."

"We - can go halves, if..."

Mycroft's expression softened. "I'm happy to cover expenses. Genuinely - it's quite alright." He paused, deciding whether to say something or not. In the end, a faint smile won out. "Tragically rather enjoyable to spend money on someone else. Please don't feel uneasy."

Greg returned the smile, lopsided. "Not used to being wined and dined," he admitted.

Mycroft huffed with amusement. He browsed the menu, his eyes trailing contentedly from one item to the next, and said, "Not used to wining and dining."

"D'you ever eat out at home?"

"Not usually with other people." Mycroft turned the page, reading. "Some of the sharing dishes look rather nice..."

Greg smiled, his heart lifting. "I thought so, too." He took a sip of his mojito; he had to ask. "You're - pretty minted, aren't you?"

Mycroft gave him a look that was half-pained, half-amused. "Define 'pretty minted'."

"You're well-off," Greg said. "You're - doing alright, thanks very much."

"By that definition, I suppose I am." Mycroft raised an eyebrow. "My compensation is... significant, I imagine, by most standards. But there's a great deal expected of me in exchange."

Greg supposed all the money in the world couldn't make up for some things. "At least you get to come places like this, though."

"Mm," said Mycroft, as the waiter reappeared. "Are you ready to order?"

"I can be," Greg said, smiling. "D'you - like the look of the sharing picanha, by any chance?"

Mycroft's eyes danced. "I had a feeling you'd go for that... and yes, as it happens, I do. And a starter?"

"Jesus, are you sure? Erm - the yellowfin tuna sounded nice..."

Mycroft turned to the waiter, smiled, and gave their order in easy, faultless French. Greg spent the
time wondering why even Mycroft's casual mastery of a foreign language was now arousing him. He was so dazed that when Mycroft looked across at him and spoke in English, it took a second for his brain to catch up.

"Another drink?"

"Erm - just a coke," he said. "Probably need to let you catch up on booze."

Mycroft smirked, lifting his eyes to the waiter. "A coke and a Pink Indies, please. Thank you."

The waiter left.

Mycroft made himself comfortable, returned the menu to the centre of the table, and clocked the look he was now being given.

"Yes?" he enquired, amused. "What is it?"

"A Pink Indies?" Greg grinned. "Bit racy."

"What is 'racy' about vodka, grapefruit and cranberry?"

"Comes the colour of my nieces' bedroom, doesn't it? Didn't think you were a pink cocktails man."

Mycroft eyed him across the table with utter delight. "Does it help that I'll be progressing to the Anani?" he said, sitting back in his chair and toying with the base of his third finger.

"What's an Anani?"

"Cointreau," Mycroft said, "dark rum, grenadine and coco, with passionfruit."

"Shine a light." Greg lifted his eyebrows. "Think I'll be joining you."

"Perhaps some food first..." Mycroft remarked, "lest this evening take a turn in the direction of New Year's Eve."

Greg finished the last inch of his mojito with a grin.

"I wonder what the recipe for Mrs Hudson's punch is," he said, chewing at the straw.

Mycroft despaired for a moment at the memory. "Six different types of gin, from the taste of it... added to a bucket of Asda champagne, with Ribena to sweeten and a generous splash of Cillit Bang."

Greg nearly swallowed the straw. When he'd stopped spluttering, Mycroft passed him a napkin with a smirk. He dried the lime and rum from around his nose and mouth, then mopped up the table.

"Quite finished?" Mycroft enquired.

"Shush. Not my fault you're funny."

"Mm." Mycroft tilted his head, apparently appraising Greg for a moment. "You have tanned," he said. "Noticeably..."

"Yeah?" Greg had taken a quick peek in the bathroom mirror when he arrived - it was looking good. He'd only know for sure once he got back to the villa and had some after-sun on it, but he had a feeling he'd be the envy of Scotland Yard for weeks. "Good job you brought after-sun, really... I'd be
in trouble now, if you hadn't."

"Quite."

"Did you enjoy it today? The beach, I mean."

A smile played across Mycroft's mouth. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I did. Very much." He glanced down at Greg's hand, lying casually on the table. "You're - easy to work near. Thank you for taking pains not to disturb me."

Greg's heart stirred. It had been tricky at some points - chatty by nature, he'd had to restrain himself not to keep striking up conversation. The book had helped, crap as it was, and the thought that Mycroft felt comfortable working next to him. He didn't imagine many people in the world fell into that category. It was, in some ways, a bit of an honour.

"M'glad," he said, with a smile. "Glad you got lots done... I wouldn't want you to get grief from work, just 'cause you're here with me..." He spread his hand a little on the table, palm up, stretching his fingers. "How'd you feel about working near me tomorrow? Doing the same again?"

Mycroft thought about it. Greg watched him think, trying not to hope too hard.

"I - don't see any reason why not," he said at last. Greg's heart bubbled. "Though... if we could try somewhere else, perhaps."

"Yeah?" Greg couldn't help but wonder. He'd thought Mycroft had been happy, settled on the sand. "Didn't you like it there?"

"No, it was very pleasant," Mycroft said. "I'd just - rather not have another encounter with a certain admirer of yours, I suppose."

Greg's heart twinged. He knew it had been a risky idea; he'd felt guilty as soon as he asked, then told himself Ethan wouldn't do any harm - just come over and chat, smile a bit, then leave them alone. Now Mycroft was actively trying to avoid the guy.

"The terrace, perhaps?" Mycroft said, before Greg could pull his thoughts together. Greg blinked. "At the villa? The pool is fairly small, but I - imagine it would be enjoyable for you to relax in. I could work, whilst you sunbathe and read..." He hesitated. "If you wished to, of course."

Greg's smile arose from the very middle of himself.

He reached across the table, slipped his fingers through Mycroft's, and said,

"Sure. Tomorrow on the terrace... that sounds perfect."

Mycroft flushed, happily. "Are you certain?"

"Of course I am. That'll be great." Greg could see Mycroft's cocktail approaching across the restaurant behind him. He was delighted to spot a jaunty orange umbrella in it. "We can take a bottle of wine out, maybe? I'll do us lunch... then, when you're done, you can come rest in the pool with me."

Hopeful enjoyment softened Mycroft's face. He squeezed Greg's fingers, gently. "I'd like that," he said.

As the waiter reached their table, Mycroft's hand instinctively loosened to let Greg go - then, after a
thought, kept its grip. Greg felt his heart kick softly against his ribs. The waiter nodded politely to them and turned away, leaving Mycroft with the world's pinkest cocktail.

As he left, Mycroft visibly relaxed - then turned his gaze to the cocktail, and gave a sigh.

"It is rather pink, isn't it?"

Greg smiled, realising in a flush that he'd treasure this moment. "S'alright, posh. I won't tell anyone."

Mycroft's grateful glance tugged at his heart. "I'll have to insist you order something equally as flamboyant next," he said, playing with Greg's fingers. "A daiquiri of some sort. Share in my humiliation."

You're gorgeous.

Just... gorgeous. You're funny and smart and you're gorgeous.

Christ.

I'm going to miss you next week.

Greg calmed himself, watching as Mycroft took a first tentative sip through the straw.

"Before you got here," he offered, "there was a little girl had a gigantic caramel sundae with a really long spoon. I'll have one of those, if you want. Eat it wriggling and licking the spoon."

Mycroft's eyes glinted. "Mm, that should do." He took another sip of the lurid cocktail, wincing delightfully as it reached his mouth. "Don't let me have too many of these," he remarked, releasing Greg's hand at last and relaxing back in his chair.

"For your dignity?"

"And to stop me spending tomorrow on my knees in the bathroom," Mycroft said around the straw, raising an eyebrow, "groaning into the lavatory, as I lament my poor decisions."

Greg smiled. "Generous with the vodka, then?"

"Mm." Mycroft eyed him across the table. "I hope you're prepared to see me home safely."

Greg's stomach stirred.

"Course I will," he said, and picked up his coke. "Relax, darlin'... I'll look after you."
Relax

Halfway home, Mycroft's hand appeared on his knee in the darkness.

"I had a wonderful time this evening," he murmured, leaning into Greg's shoulder. The rumble of the car masked his voice for Greg alone to hear. "Thank you... I don't think I've ever enjoyed a meal so much in my life."

Greg smiled, tilting his head into the murmur. "Glad you had fun, gorgeous... been a pretty good evening so far."

Mycroft's soft huff tugged at his stomach.

"So far?" he said, and there was a note of restlessness to his voice. While he wasn't drunk, he certainly wasn't sober. The scent of cointreau lingered at the edges of his words, and his hand was inching itself along Greg's inner thigh.

"Mm. So far..." In the darkness of the back seat, Mycroft's hand idled its way higher and higher - fond, familiar, just feeling his thigh through his trousers. Greg couldn't bring himself to stop it. "Still a little early," he rumbled, and stroked a kiss over Mycroft's forehead. "M'not that tired yet."

Mycroft shivered. "Nor am I."

"Put a film on, d'you think?" Greg nosed at Mycroft's temple. "Scrabble, maybe..."

Mycroft said nothing. He turned his head, reached up, and gathered Greg's earlobe between his teeth.

Greg inhaled in slow, forceful silence. He concentrated on looking as laid-back as he could, one eye trained on the rear-view mirror as Mycroft sucked at his ear, gently biting and stroking with his tongue, letting him hear. His hand had stalled barely an inch from where Greg needed it; he knew what he was doing. Pleasure skittered and trickled down the side of Greg's neck, between his shoulders, tumbling deliciously along his spine. His cock ached with every soft and damp sound; he was hard as hell.

As Mycroft's hand finally slid to cup his groin, Greg breathed in and shifted. He lowered his voice further.

"Oi..." he murmured, even as his cock throbbed for more.

Mycroft began to massage him in silence - slow, firm squeezes that made his eyes shutter. He closed them, inclined his head calmly back against the seat, and put an arm along Mycroft's shoulders. He kept his focus on his disaffected expression as he let Mycroft rub him, feeling his heart leaping in his chest and his cock straining for more friction.

This shouldn't be hot. It shouldn't be working for him so much - but it was.

The driver hadn't noticed, busy watching the narrow road ahead. Mycroft's breath came slow and soft and somehow still shy in Greg's ear, and the movements of his hand were magnificent.

As the slender fingertips idled up to his waistband, Greg gripped Mycroft's shoulder.

"No," he murmured, his voice barely audible. He disguised it as a kiss to the forehead. "Not here. Not yet."
Mycroft made a faint noise of impatience. His fingertips retreated from Greg's waistband all the same, slipped back to his inner thigh and settled there - leaving Greg to breathe, and try to think of anything in the universe except his cock.

"Take me to bed," Mycroft whispered in his ear. "Back at the villa. I - need you."

Greg's heart heaved. Day One Mycroft had hardly been able to look him in the eye; Day Three Mycroft liked turning him on in public and husking in his ear to come to bed.

He couldn't wait to meet Day Four Mycroft.

"Think you promised me some after-sun first," he murmured, turning his gaze to those flashing blue-grey depths.

Mycroft hummed, his mouth curving. "So I did."

"You're delicious when you're relaxed like this." Greg looked him in the eye, meaning it - wanting him to listen to it. "Utterly fucking delicious. I hope you know that."

Mycroft found something funny. He leant close, catching Greg's ear again with a warm flash of tongue. "It's - enjoyable not to worry..." he said. Greg's heart gripped. Mycroft shifted, squeezing his thigh. "I want you. Please."

*Christ, you're fucking beautiful...* "Mm hmm?" Greg let his voice grow low. "Want me to look after you when we're home?"

"Mm hmm." Mycroft nestled closer into his side, splaying a hand in the centre of his chest. "God, please..."

Heat curled deep in Greg's stomach, soft. "What's on your mind?"

Mycroft shivered; his breath caught. "A number of things," he said, neatly.

"Mm?" Greg nuzzled at his temple, checking again in the rear view mirror. "Share with me."

"I..." The flicker of hesitation was gorgeous. Mycroft had only ever talked a little dirty when they were fucking. Now he wanted to share, desperately - Greg could hear it in the slight rasp to his breath - but he was nervous. "Greg..."

Greg licked his lower lip. He brought his mouth to Mycroft's ear, and murmured,

"Think I want to keep you going for a while tonight... see if I can find something you never knew you liked before."

"Oh, God..." Mycroft's throat audibly contracted. "I daresay you can."

"Mnh. I love your faith in me."

"Had rather enough experience to justify it by now..."

Greg chuckled, running his lips along the shell of Mycroft's ear. He let Mycroft feel his grin. "Stay up late with me... see if we can use up that bottle of lube you brought."

"God almighty..."

"Fuck until we can't move," Greg whispered, delight by the groan that was swiftly stifled. "Fuck
until you'll pass out if I don't let you come... fuck until I could whisper you over the edge..."

"Greg..."

"Mm hmm?" Greg closed his teeth on Mycroft's ear, tugging gently. "Loved watching you ride me last night. Getting hard again for me. Think you liked it, too. Taking what you need from me."

Mycroft shivered. "Y-Yes... yes, I..." He drew breath. "Oh God, I need..."

Greg glanced through the windscreen - not far now. He recognised the road and the slope of the hill.

He brought the hand on Mycroft's shoulder up, stroking the side of his neck.

"Don't worry, darlin'," he murmured. "You'll have. An hour from now, those pretty legs of yours'll be wrapped tight around my waist... might even be pleading with me by that point. Let's see."

Mycroft made a quiet, tight sound, shivering at the gentle play of his fingers.

"I have to wait an hour?" he murmured, closing his eyes.

Greg's grin flashed in the darkness. "Help me with my after-sun... should speed things along a little."

As the car rolled off into the night, Mycroft unlocked the front door of the villa.

Greg couldn't help but notice the shake in his hand. He glanced after the car, making sure it was on its way - then stepped closer, up against Mycroft's back, and without preamble pinned him hard against the door.

Mycroft stiffened with a groan. As he arched back, it provided the perfect opportunity for Greg to thrust against his arse, shivering at the animal friction against his cock.

"You were going to touch me in front of the driver," he breathed, low in Mycroft's ear. Mycroft gasped; the key clattered to the ground somewhere. "You were trying to see how turned-on you could get me. M'now answering your question. The answer is very."

Mycroft bucked, pressing his forehead against the door. "Oh - God -"

"And," Greg continued, his snarl as soft as smoke, "you beguiled me into sex on a public beach. Last night, we fucked until one AM. Tonight we're going until two, and unless you beg me desperately enough to believe you, I'm not sure I'll be inclined to stop at that point."

"Christ -"

"So here's what's going to happen." Greg laved his tongue behind Mycroft's ear, relishing the protracted shiver it caused. "We're going to lock the door after us. Then we're going straight to bed - where you can start by riding me like you're sorry. Mm?"

Mycroft bit down into his lip, stifling a moan.

"Then," Greg whispered, "I'm going to the kitchen. I'm going to find the coldest, runniest thing I can. I'm going to cover your stomach and your cock in it, and if you come before I'm done cleaning you
up, I'm going to need another serious apology. Right?"

Mycroft whimpered. "Yes. Oh, fuck - yes."

"Good..." Greg eased the neck of his shirt aside, and nuzzled against the soft purple blotches hidden there, licking them. His heart ached with pride. "Christ... d'you have any idea how pretty you are? All fucked and bitten... would you like a few more of these?"

"Yes," Mycroft breathed, arching. His face contorted. "Please, please -"

"Marked," Greg whispered. He ground his cock against the seat of Mycroft's arse, groaning with the sensation. "Mine."

"F-Fuck -"

"Say it," Greg breathed. "Say it, and I'll prove it."

Mycroft's chest heaved back against him. "Please - please, I -"

As Greg bit down into the side of his neck, Mycroft cried out, jerked - and began to vibrate.

Greg was startled enough by this development to stop, wondering what unknown superpower he'd accidentally triggered.

He then caught Mycroft's noise of despair - and he realised.

"Is that -"

Mycroft reached for his back pocket, laying his head against the door with a thump. He retrieved his phone, answered it one-handed and said, with intense reluctance, "Yes?"

Greg stayed still. He couldn't make out the words - but they caused Mycroft to stifle a small moan of a very different kind.

"You can't be serious," he said into the phone, reaching up to cover his eyes. "All of them?"

The answer given wasn't the one he wanted.

"Yes," he sighed. "Yes, for God's sake... give me five minutes. Provide him with my Skype details. Warn him that I'm not impressed in the least."

Damn.

Biting his lip, and suppressing a sigh, Greg gently stepped back. He bent down, scooped the key from where it had fallen, and fitted it into the lock.

"I'm wholly aware of that," Mycroft snapped into the phone, rubbing between his eyes, as Greg turned the key and opened the door for him. "If he asks, tell him it's precisely none of his business where I am. And tell him it's much to his advantage that I'm out of the country."

Inside, Mycroft headed at once in the direction of the safe. Laptop, Greg thought, biting his tongue. Going to be a while.

There was white wine in the fridge.

Greg poured himself a large glass, took it to the bathroom, and watched himself in the full length
mirror as he undid the buttons of his shirt.

_Tan's alright, at least._ He drank, loosening his trousers and stepping out of them, leaving them crumpled on the floor. _Very alright._ A little toasty, but no real burn - Mycroft had done a good job with the sun cream. Greg smiled a little, had another mouthful of wine, and retrieved the after-sun from by the bed.

He could hear Mycroft bollocking someone via Skype in the lounge. What this person had done, Greg couldn't even guess - but the irate tone probably owed something to the interruption as well. He only hoped the poor sod was sufficiently sorry. He sat himself down on the edge of the bed, cracked open the after-sun, and got started.

Mycroft was still talking by the time he'd finished.

Greg washed his hands, brushed his teeth, then drank his wine while studying his tan in the mirror, trying not to worry this would be going on all night. They only had five left, and this one had been shaping up nicely. He didn't want to lose it to work.

Mycroft had the rest of his life to work.

On the verge of wondering if he should go and get a new book started, Greg heard the distinct sound of a laptop lid being slammed.

He finished his wine, his chest tight.

It was a minute or two before Mycroft appeared in the bathroom door - distressed, tired, and pale. He looked like a different man.

"Forgive me," he said, awkwardly. He was carefully not looking below Greg's neck. "Work. An unexpected error within my team. I... didn't mean to -"

_Fuck your job. Fuck what it does to you._ Greg threw back the last of his wine, put the glass beside the bath with a chink, and came over.

Mycroft's eyes grew guarded as Greg cupped his jaw, gazing at him.

"Oi," he said, softly. "M'down here."

Mycroft's eyes flickered into his.

"It's fine," Greg said, trying a smile. "Is it sorted?"

Mycroft hesitated, his jaw working. "For now. The morning is likely to bring more -"

Greg stopped him with a hand, stroking two fingertips over his mouth.

"In the morning," he said. "Leave it 'til then. If there's crap to deal with, fine - s'part of your job. I'll make it easier. Run you a bath, rub your shoulders, go down on you. I'll tell the concierge to bring pavlova for breakfast. Whatever'll help. Are you safe to relax a bit for now?"

Mycroft flushed. It took him a moment.

"Yes - but I'm - n-not sure I feel - ..."

_Christ. Christ, you worried I'd..."
Greg slid his arms around Mycroft's waist, over his clothes, hugging him slowly.

"Come the fuck here," he sighed, resting his chin on Mycroft's shoulder. "Get your arms around me. Now listen... I've got more sense than meets the eye. If work's pissed you off, I'm not expecting you to still feel playful."

He felt something unwind in Mycroft's shoulders. The arms around his waist tightened. "I'm - sorry. Truly."

"Why? M'not put out." Greg kissed his jaw. "Don't worry about it, posh... I'm adaptable. Playful can wait until another night."

Mycroft shook slightly. He nuzzled into Greg's neck, saying nothing, and let Greg stroke his hair.

What d'you do at home when work pisses you off, mm? Greg kissed his cheek, fingers stirring through his hair. Who looks after you then?

"D'you want a drink?" he murmured. "Wine in the fridge, if you want... maybe a bath? Chill you out again?"

Mycroft took a moment. "No, I - I'm quite fine."

Greg smiled, not buying that for a second.

"Something else then," he said, and kissed the side of Mycroft's neck. "Food, maybe? Lie down and watch a film?"


"Just lie down?" he said - and the tight tremor confirmed it. "We could go get in bed, darlin'... get you out of your suit. Cuddle a while. See if we can slow your head back down."

Mycroft hugged him. "That - that would be - ... i-if you..."

Christ, they've made a mess of you again. Just when I had you sorted.

Greg pulled back, framed Mycroft's face with his hands, and looked into his eyes.

"'Course I don't mind," he said, warmly, and watched relief flicker over the poor bastard's features. "Shall we take these clothes off you? Think you need some skin time."

Mycroft swallowed, glancing at Greg's mouth. "'Skin time'...?"

"Mm hmmm. Time to stop thinking, and just feel instead." Greg began to undo his shirt buttons, smiling easily, taking his time with each one. "Nothing ever seems that bad when you can feel someone else's skin."

Mycroft huffed, quietly watching the buttons come undone. Greg kissed his chin, slipped open the final button, and parted the fabric as he stepped close.

Their chests and stomachs pressed. Mycroft shivered a little, breathing something out.

Greg smiled and coaxed the shirt back over his shoulders.

"There, baby," he soothed, kissing Mycroft's jaw. "Better already."
Mycroft's freed arms wrapped hesitantly around his middle. Greg's smile widened and he nuzzled Mycroft's cheek, stroking down his back with both hands.

"Can't believe the crap you get from work," he murmured, kissing Mycroft's neck. "You're indispensable, darlin'... they should treat you like you are. Should do anything to keep you sweet. Let you have whatever you want."

Mycroft was quiet, nervously petting his back.

"First holiday in three years," Greg soothed, brushing his mouth against Mycroft's pretty bites. "Can't even let you go a day without whining at you... don't worry, love. We'll unwind you again."

Mycroft kept on stroking his shoulders, wordless. The quality of his silence made Greg wonder - he seemed to be distracted by something, even though the tension in his shoulders was easing.

Tilting his head a little, Greg kissed his cheek.

"Want me to hush, darlin'? Just say."

Mycroft shivered. "No - no, don't. I'm sorry. I - I was..."

His gaze was still caught on something over Greg's shoulder.

Greg glanced around.

The full-length mirror stood in the opposite corner. From this angle, it framed them almost perfectly - Greg's bare back, his arse and his thighs, tanned and dark; Mycroft's head on his shoulder; Mycroft's hands, pale and slender against the honeyed tones of his skin.

Greg caught his eye in the mirror, smiling.

Mycroft flushed, but did not look away.


Mycroft shivered slightly, lowering his voice. "You are."

Greg grinned.

"I'll go naked again tomorrow... out on the terrace... that okay? S'pose you can take full advantage of it there." He nosed at Mycroft's cheek, still holding his gaze in the glass. "We can fuck in the sunshine, if you like."

Mycroft shook, breathing in rather hard. He gripped Greg's shoulders. After a moment gathering courage, the words broke from his lips.

"I want that," he whispered. "I want - ... o-outside. Very much."

Greg's heart glowed. "Mm hmm?" Christ, sweetheart, why does that get to me so much? Hearing you tell me what you want. "On my lap on a sun lounger, maybe? Or lie down, let me do the work?"

A flush bloomed desperately across Mycroft's face. He tore his gaze from the mirror to look into Greg's eyes, trembling as he did. The vulnerability in his expression took Greg's breath.

"You - said that I could ask," he said, his voice tight. "For - f-for things I want. Did you mean it?"
Jesus. Jesus, yes. "Of course I did... anything. Tell me."

Mycroft swallowed, glancing at his lips. His flush deepened. "I... i-if you - "

Greg tugged him close, eased his fingers through his hair, and murmured in his ear. "Tell me, darlin'. Only me here."

Embarrassment wracked Mycroft's voice.

"Can you - u-use your mouth? On me... please."

Greg's chest strained. He didn't think he'd ever been so affected by someone asking for a blow job; something about it made his heart twist. The need in it, he thought. Nervous. As if Greg would be appalled, and ask what gave him the right to want that - to want someone to make him feel good, to make work go away again.

He took Mycroft's hands, tangled their fingers, and murmured, "I'd love to. C'mon... let's get you comfy."

Mycroft avoided his eyes as they moved through to the bedroom. Greg sat him down on the side of the bed, stepped into his body and gently tipped his face up, leaning down to kiss him slowly. Mycroft trembled as their lips met. His hands reappeared on Greg's shoulders, "Greg - "

Greg closed his eyes, nuzzling Mycroft's growing erection with the tip of his nose. At the first stroke of his open mouth through the fabric, Mycroft jumped and gripped his shoulders harder.

"Oh, God - Greg - "

Mmhm, darlin'... that's it. Just relax for me. Greg reached up with his fingers, eased the zip down with one hand and stroked his nose inside the parted fastening, letting his warm breath pool around Mycroft's cock. Mycroft's breath thickened; a tentative hand laid on the back of his head.

Carefully Greg hooked his thumbs in Mycroft's waistband, catching beneath his underwear as well.

"Lift for me, gorgeous..."
Mycroft leant back onto his elbows, nervously, and arched his hips as Greg worked his clothing down. He took care of Mycroft's socks for him, pushed all the fabric aside and returned to his task, settling on his haunches.

Fondly he kissed along Mycroft's thigh, working his way towards his cock.

"Did I get the mirror on us right, love?" he murmured, following the path of his mouth with his fingertips.

Mycroft shuddered, swallowing. "Y-Yes... why - ?"

Greg smiled, brushing his cheek against Mycroft's erection. "So you can watch."

Mycroft trembled; his fingers stirred on the back of Greg's neck. "I - I've never - ..."

"Told you I'd find something new," Greg hummed, wrapped a hand around Mycroft's cock and brought it to his mouth, running his tongue in a long, wet stripe along the underside. He gazed upwards as he did, watching Mycroft's expression tighten. "Nice having me kneeling?"

Mycroft nodded, mute, his pupils blown and his breath already short. Greg smiled, taking a moment to lap flat-tongued at his frenulum.

"Nice having my mouth?" he murmured, and pressed a kiss to the very tip, holding Mycroft's gaze as he trembled. "You look gorgeous like this, you know that?"

Mycroft's eyes flickered. "I..." He didn't believe it.

"All aroused and shy..." Greg swirled his tongue around the head, watching with delight as Mycroft's mouth opened. "Hold my hair, posh... don't mind."

As he slid his lips around Mycroft's cock, drawing him deep and smooth, Mycroft shook. He let out a sound of desperate relief, fingers burying in Greg's hair. Greg relaxed his throat; he knew this didn't need to be fancy. Comfort sex, he thought. Just familiar. Mycroft was vulnerable and needy, and he felt good to suck. The sounds he made as Greg worked were gorgeous. Greg found himself enjoying every tentative twitch of fingers, every timid nudge for deeper, every restless shift against the bed as he began to build a rhythm around his mouthful. He hoped Mycroft was watching in the mirror - taking in the sight of Greg on his knees, tanned back and broad shoulders - taking in his own pleasure, too. You never really knew yourself until you'd seen your own face desperate to come. Mycroft began to rock his hips, pushing down against the bed with little whimpers, and Greg felt his heart growing with each one.

He worked until Mycroft's sounds were tight and his grip was flexing every few moments. He then eased back, licking carefully with the flat of his tongue. Mycroft shivered, broke into panting and looked down at Greg, his eyes big and his lip swollen where he'd bitten it.

"Come like this?" Greg murmured, soft.

Mycroft's expression flashed with desperation - the thought of something else. "N-No..."

Greg held his eyes, gently kissing his quivering stomach. "D'you want to fuck, darlin'? Come like that with me?"

Mycroft gasped, shaking. "Yes - yes, I want - "

"'kay..." Watching the mirror, gorgeous. Watching yourself take my cock... "Lie back for me?" Greg
murmured, kissed his thigh, and reached for the lube on the bedside. He uncapped it as he sat up, kissing Mycroft's hipbone, easing a hand down past his cock to massage his balls for a few moments, enjoying the tight tremor and groan it caused. "Shall we take it slow, mm? Just enjoy each other for a while?"

Mycroft was oddly quiet. Greg nuzzled at his belly, glancing up to find him watching. He looked anxious, almost a little guilty.

Greg smiled, his eyes soft.

"Relax, darlin'," he whispered, and slipped his fingers down. "You're safe in - "

As his fingertips encountered the flat edge of silicone, Greg's brain skipped. It took a moment to catch up.

When it did, he found Mycroft gazing at him down the bed, one eyebrow slightly lifted, pupils swollen, visibly breathing as he waited for Greg to cotton on.

The wave of realisation wrenched a moan from his mouth.
"No," Greg breathed.

Mycroft's teeth pressed into his lower lip.

Greg rubbed his fingers across the flared base of the toy, his heart pounding. "The whole fucking time?"

Mycroft stirred, his eyes full of nerves. "Mhm."

Greg suddenly realised why it had taken him so long to get to dinner. He swallowed, feeling his cock throb at the thought.

"Did you - lie here to put it in?" he managed.

Mycroft hesitated, cautiously reading his eyes. "On my back."

_Fuck. Jesus._ The image of Mycroft, lying here in bed - pillow under his hips - slicking the thing with lube, gently opening up his own thighs...

"Fingers first?" Greg managed, his voice tight.

Mycroft held his gaze. After a moment, he gave a single soundless nod.

_Fuck, gently fingering yourself... lying in our bed... then the toy, filling yourself... oh, Christ. Getting up. Getting dressed._

_Sitting there at dinner, the whole bloody time._

Greg stroked the toy, his fingers shaking. "Did you bring it from home?"

"Mm." Mycroft's cheeks darkened. "My favourite."

_Oh - oh, fuck -

_Fuck, fuck, fuck -

Greg's shoulders shook. He eased his fingers beneath the base of the toy, took hold of it gently, and watched Mycroft's face as he withdrew it just a little.

Enjoyment coursed through Mycroft's expression. His teeth sunk into his lip again, and he let out a weak moan.

"Please," he whimpered, spreading his legs. "P-Please - take it out... f-fuck me... please, I want - p-please -"

Greg's every nerve and artery ignited in a blaze. He forced himself to breathe, still gazing into Mycroft's eyes - then nudged the toy back in again, a first gentle thrust.

Mycroft tightened at once with a whimper, moaning. "Greg...!"

_Fuck. Oh fuck, sweetheart... your favourite? Is this what it looks like when you use it?_

Slow, slick thrusts. Mycroft writhed against the bed, throwing his head back with a soft cry. He
spread his shaking thighs apart for more, panting with pleasure. Greg rose up from his knees, leant over him and began to mouth at his perfect white neck.

_Do you moan like this, baby? When you use it? In your bed, on your back... fuck, filling yourself - whimpering for your toy..._

Mycroft's hands curled tight at his shoulders, twitching as Greg deepened the slow thrusts into his body.

_Fuck, your favourite... that means you've got others. You like this one the most, darlin'? This one feels best?_

From the noises Mycroft was making, it fit him just right - just perfect against his prostate - urgent, gasping whimpers, moaning frantically as he blushed to heaven.

_Brought it to play with me... wanting me to use it for you. Wanting me to see you like this. Wanting - fuck, fuck..._

_Oh fuck, I want to see..._

Greg slowed the rhythm, his heart banging as he caught Mycroft's hand. He moved it, shaking, to the base of the toy.

"Show me," he whispered. His voice was hoarse. "Show me. Want to watch."

Mycroft's expression opened with longing and shyness; his eyes filled. "I- ... G-Greg..."

Greg leaned close, cupped his face and kissed him - hard, desperate, slipping his tongue into Mycroft's soft mouth. Mycroft whimpered around it, taking, squirming beneath him. He trembled a little as Greg gripped his jaw.

When their mouths parted, Greg whispered,

"S'only me. You know me, darlin'. Just your Greg..." He stepped back, shivering. "Show me. Show me how fucking beautiful you are."

Mycroft quivered, his thighs easing shyly closer together - he kept hold of the toy.

"You want me instead?" Greg managed, pressing himself back against the bedroom wall - spreading his hands flat against the surface. "You want me to come back, pull that thing away, and give you what you need?"

Mycroft whimpered, nodding frantically.

Greg bit into his lip, his face contracting. His eyes closed, and for a few moments he simply panted, calming himself, tightening his grip.

He then began to move the toy - tentative, shallow in-and-out.

Greg dug the heels of his hands into the wall, burning up as he watched. Mycroft quivered, let out a nervous moan, and shifted to brace a foot against the bed. It opened his thighs, giving Greg a better view. It opened his body, letting the toy sink deeper, and his plaintive cry cut Greg to the heart.

Greg breathed with purpose for a moment, recovering himself.
"Good, darlin'?" he whispered.

Mycroft shook in desperation, fucking himself steadily with his toy. "Oh, God - "

"I know, baby... me too." Greg tipped his head back against the wall, breathing slow. His cock ached from balls to tip, jutting from his body at a right angle. He wanted to rub himself for relief, but he didn't dare. One firm stroke and this would all be over. "Oh fuck, darlin'... if you knew what you look like - fucking yourself for me - your pretty thighs open like that, moaning like that - ... fuck. You don't know what this is doing to me."

"I want you - " Mycroft sobbed, arching. "I w-want you, please - "

Jesus, this is so fucking hot. "Kneel up for me, gorgeous. Ride it."

Mycroft obeyed at once - shaking, panting, struggling onto his knees and bracing himself with one hand on the mattress. With the other, he angled the toy beneath him and held it upright. His eyes flickered as he lowered his hips, guiding, searching - then looked up into Greg's as he found the right position.

A moment's hesitation filled his gaze.

Greg realised he wanted permission.

"Go on, darlin'," he whispered, surprised he could still form words. "Enjoy."

Pleasure flooded through Mycroft's face as he sank down. His entire body shook, his expression twisting. He held Greg's eyes for every second of it, whimpering with each extra inch, panting hard and so pretty with his toy that Greg knew he'd be seeing this in his dreams for the rest of his life. He pressed his fingers hard into the wall behind him - there'd be marks. He didn't care.

Seated, Mycroft moaned and swallowed, tipping his head back in restless relief. He began to move: slow, deep circles of his hips, working himself down against the feeling of the toy inside him.

Greg watched without breath, forcing himself to pay attention to the rhythm. Slow. Steady. That's what you want.

The whole time through dinner. Knowing I'd find it now, and I'd love it. Wanting to fuck as soon as we got back. Your gorgeous blue suit. Sitting there, full. Wanting me.

He let Mycroft come close again - let those movements grow restless and shaky, let the sounds of excitement grow loud and urgent and then suddenly quiet.

He then took a breath, pushed away from the wall, and crossed the room. His legs didn't feel like his own. His muscles were too tight, too tense.

Mycroft shuddered at once. "Yes," he gasped, almost panicking as he whimpered, his eyes flying wide. He sat up. "Yes, yes - "

Greg climbed onto the bed behind him, crawled over, and wrapped an arm restlessly around his torso from behind. Mycroft arched in his hold.

"Oh fuck yes - "

Greg turned him without a word to face the mirror. Mycroft nearly keened, trembling.

"Y-Yes - "
Greg reached down, wrapped his hand around the toy and slowly eased it free from Mycroft's body, taking his time. Mycroft sobbed with longing and spread his legs. The ensuing rush of heat through Greg's stomach was incredible; he'd never wanted to fuck someone more. He put the toy aside and took a minute to tend to Mycroft's neck, calming himself with the steady movements of his mouth, licking and sucking until Mycroft was incoherent and pleading.

He then shifted, and pressed between Mycroft's shoulder blades. *Bend, gorgeous.*

Mycroft sobbed once more, stretching himself immediately onto all-fours. The submission in the movement was electrifying. Greg gazed down at the bowed arch of his spine, the trembling in his shoulders, the trust he was being given. He felt his heart grip oddly tight.

He took hold of Mycroft's hips, lifted them a little, and reached for the lube. *More is more.*

"Mm hmm?" he murmured.

Mycroft moaned, his cheek pressed against the mattress, hands tightening into claws on the edge as Greg slicked a little extra lube around his softened ring of muscle. *Mmhmm. Thought so.*

Greg took his cock in hand, slicked himself and lined up, just nuzzling at Mycroft's entrance.

"Darlin'?" he said, softly, teasing with the tip, feeling Mycroft's body yield eagerly around him. He splayed his other hand on Mycroft's lower back; he could feel his pulse in every inch of his skin. "Lift your head for me, baby. You'll want to see this bit."

Shaking, Mycroft raised his head from the mattress. His dazed grey eyes fell upon the mirror in front of them.

Greg watched him take it in - all of it - all fours with Greg's cock just nuzzling where he needed it, blushing, panting, his hair a mess, devolved into a creature of shivering and sweat. He watched Mycroft's eyes flicker deeper into the mirror, finding Greg - the darkness of his tan against Mycroft's pristine snowy pallor, the possessive hand on his raised lower back, the raised eyebrow, the look of expectancy.

Greg would never forget Mycroft's expression. It was a look of sheer, soft, animal longing - longing for Greg, longing for himself, longing for this, for more, for everything.

"Mm?" Greg murmured, and pressed the first fraction inside.

Mycroft's face wracked; he bit down into his lip, desperately holding Greg's gaze in the mirror. "Mmh. Please."

Greg flexed his hand, holding Mycroft still.

He pushed his way slowly inside.

Halfway, overcome, Mycroft dropped his head to the mattress to moan.

Greg stopped, staying just where he was.

"Head up," he said, softly. "Watch."

Mycroft gasped, digging his fingers into the mattress edge. He lifted his head and gazed at his reflection once more, breathing hard, his whole body shuddering as Greg pushed on.

"You're doing beautifully for me, darlin'," Greg soothed, and stroked his free hand along Mycroft's
back, enjoying the responsive flexing of his spine. "You're doing just perfect, baby... you just keep watching. Don't want you to miss a moment of how gorgeous you are. I want you to remember."

Mycroft exhaled every breath of air in his lungs, his eyes flashing wildly in the mirror. "F-Fuck me," he gasped. "Fuck me please."

*There we go, sweetheart... knew you were in there. Work might make you run off and hide from me. But you're never gone for long.*

"You were gorgeous in the restaurant, too... you know that?" Sinking the last few inches, biting back a groan, Greg soothed both hands over Mycroft's waist. "All pretty, all posh... even more gorgeous now I know. Sitting there, feeling that inside you every time you moved..."

Mycroft groaned, trembling, his eyes locked onto the mirror.

Greg began to rub two steady circles either side of his tailbone, giving him time to adjust. "Good, baby?"


"Now?"

"*Fuck. Do it.*"

Greg grinned, ghosting his fingers slowly up Mycroft's sides. The shiver it caused was delicious. "What happened to 'please'?"

Mycroft let out a groan of despair, bending.

"Do it," he panted, grinding back against Greg. Greg moved with him, teasing. "*Do it, or I will send you home.*"

"You're not going to do that," Greg murmured, tickling his fingers lazily back down Mycroft's sides. "You're going to ask me nicely."

Mycroft dragged in a breath, raising his head to the mirror. He stared at Greg, his cheeks flushed and his eyes flashing. "Do it, please."

Greg waited, smiling, tracing idle patterns at the side of Mycroft's hips.

Mycroft's expression worked and he whimpered. He swallowed, pushed backwards, and breathed, "Please. Please move. Please. I need you."

*Better.* Greg curled his hands at Mycroft's hips, took an easy grip, and withdrew just a little - slow and gentle, barely moving. He coaxed back in, as carefully as he could.

Mycroft's shoulders shook. He groaned, low in his throat, and rocked back. "Nnh. More."

"Mm?" Greg didn't change - another easy withdrawal, another gentle press forwards. "Didn't catch that."

"Fuck..." Mycroft gazed at him in desperation in the mirror, his pupils huge. "Fuck. Please. Please more than that. Please harder."

"Harder, mm? You want to feel it?"
Mycroft groaned, trembling, need coursing through his expression. "Y-Yes. Please. Please make me feel it."

Greg shifted his grip, inhaled, and followed his next gentle withdrawal with a deeper, firmer thrust. Mycroft's body contracted around him; the cry burned through his senses.

"Fuck, yes...!" Mycroft heaved with it, arching, his mouth opening wide. "Fuck, fuck - "

Another thrust - another slam - Mycroft writhed back against him, his back bowing, fingers shaking as they fixed themselves around the edge of the mattress. Greg tightened his grip. He forced himself to breathe as he coaxed Mycroft to push back in rhythm, meeting his quick and shallow thrusts each time. Mycroft let out another cry; his face convulsed with enjoyment. A shudder seemed to ripple along his spine, so potent it was almost visible. With a squirm, he took a hand from the mattress and pushed it beneath himself, reaching for his cock. His panting roughened at once; the little moan of pleasure drew Greg's balls tight.

All the same he shifted, and slid his arms up Mycroft's sides. He leant over him, laying his weight on Mycroft's back. His lover moaned eagerly - then whimpered as Greg reached beneath him, removed the hand from his cock and pulled it up, pinning it firmly to the mattress.

Greg got hold of the other one, too, and held it in place.

He then reached for Mycroft's ear, dragged his tongue across it, and breathed,

"You'll come from my cock. Not yours. And you'll come when I let you."

"Oh...!" Mycroft shook beneath his weight, panting. "Oh - Christ - "

"Head up," Greg murmured, lowered his mouth, and applied it none-too-gently to the side of Mycroft's neck.

Mycroft watched in the mirror as they fucked. Greg could almost feel the weight of his eyes, as palpable as any other touch, roaming with hunger over the sight of them as they ground together. They rutted deep and restless for some time, their groans tight, breath shaking as the pressure built.

At last, panting, Greg bit Mycroft's shoulder and pulled himself out.

"Get on your back," he gasped. Mycroft struggled beneath him to comply, flipping over and dragging his legs around Greg's waist almost at once, pulling him in, whimpering high-pitched as Greg drove back inside him.

He was close; Greg knew the wild look in his gaze. He knew the flush, the neediness, the slightly vulnerable depth of his eyes.

They kissed, moaning, as Greg built them a rhythm again - slower like this, smoother and easier. Mycroft's calves cradled him on either side. The contractions of his body were coming often now, deep, enough to make him shudder beneath Greg, and his fingernails were pressing half-moons into Greg's back. He'd softened completely around Greg's cock - relaxed, taking, yielding, wanting - no work, no London, no thinking - just skin and sounds. He wanted to come, but he wasn't asking. He was just obeying prettily, waiting for when he was allowed, enjoying it and letting Greg hear every single sensation.

Fuck, fuck... fuck, I love kissing you, tasting you, seeing you... feel nice, darlin'? Better than your toy?
Catching Mycroft's lower lip with his teeth, Greg pulled gently, relishing the little whimper. As he released, he said, "Head up."

Mycroft shuddered. He dropped his head against the edge of the mattress, craning his neck back to look above them.

His hands gripped Greg's shoulders, hard.

"Fuck..." he whispered. "Oh, fuck..."

"That's us." Greg met his eyes in the glass, slowly flexing his hips. "That's you, right now, underneath me. Those are your legs spread for me. That's what you look like, letting me fuck you."
He sealed it with a deep, hard thrust, ramming against Mycroft's prostate and making him shout. "Look how gorgeous you are. Look how beautiful. Look how right you look, just there..."

Mycroft clawed at his back, moaning, trying to hold him deep.

"You've been so good taking it for me, sweetheart. All that work you did today... coming for dinner with me... showing me with your toy..." Greg laved his tongue across Mycroft's ear again. "Would you like to come now, pretty posh?"

Mycroft had lost his access to spoken language. The response was an ardent, pitched moan and a desperate nod, staring into Greg's eyes as if he was the only thing in the world.

"Then you'll help me finish, mm? Maybe ride me a little?"

This suggestion seemed even more welcome than orgasm. Mycroft gasped in his ear, clenching around him, every muscle in his body now trembling.

"'kay, sweetheart... you just hold tight to my shoulders. Let it come, baby." Greg nosed beneath his neck, nudging his chin to tilt his head up to the mirror. "Watch for me."

He began to thrust - hard, deep and quick, pressing their bodies into a single tight line, giving Mycroft's cock just a little friction against his stomach. Mycroft's moans kicked at once into cries. The only words Greg could make out were 'fuck' and 'Greg'. So it should be. He didn't want another thought in Mycroft's head right now - just fucking, and pleasure, and his lover inside him, and what it felt like to come with someone who thought he fucking mattered.

Mycroft lasted all of another minute. His thighs then dragged Greg inside him and held him tight, writhing only harder as Greg pinned him down, gasping and trying to cry out at once. Heat bloomed across his face. Greg watched it, every glorious second of it - every hissed moan, every sob, every choked and incomprehensible plea. The spurt of wet heat between them was magnificent; it made their chests a little slick together, sliding messily as Greg slowed his thrusts. As Mycroft broke into sobbed moans of relief, Greg gently gathered him up.

For the first minute, Mycroft was barely a rag doll - stirring softly as Greg coaxed him onto his lap, guided him close, then gently eased his cock back through hot, squeezing muscles. Mycroft shivered, stirred and reached to the bedside for lube. He emptied the thing into his palm. Reaching down between their bodies, he slicked around their join with trembling fingers, massaging Greg's cock, working Greg gently inside him to spread it. Greg did his best to hold still, squeezing his eyes shut as Mycroft began to rock on him again - tight, slow little movements, finding their rhythm.

Mycroft's mouth stroked against his own. Greg responded, his pulse hammering, and their lips sealed. Mycroft's hands came up to hold his face, tilt his head up as they kissed, and the exhausted rocking of his hips felt just right. Something about having Mycroft do this for him, post-orgasmic,
tired, made him feel like a fucking king. The skin of Mycroft's waist was soft, his hips grippable, his thighs satisfying to stroke, his mouth hot and pleasing, and the rhythmic slick of tight muscle and wet heat around his cock made him desperate to come in seconds.

As Mycroft broke the exhausted kiss, and leant down to his ear, Greg shivered.

"Watch..." his lover breathed. Greg felt his heart wrench at his ribs. "Watch it feel good..."

Almost not daring, Greg turned his head.

_Fuck._

_Jesus, fuck._

The mirror showed him a fantasy, one he'd had for months: Mycroft Holmes astride his lap, his pretty white skin blotched with love-bites, his posh hair all over, his cheeks flushed from coming in floods on Greg's cock, his hips rolling and stirring as they kept fucking. Mycroft was perfectly pale, as smooth as cream; it made Greg's hands all the darker against his hips. They looked as satisfying together as a yin-yang. The slowness of their movement caught his breath. It was almost lazy, steady as ocean waves.

Mycroft tipped back his head, panting, and placed a hand on each of Greg's thighs. It gave him the leverage to rock a little harder. Greg's stomach gripped, his cock throbbing at the sight, and let his head rest back against the headboard.

"Fuck, you're pretty..." he mumbled. His hands stroked by their own volition up Mycroft's sides, slid onto his chest and brushed his nipples gently, his heart drumming as Myc continued to grind on his cock. "Fucking love when you do this..."

Mycroft's breathless laugh sent a jolt to his heart. "Good..."

"Christ, I could watch you ride me all night..."

Mycroft moaned, his chest arching into Greg's hands. "I want to fuck on the terrace," he whimpered. "Tomorrow. I-In the sun."

Greg's stomach tightened. "Mm hmm?" He took a breath, and began to rock his hips up to meet Mycroft's downwards movements. "I want that, too."

Mycroft shuddered. He tipped his head forwards again, his gaze foggy as it focused on Greg. Sex filled his face with a molten contentment.

"I want to fuck you," he whispered. "I want - ... f-feel you take. Listen to you."

_Oh, Christ._ "I want that, too."

"I want to fuck on the sofa," Mycroft gasped, flushing.

Greg's pulse began to speed out of control. "I want that, too."

"I want to fuck on a beach. At night. Drinking. I want everything. I want it to hurt."

_Jesus, Jesus._ Greg pulled Mycroft down to his mouth, pushed his tongue between his lips and kissed him in a frenzy, bucking his hips upwards with urgency. Mycroft met his every thrust, panting, pinning him to the headboard and kissing him hard.
Greg's stomach began to clench. His thighs shook and he moaned with warning, the sound lost somewhere in the hot slide of their mouths. Mycroft only kissed him harder.

As orgasm tore its way through him, blitzing out his senses in a riot of pleasure and hot white relief, Greg felt those words thundering in his veins. *I want, I want, I want.* They filled him like a heavy drumbeat. *I want that, too.* Mycroft was still kissing him, still holding his face, drinking his desperate moans and cries as the last moments of sex grew slick and wet. *Fuck, fuck... Christ, fuck...*

Mycroft sighed with satisfaction against his mouth. Greg breathed it in, panting, and let it sink inside his body as his own. Relief ached through his every muscle in waves. Mycroft softened the kiss as he came down, stroking his hair.

It was lovely - gentle, almost loving fingertips, cool against his temples and his forehead. They helped draw the whirling into something he could process, settling it back inside his skin. He found his hands at Mycroft's hips and held them, tracing circles with his thumbs, as his heart-rate eased and he started to breathe again.

At last, with a small hum, Mycroft retrieved his tongue from Greg's mouth. He smiled against his lips, and whispered,

"Good?"

Greg shivered. "Fuck me up."

The little chuckle raised the hair on his arms. "Good..." Mycroft gazed at him for a moment, thinking. His eyes were soft. "Have I shocked you?"

Greg's heart twinged.

"No," he murmured, and pulled Mycroft down against his chest. "Briefly surprised - in a good way. Not shocked me, posh." He kissed the curve of Mycroft's shoulder, his breath hitching as their bodies slid apart. Mycroft stifled a small moan. "Have I - shocked you, darlin'?"

"Yes," Mycroft said, without hesitation. Laughter escaped from Greg in a bubble, irresistible. "Several times now."

"In a good way?"

"Mmhmm. In a very good way." Mycroft nestled against him, shivering, and stretched as Greg began to rub his back. "You're... easy to trust. You're very reassuring."

Greg's heart grew with his breath. He'd heard it from other people before - but it never lost its wonders. Especially when it came from Mycroft Holmes.

"That - means a lot to me," he managed. "I know you were nervous at first. Not sure about me. It's... Jesus, seeing you settle - makes me kinda proud..."

He hesitated, rubbing his fingertips through the sweat at the base of Mycroft's spine.

"I want you to have everything you want from this week," he said. Mycroft went slightly still. "I know it's - ... and we can't - ... I just want you to enjoy it. All of it. Don't hide what you want from me."
He brushed a kiss against Mycroft's neck.

"I couldn't - ... if next week - if you were thinking about something. Wishing you'd said. I couldn't handle that."

Mycroft was silent for a moment, not moving.

He laid his head upon Greg's collarbones.

"I shall," he said. Greg reached up to stroke his hair. After a moment's silence, Mycroft said, "I want to go out to dinner again."

Greg's heart squeezed. All the things they'd done today - and having dinner again was what Mycroft wanted.

He brushed back a little of Mycroft's hair, kissing his scalp. "We can go out every night, if you want."

Mycroft shivered. "I want that," he whispered.

Greg closed his eyes. "I want that, too."

He felt Mycroft smile against his skin; his pulse quietly skipped in response.

*Christ, I need to watch myself... this is getting kinda cosy...*

Then again, when else in his life would he get to feel like this? It was the Caribbean - they were in paradise, and they were fucking every chance they got. Of course it was going to feel cosy. If he felt any other way right now, there'd be a problem.

*Maybe even let it get wild,* he thought, as his heart gazed with distress into next week. His lonely desk, his poky flat, a week's worth of bills on the doormat. He'd need the memories of wild just to feel like life was worth living. *Let it grow like it wants. I'm not reigning this in.*

*If it hurts, let it hurt.*

*At least then I'll know it happened at all.*

He reached down, gently, cupping Mycroft's chin.


They settled together into the sheets, tangled up and soft. Mycroft's body pressed against him as they kissed. He was still sticky, his skin still damp with sweat, and as Greg stroked his pretty thighs he found wetness there that made his stomach swoop.

"How about we go relax in the bath, darlin'?" he murmured, his words brushed by Mycroft's hopeful kisses. "Get cleaned up together..."

Mycroft made a noise of quiet joy. "Please..."

Greg would have to redo his after-sun. It didn't matter.

"'kay," he murmured. "Rest here a minute, sweetheart. I'll get wine and start the bath."

In the doorway, something called him back - something he couldn't put aside. It mattered too much.
"Myc?" he said, gently.

Mycroft lifted his head. He'd been looking in the mirror, sleepy and sated. "Mm?"

Greg's heart thumped. "If work call before morning, you've got no signal."

Mycroft said nothing for a moment, holding his gaze.

"I'm - vital to the nation," he replied at last - and as he turned onto his side in the mess of their bedsheets, he was the most affecting sight that Greg had ever seen: his cheeks still flushed after sex, his skin shining, his body bare and vulnerable. "I - h-have't the choice, Greg."

Greg held his nerve.

"Think you need to remind them you're vital," he said. "Let them realise you're a precious asset. They should do anything to keep you happy. Not work you into threads."

He paused, his heart pounding. His mouth went right on speaking.

"I'd do anything. And I'm a washed-up DI with no money and no power. They're the bloody government. They should move mountains around you. They should shift the ocean if you asked."

Mycroft's eyes shone from the pillow.

"I wish I had your fire," he murmured. He took a breath. "It's - rather stirring, Greg."

Christ. The way you say my name.

Like you want to keep it.

"My fire's yours this week," Greg said. His voice didn't sound quite right. "Use it, if you want. Don't be treated any less than you deserve."

Wonder crossed Mycroft's face. He seemed to take a moment to process something, as if it didn't feel real. He held Greg's gaze.

"I want you to rub my back," he said. He stirred against the bed, the movement quiet and sore. "In the bath... and I want you to kiss me very slowly. I want you to dry me. Then I want you to hold me while I sleep."

Greg's heart strained.

"It'll be an honour."
Mycroft woke to lips gently kissing along his inner thigh. He stirred, shivering, and turned his blurred gaze downwards to find a distinctive shape beneath the sheets.

He bit his lip. Rogue.

The gentle rasp of stubble against his tender skin was perfection. It made him blush, his breath tightening with immediate interest, and as he shifted he found his body had responded to the attention in his sleep. The sheets pulled with lazy friction across his already swollen cock.

Parting his legs a little, he inhaled.

The affectionate mouth eased its way to the intimate skin at the crook of his thigh, brushing and teasing - dry stubble, soft lips, the sweep of a gentle tongue. Mycroft's blood flushed with restless warmth, a small whimper escaping him in a breath. The gentleness of it made him want to faint.

As a fond nose began to nuzzle through his pubic hair, he reached shaking fingers for the sheet.

Greg appeared - flashing eyes, deep brown shoulders and a grin.

Mycroft felt his heart quietly detonate.

"G'morning..." Greg rumbled, fingertips skimming up the inside of his thigh.

Mycroft shivered again. He laced his fingers through Greg's scruff of silver hair, rather hoping this was headed where he thought it was. "Good morning..." he managed, weak.

"D'you sleep okay?"

"Mmh." The part of the night you let me sleep. "A - little sore."

"Mn? Sorry, sweetheart..." Greg nuzzled up to his hip bone, placing tiny kisses as he went, delicate as sugar flowers. "Shall I be gentle with you today, baby?"

Oh, God... God almighty...

Greg's fingers skated up his thigh; he murmured against Mycroft's stomach, his voice a soft vibration.

"Going to have to get hold of more lube, darlin'... something longer lasting, d'you think? Something soothing..."

As Greg's mouth finally brushed along his cock, Mycroft closed his eyes in longing. A gush of hot pleasure fluttered through his veins - familiar, easy, hopeful pleasure. It was a feeling he hadn't had since his twenties. A lover who knows my body; a lover my body knows. Greg began to lick him gently, wet little strokes that made his stomach coil, and as he relaxed into the bed and breathed, Greg's mouth slowly enclosed him.

It was so easy just to rest. The faintest whisper of guilt stirred in the back of his mind - selfish... lazy - but Greg was stroking his stomach, humming, tending to him as if they had all damn day. The
satisfaction of sleepy blurred his arousal into something low and soft and rumbling, something that drenched him in a kind of peace he hadn't felt in a decade. He wanted to feel. He wanted to be looked after. He wanted to be licked and stroked and come, and Greg was gazing up at him as if he wanted those things just as much, watching him with longing.

Shivering, stirring as Greg's mouth moved in the lazy rhythm that he liked, Mycroft touched his soft grey hair. He let himself breathe and rest. He watched Greg's eyes in return, and whimpered each time they closed.

Climax took time. Greg didn't seem to notice. He only seemed to settle more and more as the minutes eased by, more comfortable between Mycroft's thighs, more easy in his movements, his fingers trailing tiny patterns over Mycroft's stomach as he trembled. Something about the early morning quiet kept coaxing Mycroft's attention to his own sounds. He was vocal. He'd never been so aware of it before.

He couldn't bring himself to be ashamed.

Greg didn't care that he was vocal. He didn't mind. He responded to Mycroft's noises with hums, soft groans and tighter movements of his mouth, encouraging him, wanting him, and moaning itself began to feel good. He liked his sounds. He liked hearing himself this way - whimpering in the early light, panting as his lover did this for him, licked him and slowly sated him and let him moan as he wanted.

Greg began to stroke his sides: a light and maddening up and down, desperately slow and almost ticklish, drawing across Mycroft's skin as if he was water and Greg just wanted to disturb the surface. Mycroft began to anticipate the gentle skim of fingers just past his navel, where each jolt of sensation made him gasp.

Greg noticed.

He timed the deeper slides of his mouth to meet the feeling; within minutes Mycroft was flushed and begging, twisting his head against the pillows. He couldn't bear it. His cock ached. Greg's fingers shortened their span of stroking until he was brushing the sensitive patches he'd found over and over again, his mouth working in rhythm, dark eyes turned up the bed to Mycroft's face - and when it came, orgasm broke from Mycroft's mouth as an almost anguished groan. He buckled beneath the force of it, panting, pleasure searing sharp and hot and good in every nerve, crying out as he felt Greg swallow around him, still caressing his sides with those light and loving fingertips.

The rush left him reeling and boneless.

In its wake, warm arms curled around him.

"Shhh..." Greg's mouth, gentle at his temple; Greg's voice, soft, as pleasurable as a breeze across his skin. "Love doing that for you... fuck, sweetheart, the sounds you make..."

Mycroft couldn't speak. He couldn't even move, a molten mess of hormones and pleasure in Greg's arms. Greg's chest was broad and safe and warm; he smelled like Mycroft imagined a husband would smell.

He didn't have one. He never would.

He imagined they smelled like this, though.

Gently Greg began to stroke his hair.
Lost in the wreckage, exhaustion was soon lapping through Mycroft's body. He felt it blurring into sleep once more, and he shifted, running his weak hands down Greg's stomach. *Selfish. Reciprocate. He deserves to, too.*

Greg smiled against his forehead.

He caught Mycroft's hands, lifted them above the sheets and kissed them, gathering them to his mouth.

"You're shattered," he whispered. He laid each sound gently on Mycroft's knuckles with his lips. "Had you up half the night, gorgeous... rest for a while..."

"Nnh, Greg... you..."

"When you're awake." Greg cuddled him close and kissed his head, drawing the covers up around him. "Close your eyes, love... you've earned a lie-in."

*Love.*

The word seemed to nuzzle at Mycroft's ear. It made him feel happy and safe.

It felt good.

He draped his arms around Greg's torso, and settled against his chest. Greg's breathing loosened the last tie of his thoughts; sleep carried him away on its breeze.

When he woke again, Greg wasn't there.

Mycroft stirred, reaching beneath the covers for the familiar warmth that he wanted. He could find no arms, no skin. At last, his outstretched hand came across something resting atop the covers - a long, flat edge.

He blinked, sleepily opening his eyes.

There was a breakfast tray lying beside him: sliced fruit, pastries and fresh coffee. The British papers were folded neatly beside them. There was a tiny jug of cream for his coffee.

Just beyond the tray, there was Greg Lestrade. He was naked except for black boxer shorts, scruffy-haired and perfect - and with a single shy bite-mark at the crook of his neck.

As Mycroft spotted it, he smiled. He hadn't been sure it would leave a mark.

Greg's eyes glittered quietly.

"Didn't mean to wake you up," he murmured. "Thought I'd leave these for you to find... sleep a bit longer, if you want."

Mycroft's heart squeezed cosily inside his chest. "When did it arrive?" he asked, his voice husky with sleep.

"Few minutes ago." Greg smiled, watching him warmly. "You don't mind me ringing them, do you?"

"Not at all..." Mycroft stirred, stretching his ankles beneath the covers. He'd now had three nights of sleeping naked. It had left him feeling graceful, calm and clean. His skin revelled in the cool stroke of the fabric, and the way Greg watched made him smile. "I'm surprised you didn't order pavlova."
Greg laughed. He knelt down beside the bed, laid his forearms upon the edge of the mattress, and rested his chin upon them.

"You've not been in the fridge yet," he said, playfully. "I've stocked us up."

Mycroft smiled, reading his wicked gaze. "With pavlova?"

"Yep," Greg said, unapologetic. His smile broke into a grin. "Among other things. I got some wine for us, too... a few things to make lunch with. Snacks. I've got us covered."

Mycroft felt his soul tingle under the glow of those eyes. Being looked at by a playful Greg Lestrade was an experience impossible to put into words.

"What manner of pavlova?" he asked, cosily.

Greg's eyes flashed. "Cherries." As Mycroft's toes curled beneath the covers, he added, "Let's hope there's more than three in it."


"You know you could google it?" Greg said, and bit down into his grin.

"I don't wish to google it," Mycroft replied, fighting not to smile and rather losing. "I wish for you to tell me."

Greg's eyes danced, his pupils swollen. "How have you not figured it out yet?" he said. "It's so obvious. I don't know how you can't see it."

"Because it makes no sense," Mycroft said, now wanting to fuck and throttle the delectable bastard at once. "Nothing is that shape, except perhaps the suit of spades. And that makes even less sense than cherries."

Greg gripped his own forearms, grinning wider than ever. "Christ, I can't bear it..."

"Then tell me."

"How many hours have you spent with your head cocked to one side, staring at it? Please. I need to know."

"None," Mycroft said, grinning. Wild joy was coursing through his veins, bright and beautiful as gold. The man was magnificent. He was wicked, and he was wonderful - and he was only an outstretched touch away. "Is it something about 'the two of us'? Less than three?"

"Christ," Greg breathed in delight. "I love how much you're reading into this. You'll have a full literary analysis by the end of the week, won't you?"

"Unless you tell me," Mycroft said, "quite possibly."

Greg pressed his tongue between his teeth, still grinning. He reached out and ran a finger down Mycroft's nose.

"You were close just then," he admitted. "In a weird way..."

"With?"

Greg's mouth curved. "Suit of spades."
Mycroft stared at him, baffled.

"Why would you send me the suit of spades?" he demanded, more lost than ever.

"'Close'," Greg grinned. "Not 'correct'. You were closer than cherries, anyway. Just - ... fuck, I can't. It's too fucking good. I'm not telling you. Don't you dare google it."

Mycroft had never wanted to pin someone against something so badly.

"Rascal," he murmured, his voice low.

Greg rose from his knees, easing slowly to lean over the tray. "Half a week of fucking me," he whispered, as Mycroft's heart thumped against his chest, "and you're only just getting that now?"

The press of Greg's mouth took his breath - soft, slow, and as gentle as falling to sleep. Mycroft's eyes fluttered shut; his whole body seemed to breathe.

As they kissed, something strained beneath his skin. He wondered what it was.

Greg stroked his cheek, a quiet passing of his thumb in a circle. Mycroft felt it stroking the something that strained - quietening it, calming it, easing it to breathe.

By the time their lips came apart, he was almost ready to sleep again.

"Shall I leave you?" Greg murmured against his mouth, brushing back his hair. His eyes were warm and soft. "Let you have your breakfast in peace?"

Mycroft's heart stirred.

"No," he whispered to the gentle brown eyes. "No, don't go." He paused, letting the words come. "I want you to sit with me."

Greg's smile raised a tingle across the back of his neck.

"Best shift over then, posh," he said. "I'll run you a shower after."

At quarter to one, Greg’s mobile began to bleep. He stirred on the sun-lounger beside Mycroft, winced in the glare of the sun and reached over to the table between them, sliding his phone across to him with his fingertips. Their bottle of wine was almost half-empty; it had been a rather pleasant morning.

Flipping the phone over, Greg silenced his alarm.

"Ready for a break, darlin’?" he murmured.

Mycroft glanced up from his laptop screen, feeling a smile creep across his mouth. "In a few minutes, yes... that might be rather welcome. Why?"

"Good. I'll take me a few minutes to put lunch together." Greg eased himself up onto his elbows and stretched, every muscle bulking in his delightfully bronzed back. "How's work? Have you got quite a bit done?"
"Mm, I have..." Not quite as much as if he'd done it without red wine; not quite as much as if he'd gotten up at seven, and been out on the terrace by nine - but all the same, Mycroft was pleased. "Yesterday's chaos seems to have been wrestled back under control."

Smiling, Greg reached for his discarded trousers.

"M'glad, love," he said - and there it was again. "For the record, they should still appreciate you more."

He pulled his trousers on loosely, not bothering with underwear or a shirt.

"Come inside when you're done finishing off," he said, leant down, and pressed his lips to the top of Mycroft's head. The small kiss was rather thrilling. "I'll have your lunch ready. Hope you like chicken caesar salad."

Mycroft did - very much.

He watched Greg for a few moments as he headed up towards the house: his easy walk, his bare shoulders, his hands settling into his pockets. The midday sun ignited the grey in his hair into an almost shocking silver.

Mycroft found himself strangely aware that he'd remember this moment.

He wasn't quite sure why.

It wasn't an especially significant moment. Of all the incidents of the holiday, this was perhaps the least obviously memorable - a rare few minutes they were to be apart, watching Greg walk away from him in the sun. It shouldn't be an affecting sight.

And yet it was.

Mycroft brought his morning's work to an end in a state of quiet distraction, trying to isolate the source of his unease as he typed. It felt odd somehow to be out here alone. It wasn't comforting. He found himself eager to follow Greg, and return to the same cosy distance they'd so far spent the day - a few feet apart on sun loungers, a few feet more if Greg took a quiet dip into the pool to cool himself off. They'd barely spoken a word as he worked, but the silence now had a very different quality.

He didn't like it.

As he realised this would be the silence that filled his home next week, Mycroft's heart contracted with distress.

He finished his sentence, closed his laptop, and pushed his thoughts from his head with both hands. 

*He still has three nights to grow bored of me.*

*Three nights to come to my senses. Three nights to regain my priorities. Three nights to lose the novelty of his body against mine.*

*Next week will be no different to last.*

Not that 'next week' could truly apply anymore, Mycroft thought as he walked the winding path up to the villa.

This time next week, he would already be returned to his desk - back at work, after a lonely Saturday
and Sunday re-acclimatising himself to London.

*For heaven's sake. I shan't be lonely.*

*And if I am, it will be a sensation I've lived with for twenty years.*

*Quite certain I can cope with another week of it.*

He would have to endure interest from colleagues. Some of them could not possibly be fooled; they would guess the reason for his sudden absence. They were high-level agents of the security services. It was their job to know things that people rather wished they didn't.

If Mycroft was fortunate, discomfort over their own human discretions would keep their opinions in their mouths. Every agent of his level lapsed. They all knew it. Every single one of them ended up in hotel rooms, parked cars, private places, trying to make a stranger feel like a lover for just a while. It was their communal dirty secret, and they carried the weight together.

Then, Mycroft wasn't sure what he hated more: the thought that next week would bring him unspoken contempt, or the thought that it would bring him quiet pity.

As he approached the front door, he had a strange moment's imagination: security service agents, once a year on some permitted and heart-breaking evening, bringing photos to a darkened room to share. To show, the fragments of their hearts they'd only glimpses. This is him - how he was. This was her. This is where we were.

This is who I was for seven days.

A lot of alcohol would need to be consumed at such an evening. More, perhaps, than could ever be sourced.

Unsettled, wishing he hadn't thought it, Mycroft opened the door to the villa.

Greg was setting out the table. He'd draped a fresh shirt around his shoulders; the crisp clean white was shocking against the depth of his tan.

"What's that look for?" Greg asked with a grin, pouring rosé out into two glasses. It seemed it was becoming a boozy day.

Mycroft took a moment to find the words.

"Your tan is - rather striking now," he said. "I hadn't realised."

Greg winked. "Shall we start on you this afternoon?"

Mycroft huffed, still struggling to settle his fractious thoughts. "I... burn and freckle. I'm not certain I've ever managed to tan in my life."

"You say 'freckle' like it's a bad thing..." Greg put the wine to one side, pulling out Mycroft's chair for him. "Might be nice to get some vitamin D in your veins to take home. Think about it."

Mycroft took a seat, flushing slightly. "I shall," he promised.

Greg helped him ease his chair in.

"Good." He pressed a kiss to Mycroft's shoulder. "Have a drink, gorgeous. You've earned it. I'll fetch our food."
Hardly earned, Mycroft thought, embarrassed, as he took a drink all the same. A few hours of lying in the sun, sharing wine, answering his e-mails and performing a simple fiscal analysis. He couldn't exactly claim harsh treatment.

As Greg returned, placing before him a bowl of fresh caesar salad with liberal dressing, Mycroft's heart squeezed. He'd clearly prepared it himself.

"You're very kind," he managed, suddenly a little overwhelmed. Tending to me. Spoiling me. "I seem to be receiving rather special treatment today."

"So you do," said Greg, with a bright-eyed and rather enigmatic smile. He sat down opposite Mycroft and reached for his wine. "Best enjoy it, hadn't you?"

As his foot stroked Mycroft's calf muscle beneath the table, Mycroft flushed. He couldn't hold back a smile.

"Thank you," he said, moved. "You're - very kind."

"I like making you happy," said Greg, as if it were nothing - as if there were legions of people in this world who wanted that; as if Mycroft were giving him some kind of favour by permitting it. "I get the feeling your usual people have forgotten to do it lately."

My usual people.

Mycroft had no usual people - his assistant perhaps was the closest, but he could hardly expect to rely upon her as some manner of friend. His work colleagues were rather too busy managing their own affairs to care for a trifle like his well-being. As for his brother, the day Sherlock made him lunch would be the day the planet collapsed into its own core.

Lord... what am I doing?

These were not comfortable conclusions to approach.

Mycroft had another mouthful of wine, retrieved his fork and focused on eating, telling himself an afternoon of rest might be due. His brain was beginning to analyse those things that should be left unexamined; an hour in the pool might be wise.

As he realised Greg was watching him eat, Mycroft flushed a little.

Greg's smile was soft and disarming.

"Think I've found somewhere for tonight," he said.

Mycroft paused. "Tonight?"

"To eat." Greg transferred a few salad leaves to his mouth and chewed. "There's a Greek restaurant called Shellona... it's on Shell Beach. Chaise longues and tables right on the sand. Got the menu on my phone, if you want to see."

Mycroft found himself briefly unable to swallow. There was a curious lump in his throat.

He took a drink, settled himself, and said,

"You rather seem to have this day mapped out to please me, Greg."

"So I do." Greg's eyes were bright. "Enjoy it."
Happy Friday, everybody! This chapter is very special - it's tipped me over a million words on AO3. Thank you all so much for your comments and kudos and bookmarks. I wouldn't be doing what I do without you guys. <3

After lunch, they put the bottle of wine into a cool-bag to bring with them.

"I don't think I've consumed so much wine by two o'clock in my life," Mycroft confessed, as they walked down the path towards the terrace together. He'd left his laptop in the safe; he didn't intend to retrieve it until at least three.

"Are you feeling it?" Greg asked, reaching for his hand.

Mycroft's heart flickered as their fingers wove. He couldn't be certain how much the wine was affecting him. There was a fuzziness to the world that could have had its origins in any number of things - not least the man now strolling at his side, holding his hand as if they were fifteen.

"Hard to separate it from the heat," he replied, with a faint smile.

Greg's eyes sparkled.

"There you go then," he said. "No worries. Have a nap this afternoon, and you'll sleep it off ready for tonight... I got us a bottle of rum to share at home after dinner."

Home. "I'm - not certain I've ever imbibed rum."

"Don't worry," Greg said. "Goes down pretty easy." He slipped an arm around Mycroft's waist, adopting his stride. "Then I will."

Mycroft flushed wildly.

"You are a beast," he said. "A shameless one, at that. And frankly, I'm surprised I still have the capacity."

Greg grinned. "Really? No surprise to me..." It was easy to walk together, Mycroft realised; their height difference didn't seem to matter in the least. "You like sex, posh," Greg said to him, fond. "You like getting the chance to have it. Where's the surprise? We're on a sex holiday. You should be having more orgasms than you can count this week."

Mycroft wondered if it were possible to blush to death.

"You've seduced me into depravity," he mumbled. "My self-control was torn to tatters when you accosted me on New Year's Eve... it only seems to be worsening."

As Greg laughed, Mycroft struggled to imagine a more delightful sound.
"So it's my fault you pinned me to a beach yesterday?" Greg said, his eyes flashing sideways. "That's handy for you. Works out rather nicely."

Mycroft covered his face. "Stop it..." he groaned. "Beast. No-one saw us."

Greg chuckled. He gathered Mycroft close with one arm, kissed his forehead, and guided him around the corner to the terrace.

"S'fine, Mycroft," he purred. "You're on holiday, for Christ's sake. Only me here. Let go."

'Letting go' with Greg Lestrade seemed to be a breathtakingly easy endeavour. It was only becoming easier by the day. Mycroft wondered if the man had any notion of the magnitude of his influence - if Greg realised what a rare and magnificent creature he truly was.

He took his hands from his face, and drew a breath.

"I suppose if I'm going to indulge myself - " he began, then stopped dead in his tracks.

There was someone down on their terrace.

It took Mycroft a moment to realise what he was seeing: a woman in a bright white uniform, carefully tucking sheets around a wide flat table in the sunshine. She had a stand set up beside her, arranged with small coloured bottles, and her hair was tied back in a bun.

"What...?" Mycroft managed, bewildered.

He looked across at Greg - and found a grin there waiting for him.

"What have you done?" Mycroft asked, earning himself another laugh.

"Sorry," Greg said, not looking sorry in the slightest. "Couldn't help myself. I asked them this morning on the phone. When they said they had a slot today at two, I snapped it up."

"A slot for - ?"

"Massage," Greg said, his eyes dancing. "Professional. And before you argue, you're having the works. C'mon - you've earned this."

_God help me._ Mycroft found himself being pulled irresistibly along the path by the hand, wondering if he could possibly have any barriers left for Greg to break down.

On the terrace, the young lady introduced herself with a smile; she asked who it was who requested a treatment. Before Mycroft could mount any manner of protest, Greg announced him as the lucky recipient.

The massage therapist gestured to the bed, and invited Mycroft to make himself comfortable.

"C'mere," Greg said, turning towards him bright-eyed and smiling. He reached for Mycroft's buttons. "This'll be amazing for you. I promise. Change your life."

As Greg began to undo his buttons, Mycroft's cheeks flooded with colour. His heart leapt with each one. Being undressed in front a stranger was not an experience he'd intended to have today - though he supposed the poor woman couldn't exactly perform her services _through_ his clothing.

Increasingly nervous, he said nothing, watching Greg work through the buttons.
"Hey..." Greg kissed his forehead. "She sees more people naked than she has hot meals. She's a massage therapist. You've got nothing to worry about."

Mycroft attempted a stern look; he knew it was unconvincing.

"Easy for the attractive to be confident while unclothed," he remarked.

"You're attractive," Greg said without a pause, pulling off Mycroft's shirt for him. The slanted smile was rather beautiful. "That's why we're here. You attracted me. Massively. And now I'm pulling you out of your comfort zone, into mine for a while. I think you'll like it here."

He reached for Mycroft's trousers.

"Oh lord..." Mycroft muttered, closing his eyes. It seemed this decision was being taken care of for him. He placed his hands on Greg's biceps, finding that it helped to quell the panic somewhat. "Am I to remove - everything?"

"You'll have a towel over you," Greg said. The masseuse was attending to her various bottles with her back to them, the massage bed open and waiting - an inviting gleam of white in the sunshine. "Just give it five minutes, darlin', and you'll wonder what you were fussing about."

"I'm - not 'fussing', Greg..." As Greg knelt, and summarily pulled his trousers and underwear down over his hips, Mycroft grabbed hold of his shoulders. He gripped the muscles there hard. "Oh, lord."

Greg glanced up from his knees with a grin. "I know, love. I'm a scamp, and you'll have me on a plane home by tonight."

Distress at the very thought flickered through Mycroft's chest.

"I might not go that far..." he mumbled.

Greg freed the bundled clothing from Mycroft's ankles, smiling, then tossed it all aside on a sun-lounger. He reached for Mycroft's hands as he stood up.

"Here," he said. "On you get... lie on your front and get cosy. I'll cover you."

Mycroft blushed furiously. He took the offer of assistance to seat himself on the massage bed, and with as much grace as he could muster, he arranged himself carefully on his front. This felt ludicrous - but it seemed that it was happening.

He supposed there were worse things to have foisted upon him on a Monday afternoon.

He cushioned his head upon the rolled towel prepared for him, biting his cheek. Greg pulled the cover across his hips. From his prone position, Mycroft shot him a wry look that he hoped conveyed sufficient displeasure.

Based on the grin he got back in response, he'd not entirely managed it.

"I know," Greg murmured again, bent down and kissed his cheek. The massage therapist turned around from her stand of oils, holding a white ceramic bowl in both hands; the woman was visibly fighting a smile at Greg's antics. "Just give it a few minutes, posh. If you absolutely hate it, you can punish me later."

Mycroft's eyes glinted. "Believe me, I shall."

Greg took a seat on the sun-lounger beside the massage bed, settling himself where Mycroft could
still see him.

"Be good," he warned. "Let the masseuse work her magic. She's got twenty years of rubbish to knead out of you."

The young lady placed the bowl on a table close by. The oil had three small white flowers resting on the surface. As he looked at it, Mycroft caught the distinct scent of coconut and frangipani.

He tried not to smile. This is ridiculous.

"Your first massage, Mr Holmes?" the therapist asked him.

Mycroft looked at Greg as he answered, his mouth curving. "Mm. I don't seem to find the time for them in London."

"Important to take time for yourself," she said, her voice warm with a smile. She oiled her hands. "Your partner would agree with me, I think."

My -

Oh.

No, he is not my -

But Greg was smiling, delighted by it - watching Mycroft with those dark eyes, bright with joy. They only seemed to be brightening by the day.

I suppose that only we know that, don't we?

For all the world believes this week, you could be.

Mycroft inhaled. Firm, gentle hands slid across his shoulders; his eyes fluttered shut at the feeling.

"He's - rather good at pushing my best interests," he managed, and revelled in Greg's laugh.

"Someone around here has to," Greg said. There came the zip of the cool-bag, then the clink of a bottle neck against glass. "Give me a minute to find my phone, love, and I'll read you the menu for tonight. How's that? Hope you're in the mood for tzatziki."

Watching Mycroft relax was like watching the tide come in - little-by-little, then suddenly all at once.

Greg had meant to drink wine and read this afternoon, but nothing could compare to this. Just watching the massage seemed as relaxing as having it - seeing the tension melt from Mycroft's face, minute-by-minute, hearing his voice sink low in his throat and grow soft. It was a little bit magical.

Mycroft didn't have a clue how appealing he looked.

Greg could almost pinpoint the moment he forgot that he was naked. He forgot he was outside under a stranger's hands, forgot his body was bare to the sun, and started to enjoy it. An ease settled across Mycroft's face, almost fragile in its softness, and his eyes filled with a glitter Greg had only ever seen in the moments just after he'd come. When the masseuse found knots of tension and loosened them,
Mycroft's only sounds were quiet and deep exhalations - but the longing to moan was written right there across his face.

Greg had seen it enough times now to recognise it.

*Seen it in my partner.*

*Christ.*

As if they did this every year, he thought - got themselves out of London in January, headed off to the Caribbean for some sun. Left the butler to look after the dogs. Told the staff to take two weeks off.

Did people really live like that?

In a place like this, Greg could almost believe it.

It was nice to pretend they were part of it. She was just a stranger, just a therapist - she'd probably been to three or four villas today already - but it was nice to think she believed that about them. In her eyes, it was who they were: a couple; a successful man who didn't have time for massages, and the lover who coaxed him into them on holiday. Next week they'd be back in London in their posh flat together, talking about groceries and traffic and the news.

She didn't know Greg would be by himself again. She couldn't see him digging through his freezer for ready meals, sitting on his sofa drinking wine just to get through his paperwork. She wouldn't see him at night, trying to sleep, wondering if the whole damn thing had been a dream.

It helped, somehow - knowing there'd be some form of them forever, safe in someone's mind across the world. Greg wouldn't get to live it, but they'd be there. Whenever she remembered them, they'd come into being for a few moments: Mr Holmes and his partner, who read him restaurant menus and held his wine glass for him as he drank.

Four days from now, Greg would never get to speak to Mycroft again. A massage therapist's memory was the only version of them that would exist.

Greg hoped she thought about them often.

When the hour was nearly over, Mycroft seemed almost on the verge of sleep. Watching him stir, Greg realised there was something he wanted to do. He needed to know that he'd done it. Next week, the chances he hadn't taken were the ones that were going to haunt him - he wanted to leave as few of them lying around as possible.

Finishing the last of his wine, he put the glass to one side.

Mycroft didn't even notice him getting up from the sun-lounger.

The therapist smiled as Greg approached. She seemed to radiate calm from every pore.

"Daft request," Greg murmured. For all he knew, Mycroft was asleep. "Can you teach me? Just something easy - so I can do this for him at home."

Her eyes sparkled.

"Of course... here," she murmured, completed her current movement, and reached for the small ceramic bowl on the side. "You can help me finish."
She poured the last of the oil into Greg's palms.

"It should be warm from the sun," she said, and showed him a circling motion between her palms. "But just in case..."

Greg smiled, mirroring the movement to spread the oil across his hands. The therapist stepped quietly to the head of the bed, and laid her hands at the very top of Mycroft's back - one either side of his spine.

"This we call 'effleurage'," she said, gently. "A gliding technique... start here at the neck - "

She showed Greg, pressing only lightly.

" - then down, either side of the spine..."

It was a long, smooth, slow glide, straight down to Mycroft's tailbone.

" - down his sides..."

Her hands parted to the sides of Mycroft's hips, slipping up to his waist.

" - then up... round..." The glide brought her hands to his spine again, smoothly. "And up his back again..."

Mycroft visibly inhaled during the upwards glide. At the top of his spine, she stroked out across his shoulders and down the tops of his arms, back in to gently dip either side of his neck. It was soothing just to watch. Her hands moved with a practiced, elegant ease.

Greg watched her do it twice more, paying close attention, then took her gentle nod as an invite.

He stepped into place at Mycroft's head. He laid both hands on the back of his lover's neck, enjoying the heat of his skin in the sunshine a moment.

"Are you awake, darlin'?" he murmured, as he slid his palms down Mycroft's back.

Mycroft stirred, mumbling his reply into the bed. "Mmh."

"Good." Reaching the bottom of his spine, Greg stroked around to his sides, his waist, the softer pad of skin Greg had gripped last night as Mycroft rode him. He took his time to ease his hands upwards. Mycroft's back rose beneath his palms as he breathed. "M'I doing this right?"

"I think you have it," the therapist said, fond. "Perhaps a little firmer, if he wishes."

Mycroft made a faint assenting sound. Smiling, biting his lip, Greg pressed slightly harder and repeated the slow circuit.

A distinct shiver passed through Mycroft's back this time.

"A natural," the therapist said, amused. She gave Greg a bright-eyed glance, and he grinned as he repeated the firmer stroke.

"Pretty certain there's more to it than this..."

"A little more," she admitted. "But we start and finish every massage with this stroke. It is the most important - and a partner's hands are always better than mine. Shall I show you more?"
Christ, yes. Greg stepped aside, and prepared to learn.

She taught him a kneading motion up each of Mycroft's sides ("Three times," she said, "very slow, then more gliding...") and a figure-of-eight technique around his shoulder blades, using one hand on top of the other.

Mycroft gave a distinct slow squirm the first time Greg tried it.

"Is that okay?" Greg murmured, his voice soft.

Mycroft exhaled with a shiver. "Mmh..." There came a tentative pause. "A - little harder would be - "

Not the first time you've wanted that from me. Greg kept the remark to himself, biting into his grin, and repeated the slow movement.

Mycroft seemed to breathe from the centre of every bone.

"You have the right hands for massage," the therapist told Greg, as he found himself relaxing into the motion. Mycroft's deeper breaths were quietly interesting. "Firm but gentle... not something men always find easy. Do you work with touch?"

Greg nearly laughed.

"No," he said. "Police, would you believe?" There came a faint, tight groan as he returned to the gentle gliding motions. It made him smile. "Looks like I missed my calling..."

The therapist gave him a twinkling look.

"Never too late," she told him, with a wink. "Life is long."

Greg's heart stirred.

"Have to remember that," he said. He glanced fondly down at Mycroft, who seemed only a minute or two away from actually melting across the massage bed. "How d'we finish?"

"Gliding," she said. "Just as you are, six times, lightening your pressure each time... then a final time, just fingertips, and cover him with the towel to rest."

"'kay... can do..."

By the time Greg raised the towel over his lover's shoulders, the sigh Mycroft drew could have been bottled.

"Thank you..." Mycroft mumbled, dazed.

Greg wasn't sure which of them he was thanking. He smiled, leant down, and kissed Mycroft's towel-covered shoulder.

"S'alright, gorgeous... don't fall asleep. We're pitching you off there in a minute."

The therapist cleaned Greg's hands off with a small towel. She packed away what she could, then gave him a hopeful glance.

Greg took the hint with a grin.

"Darlin'?" he murmured.
Nothing. Greg grinned, knelt down and kissed his cheek.

"Myc," he hummed. "Wake up, love."

Mycroft stirred; his eyelashes flickered. "Nnhh. 'Myc'."

"I know. C'mon, posh... let's get you up. You can nap in the sun with me all afternoon. Lady's got more people to see."

The therapist handed Greg a larger towel for Mycroft's modesty - though it seemed much less of a priority to him now. Greg wrapped him in it and helped him from the bed, then guided him sleepily to a sun-lounger in the shade. He got Mycroft settled on it, then gave the therapist a hand to pack the table away.

A car was already waiting for her at the door of the villa.

She shook Greg's hand; her smile had a warmth to it that would stay with him for years. "Goodbye, sir. It was good to meet you."

"Yeah - you, too. Definitely. Thanks for the lesson, I appreciate it."

"If you wish, I can come back to you on another day... teach you more of what I know. Mention my name to the concierge, if you like - I'm Leta." She gave him one last smile, a little curtsey, then turned towards the car. "I hope you have a good afternoon, sir."

Got a funny feeling I will.

Greg stepped into the villa for a few minutes. He retrieved a couple of things, and two spoons, and made his way back down to the terrace.

He half-expected Mycroft to be asleep.

Instead Greg found him resting on his side on the sun-lounger, half-covered by the towel. His eyes were soft and shining, his smile pink-cheeked, and he was waiting for Greg.

Greg approached, and placed the bowl of pavlova on the table. He then settled himself on his knees beside the lounger.

"How are you?" he murmured, as Mycroft reached up for his shirt.

Mycroft shivered, curling his fingers in the crumpled linen.

"Come here," he breathed.

As their lips met, Greg's heart thumped against the front of his chest. He slid an arm around Mycroft's waist, pulled him close and held him as they kissed, letting the seconds soften into minutes. Mycroft's movements were almost feline - slow, sensual and easy. He trembled with enjoyment as Greg stroked his bare back. The massage oil had left his skin so soft it took Greg's breath a little, and he stirred beneath every caress. After long moments, his arms went around Greg's neck, slim fingers delving through his hair. The feeling sent skitters down Greg's back; their tongues flashed together, slow.

He could feel Mycroft's breath growing tight.

"Brought you pavlova," he murmured, in the first breath of air that came between their lips.
Mycroft shivered. "Fuck the pavlova."

Greg's expression skipped. He took a moment to get himself under control, fighting a smile. "I mean... I will, if you insist."


"Thought I already am 'here'," he said, rising from his knees.

"Come more here," Mycroft gasped, pulling him into the sun-lounger. He shivered, flushing, as Greg pushed his towel inside. "Yes - God, yes. Please."

"I did a good job with the massage then, did I?" Greg settled himself on top of Mycroft, his stomach swooping as Mycroft's arms went around him at once. "Thought you were squirming a bit."

Mycroft shuddered.

"Please," he whispered, scrunching his hands in the back of Greg's shirt. "Please, I - I w-want to come. I want to fuck. Please."

Four days, Greg thought. Four days, and here we are.

Their lips didn't part as Mycroft undressed him, fumbling with his buttons and shivering. He seemed almost liquidly relaxed from the massage. He just wanted to touch, wanted to feel, wanted as much of their skin pressed together as he could get.

As Greg's body finally pushed against him, naked together in the shade, all the moans Mycroft had kept in during the massage came rising to the surface.

Greg set about releasing them, one-by-one.

After some time he reached down for his trousers, lying discarded by the sun-lounger. Panting, Mycroft stirred beneath his weight.

"W-What - ?"

Greg found the bottle tucked inside his pocket and fished it out.

"Lube," he murmured. "Think I promised you something last night... 'fuck me on the terrace', if I remember right."

Mycroft gasped against his neck. His hands dug into Greg's back. "W-Where did you get - ?"

"Concierge," Greg said. "This morning, when I rang for breakfast." He uncapped the tube, squeezing plenty across his fingers. "How sore are you, darlin'?"

Mycroft shook. "Not too sore to - "

Greg smiled. "Promise?"

"P-Promise." Mycroft drew his knees back carefully, resting them either side of Greg, one over each arm of the sun-lounger. "Gentle, perhaps."

Christ. "Mm hmm, darlin'... nothing else." He leant down for Mycroft's mouth, sliding his fingers smoothly between his legs. "You stop me if this hurts even a bit, okay?" he murmured against Mycroft's lips, kissing him as he spread the silicon gently. "Not interested in hurting you."
Mycroft twisted with longing, his panting kicking up at once. "Please - please just..." As Greg breached him slowly, he moaned. "Fuck, Greg..."

He relaxed beautifully for Greg's fingers.

He relaxed beautifully for Greg's cock, too.

"Fuck..." He was all pupils, all need; his thighs felt like they belonged around Greg's waist. As Greg began to move within him, he let out the noise that meant he felt full. His face contorted with desperation. "Ohh, fuck...!"

Greg nosed along his jaw, breathing in his scent.

"Mm, love?" he whispered. "Is this you wanted?" As he reached Mycroft's bites he brushed them with his mouth, letting his hips rise and fall as slowly as he could. Mycroft's body squeezed tight around his cock. "Fuck each other out here, gorgeous... fuck under the sky, feel me deep..."

Mycroft arched against his body, breathing hard.

"Fuck," he whimpered. "Fuck, fuck - " His fingers clenched on Greg's back. "Greg - ?"

Greg felt his heart contract, nudged out of rhythm by the sound of his name.

"Mm, sweetheart? M'here. Tell me."

Mycroft seemed to shudder to the soul. His thighs tightened, and he dragged in a breath too big to hold. "Nothing, I - it f-feels good..."

Greg nuzzled against the corner of his jaw. He knew a changed mind when he heard one.

"Is there something else might feel good?" He brushed his tongue against Mycroft's ear. "Not gonna shock me, darlin'. Tell me. M'inside you right now... I want to know."

Mycroft's expression contracted. He stirred, swallowing as Greg continued to move in him, easy and slow. Longing flashed over his face.

"Feed me," he gasped. "W-While..."

It was all Greg could do not to come on the spot. He smothered his growl with Mycroft's mouth, coaxed Mycroft's head up to kiss him, and reached his other hand for the bowl.

Cream from his clean fingertips, licked and sucked with frantic whimpers; cherries held out by the stalk, wrapped up with a nervous pink tongue. Mycroft's blush only deepened with each one. His pupils were huge, his body shaking, and as Greg kissed the taste of cherry sauce from his tongue, fucking him with slow and deep and steady strokes, Mycroft panted like he was about to pass out.

"Good?" Greg breathed, reaching for more cream.

Mycroft pulled his fingertips into his mouth with a gasp. He shuddered, restlessly cleaning up the cream, eyes closed, face flooded with enjoyment, breath cutting with a whimper as Greg slid back inside him.

"Almost, darlin'?" Greg whispered. "Close to coming for me?"

A desperate nod; Greg eased his fingers a little deeper into Mycroft's mouth. As Mycroft's grip clenched around his wrist he felt his stomach twist, glorying in his lover's urgent moans.
"D'you know how perfect you look like this?" he breathed.

Mycroft's hips bucked, helpless, his eyes closed tight.


Mycroft was on the verge; Greg knew those sounds. He knew the gripping of his thighs and the ragged edge of his breath.

"I'd fuck you and feed you cherries every night, sweetheart," he whispered. "Every single night if I could. Feed you cream from my fingers. Let you come cleaning it off my cock. Every fucking night of your life."


As he came, Greg seized his mouth and kissed him through. He drank every moan like they were wine.

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When Mycroft resurfaced, he was resting in Greg's arms in the pool.

He could barely remember getting in.

Greg was stroking his hair, tender fingertips caressing the curve of his scalp. He was murmuring something. It took Mycroft a moment to follow.

"- out about six, mm? Booked it for half past... we can always get a drink, if we're early..."

Mycroft's heart squeezed. Dinner, he thought. Greek food. Chaise longues on the sand.

He stirred in Greg's arms; gentle fingertips played down the back of his neck. They began to trace around his shoulder blades in that steady eternity symbol the therapist had taught him - round and round, steady in time with their breathing.

Mycroft wondered when they'd begun to breathe together.

"Even do some work, if you want," Greg murmured, and kissed the wet curve of his shoulder. His freckles there would be blooming in the sun. "Couple of hours free at least..."

Something pulled in Mycroft's chest. The thought of work and concentration was almost abhorrent to him. He wanted to feel. He wanted this - just like this - a lover's arms around him, the water warmed by sunlight, drifting in its gentle support as a soft voice said kind things to him.

"I'm... n-not sure I..." His throat thickened; he swallowed around it. "R-Rather happy here."

Greg placed a tiny kiss upon his jaw.

"S'fine, love," he whispered. "You be happy here... just rest."
Quiet came, broken only by the sound of the water around them.

And Mycroft realised, all at once, that this would not be here next week.

Greg would be gone.

He was almost halfway gone already - the hours were slipping through Mycroft's fingers like sand, as swift as if they had thousands of them left.

They'd had three nights. Four now remained.

Four nights of being held this way, stroked after he'd come, four nights of saying, "I want," and seeing soft eyes respond to him at once with affection and kindness. Four nights of gentle fingertips that fed him cream, just because he wanted to taste it as Greg moved inside him. Four nights of a man who asked a massage therapist to teach him, just so Mycroft could have it for four more nights.

And then nothing.

Work. His weekly diary. The nation's cares; nothing. The clockwork of the world would carry on, and Mycroft would be the mechanism at the heart of it - working, wearing, grinding himself apart, buckling and still turning, and there would be no-one to stroke his back when he was fragile. There would be no-one to sit with him at dinner.

Suddenly he wished he'd never laid a hand on Greg.

Oh god.

Oh - god -

I shouldn't have brought you here.

He should have asked Greg to dinner. Wine, candlelight and quiet conversation. Forged a friendship.

They would have permitted him a friendship.

The fire - the longing - would have blazed for a while - and Mycroft could have soothed it in the quiet company of a man who believed his masters should appreciate him. He could have always had Greg. He'd told himself that what he wanted was to fuck the man - and now he had, all he wanted was to talk and go to dinner. He wanted the two of them, just like this, resting together in the afternoon sun.

I don't want you to be gone.

What will I do when you're gone?

It is not real, his sense of reason whispered to him. Its voice was hard to hear. None of it. A fantasy, borne of escapism. Back in London, Lestrade would forget.

A silent, crushing wave of panic rolled itself through Mycroft's chest. He brushed his fingers through Greg's hair, shaking, breathing to let the fear subside.

Oh god... oh god, the lust isn't ebbing. It's not easing. It's getting easier.

Oh god, what -

What if -
His heart didn't understand that it had Greg to a time restriction. It didn't believe Mycroft when he told it that, four nights from now, he would watch Greg walk away, and that would be the last time. His heart wasn't a machine. It wasn't a system. He couldn't expect it to understand that this man, this man touching his skin as if they loved each other, was here to sate his need for sex - and then to leave, and be gone into the passage of time, and there would be no more arms to hold him again.

*Oh, god - I'm -*

Greg was kissing his temple, whispering something to him. Mycroft couldn't hear the words. There was only the panic, piercing and searing and rising more and more with every breath.

He'd wanted sex.

Greg had given him kindness.

He hadn't even known he wanted it. Kindness was something he'd been offered so sparsely in his life he barely recognised it. His parents had given it to him only sparingly, lest he develop a taste for the stuff; his career had forged him into a creature of power and calm and control.

Now there were kind things being said in his ear, kind fingertips tracing eternity across his back, and kind arms wrapped tightly around him. Greg had taken every care to make him comfortable here. He'd reassured Mycroft a hundred times, guided him gently to relax and feel at ease, told him he deserved the things he wanted *merely because he wanted them.*

It was unthinkable.

*It isn't real. For god's sake. None of it is real.*

And if it was, it had to end. Four nights left - these were his final days of kindness in this world. He'd arrived upon this island as Mycroft Holmes, power of the British government, distracted by inconvenient lust but still intending to work in silence each day between the hours of nine and five.

He would be leaving it as Myc - a man who liked to taste things from his lover's fingers; a man who enjoyed gentle massage; a man who liked going to dinner, liked sex, liked wearing his lover's bites on his throat, liked having a warm body to curl possessively around him at night.

*God help me...*

*What have I done?*

Greg had no idea of the thoughts now rioting through his head. He didn't know Mycroft was drowning in silence in his arms. He was just holding Mycroft, stroking him, humming some softness about making an effort tonight - wearing his black shirt - wishing he'd brought a suit.

Tightening his arms around Greg's neck, Mycroft closed his eyes.

He could still see the sun, reflecting from the water against his face. He could still feel Greg breathing in his arms.

*No... no, no...*

*Please, god...*

*No...*
Six o'clock.

The glass shook as Mycroft raised it to his mouth.

He'd not taken so long to choose an evening's outfit in many years. As he surveyed himself in the full-length mirror, his own reflection left him feeling as fragile and insubstantial as a snow-drop. He looked pale and unsettled, and his gaze was guarded - even from himself.

Wine.

Mycroft closed his eyes and drank.

Wine will help.

This was an Evenstad Reserve Chardonnay; it was not meant to be thrown back as an anaesthetic. Right now, he would have channeled the stuff into his veins if he could. The fuzzy bravery of alcohol didn't seem to be coming. His body was burning through it, turning it into fuel for more distress before his brain could find any courage in it.

Not that courage had done him a scrap of good so far.

Courage had led him into this disaster - courage, wilful ignorance and reckless idiocy. He'd thought himself the sort of stable, secure human being who could arrange a week of casual therapeutic sex with a man so handsome that eyes of every age and gender followed him across a room. He'd thought they would make use of each other's bodies, then shake hands and part as gentlemen - as if Greg were a box of matches, and the trick was just to strike through them one-by-one until no more flame could be produced.

He should have known this would happen.

Greg Lestrade was more than a body. He was gentle, and wild, and kind.

How many years have I watched him tending patiently to Sherlock?

Did I not realise that he'd tend to me, too?

Sinking down onto the bed, Mycroft lifted the glass back to his mouth. He turned his eyes away from the mirror as he drank. He couldn't bear to see himself any longer. All he could see was a fool, dressed for dinner with the man that he...

That he was beginning to...

Mycroft closed his eyes, pressing the edge of the glass against his lips. Fool.

As he drank, he inhaled through his nose.

I must control myself. I must extinguish the attachment. I mustn't encourage any further -

Oh god, we're sharing a bed.

Four more nights. He'll want to make love. He'll want to spend time together, to be together... as if nothing is wrong. He's able to keep control of his heart. I'm not.
I can't suddenly pull away from him.

Oh, god...

But what was the alternative?

To let it deepen?

To indulge it? (God help me.) Then, four nights from now, to rip it apart - however painful, however savage. It would be agony, necessary agony, and every happiness would now make it worse. It was unavoidable.

Oh god...

Mycroft was trying to concentrate on the queer strain of comfort beneath the utter misery. It would end in four nights, no matter what a mess he made of it - if he adored Greg, if he despised Greg, if they were enchanted with each other, if they were bored of each other, it would end in four nights and there was no alternative.

Breathing into his wine glass, Mycroft kept his eyes closed. He let his heart drum in distress and relief, trying to push his thoughts towards some peace.

It will end. It will be taken out of my hands, regardless.

Then, however intense it has become, it will fade with time and distance... it will be gone. The same outcome will arise, indifferent of my actions.

It would make sense to limit the damage to himself; to let a little coldness come between them, forced if necessary until it felt organic and normal.

But as he sat alone, dressed for a dinner he was now dreading, Mycroft knew in his bones it was too late for coldness.

If he was capable of coldness towards Greg, capable of switching his emotions off like a lightswitch, this never would have happened. He'd have been able to get the man out of his blood a week ago back in London, and Greg would never have reached his heart.

He'd made enough reckless decisions now not to trust his own heart any longer.

I should leave, then. Immediately. In the night while he sleeps - so there will be no scene.

If I had sense, I would contact someone. Anthea. Admit the situation. What I have done. Request her assistance to neutralise the damage.

His heart gripped painfully, and he drank.

If she has sense, she'll have him sent away.

Greg would find himself transferred to somewhere far out of London. Selected for an overseas exchange programme. Worse, some internal investigation that found him guilty of some fabricated offence. They would move him, somehow. They would find a way. He was an ordinary citizen; he had no idea how vulnerable that made him. He wasn't vital to the running of the British Nation.

Mycroft was.

If Greg threatened that critical mechanism - if Mycroft's colleagues honoured their commitment to the
nation, as he should have done - he would see Greg removed from his reach. Greg would be sent somewhere that Mycroft could never find him. Threat neutralised, the nation would continue; Greg would be sacrificed to its needs.

Mycroft pushed his hands across his face, shaking.

_I cannot tell them._

_I must act as if everything was successful. Pretend, upon my return, to have achieved my original aim. Then at least he..._ 

_He will be undamaged by me._

_My stupidity. He will walk away unscathed._

It wasn't Greg's fault that Mycroft had no dominion over his own heart.

_Not his fault that I adore him._

Was the answer to slip out in the night? Mycroft had a horrible feeling it was. He couldn't make himself turn cold; he couldn't stay. He couldn't spend another four nights making love with Greg, trying to conceal the vastness of his feelings. He wouldn't be capable of it. That much, he knew.

The only reasonable option was to remove himself from the situation - this utter, shrieking disaster he had caused - and return to London.

He could go tonight, and travel commercially. He'd make his way to St Maarten, and from there back to England. By the time Greg woke up in the morning, Mycroft could be travelling away from him at hundreds of miles an hour - and the problem would be solved.

Imagining it - a lonely seat on an overnight flight, with no goodbye - Mycroft's heart ached.

_The only way._

_What else will I do? Remain here? Four nights. In three, I've managed to fall in love with him. What will be left of my soul after another four?_ 

_And to what end?_

_It will be taken away from me. All of it._

_Better to end it now - finish it, close it, stop it - than prolong this. No good will come of it. My mind understands that; my heart won't. It is incapable._

_There are no happy endings._

_The best hope is a quick ending. Cleanest. The damage will be least._

Mycroft looked down into his empty wine glass, running his thumb along the stem.

_God help me. I will miss you._

There came a gentle creak from the door.

"Hey, gorgeous... you alright? Hadn't heard you in a while."
Mycroft's heart tightened at once; he didn't dare look up.

Careful footsteps came around the bed to him. Greg appeared within his gaze, kneeling upon the floor.

He was dressed for dinner too, black shirt and cologne and a watch. His hands were gentle as they took Mycroft's wine glass from him.

"Think you've had a bit too much sun, darlin'... you've been quiet all afternoon."

_Darlin'_. Mycroft couldn't meet his eyes. He couldn't see those warm brown eyes concerned for him. He couldn't bear it.

Greg's hands brushed along his arms, endlessly gentle. "Are you still alright to go out? The - car's on its way. We can cancel, if you want to rest."

Mycroft's heart clenched.

_I should feign illness - sunstroke. Sleep. There's no reason to -

_Oh god -

One last dinner.

When else will I ever go for dinner with the man I love? When will I have that in my life?

_Never._

_One last dinner. To say goodbye._

Curling his fingers quietly around Greg's elbows, trying not to shake, Mycroft braced himself for pain.

He looked up into Greg's eyes.

Greg smiled at him, as gentle as June.

"There you are..." He lifted a hand to Mycroft's cheek, stroking him gently. "Shall I cancel the car? We'll go to Shellona tomorrow... make tonight a quiet one."

_I would take you everywhere._

_Everything in the world would be yours. Everything. Everything I could give you._

Tightening his grip, Mycroft forced his throat to speak.

"I - don't want to miss a chance to - " He inhaled, concentrating on the fabric of Greg's shirt between his fingers, letting the warm brown of those perfect eyes comfort him. _I can do this. I am capable._

_One last night. _P-Perhaps if we take a quiet corner of the restaurant...?_

Greg's gaze was full of care. "You certain?" he murmured.

"Yes. Yes, I - I'll possibly feel better with food..." Mycroft hesitated, glancing at the glass on the bedside. "More water, perhaps. Less of other liquids."

"No cocktails tonight, mm?" Greg smiled softly, rubbing Mycroft's elbow. "You look gorgeous,
Mycroft flushed desperately. His mother had always liked him in ice blue; he'd heard it took ten years from his face. "Th-thank you."

"D'you need a jacket?"

Mycroft inclined his head to where a lighter jacket waited at the end of the bed. "For - after sunset."

"Alright." Greg raised himself from his knees to his feet, taking Mycroft's hands. "Shall we go wait outside?"

Mycroft let Greg lead him out to the front of the villa. He felt more fragile than he had in his life. He knew he should be armouring himself with a show of strength - summoning from the depths the charming politician he knew he'd once been - but the feel of Greg's arm wrapping around his shoulders was too much to resist. Nobody ever protected him. Nobody ever would again. They stood in gentle silence by the road together as the scents of the night plants unfolded all around them, and Greg simply held him, rubbing his back quietly, not asking.

When the car arrived, Greg insisted on getting the door. He eased in beside Mycroft, resumed the wrap of his arm and gave the name of the restaurant to the driver.

As they set off, Mycroft realised Greg needed him to do nothing - just rest. Greg had grown around his sudden weakness with protective patience, responding as naturally and perfectly as if they'd spent the last ten years together. He'd taken Mycroft's distress in his stride like it was no problem at all.

If he suspected its source, he didn't show it.

The drive to the restaurant was quiet. The car seemed full of things it couldn't comfortably hold, and Mycroft had no strength to dispel them. He leant into Greg's shoulder and put an arm around his waist; Greg gently stroked his hair. He brushed it back from one temple, over and over, and kept watch on Mycroft as they drove.

When they were almost there, easing through the busy roads of Gustavia, Greg murmured,

"D'you ever wonder what it's like to live here?"

Mycroft closed his eyes. "It - hadn't crossed my mind."

Greg smiled against his temple. "It - hadn't crossed my mind."

Greg smiled against his temple. "Crosses mine ten times a day."

"Does it?"

"Mm. Travelled a bit when I was younger... think I miss it."

Mycroft could imagine it: a younger Greg Lestrade, dark-eyed and wild, throwing himself around the planet in search of fun and freedom.

*If only I'd known you, then.*

*How different things might have been.*

He turned his face into Greg's neck, guiding the thoughts away to the back of his mind.

"You should set a book here," he said, and received a quiet laugh for it. "Live for a year, to research."
"What... one of these murder mysteries I'm going to write?"

"Mm." Mycroft glanced down, watching Greg's fingers steal gently between his own. Even your hands are protective. Tender around mine. Oh, god. He shifted, willing himself just a few more hours of normality. "An odious celebrity found dead at his horrendous sex party. Who killed him?"

He felt the smile against his hair become a grin. "You did?"

"Mhm." Mycroft bit the side of his tongue. "Not sure my supercilious nature would translate well to fiction."

"You'd make an unlikely suspect... 'minor politician' and his partner, just happen to be there at the time..."

God help me.

You're not my partner. You won't ever be.

Don't say that to me.

"Do I go to prison in the end?" Mycroft asked, as the car eased to a stop on the Rue de la Plage.

Greg smiled and kissed his head.

"No," he said. "Turns out he deserved it. The two of us escape on a plane. We sneak off somewhere to live in secret, somewhere gorgeous, and we're never heard from again."

And all I have to do is murder Ethan Sterling?

To Eden Rock please, driver.

Greg opened the door for Mycroft, helping him out with an arm. "There you go, darlin'... I've got you. Let's go get cosy."

The table was booked under Lestrade. As the server led them through the restaurant, Greg was relieved to see her heading for a quieter corner out on the sand, where two small sofas met at a right-angle beneath a palm-tree. It was shaded and cosy - just perfect. They could sit and eat together, watch the sun go down together, and Mycroft could rest. Today seemed to have knocked him for six.

Greg supposed they hadn't been prioritising sleep at night; this evening might have to be an early one. You could only fuck like twenty-year-olds for so many nights before your body had to remind you that you were forty.

The server got them settled, gave them menus and fetched them a jug of ice water, then left them alone to decide.

Passing Mycroft a glass of water, with plenty of ice, Greg laid a hand upon his knee.

"Drink up, gorgeous. You're dehydrated."

Mycroft took the glass with a slight tremor in his wrist, and drank it down. He was looking out
across the pretty curve of Shell Beach - smaller than Greg had thought, cosy and almost cute, the sand softly pink with thousands of tiny shells. It looked like there might be smaller coves, further along the shore.

Mycroft was looking at it as if he couldn't really see it.

*Christ, I hope I've not offended you somehow... done something stupid...*

*Interfering with your work, maybe - ?*

*Putting myself where I'm not wanted...*

As he poured himself a glass of water, Greg told himself to get a grip. He was making Mycroft's unease about him, and there was no evidence to suggest that. Mycroft had just had too much sun; he needed food and a proper rest.

*Leave the rum for another night,* he thought, picking up the menu. *Last thing anyone needs tonight is rum.*

"D'you know what you're having?" he asked Mycroft, who gave him a nervous glance and picked up the other menu. His grey eyes strayed across the food as if certain he'd once found it appealing. "You liked some of the mezés, didn't you?"

"Oh - yes, I... wondered about the mussels."

"Get a few to share as a starter, maybe?" Greg smiled, gently. "There's the grilled mahi mahi, too. Think you were eyeing that up at one point... still fancy it?"

Mycroft flushed a little. "I - probably shouldn't be indulging quite so exuberantly."

*What happened to 'first holiday in three years', darlin'? What's clamming you up?*

Greg glanced at the other patrons nearby. Families, groups of friends - they could be millionaires, for all he knew. They weren't any different to normal people. They were all busy with their own food, enjoying themselves on holiday and chatting to their own people, lounging happily with cocktails and sharing plates. Nobody was watching.

He nudged their table back gently, got up from his own sofa, and slid around to Mycroft's.

Mycroft watched, a little wide-eyed but not speaking, as Greg settled beside him. He rested an inviting arm along the back of the couch.

"C'mere," Greg murmured.

Mycroft hesitated a moment more - then with a look of quiet distress, he sat back. He laid his head on Greg's shoulder, and rested a tentative arm across his stomach.

As Greg circled him in a half-hug, a little tension seemed to unwind from Mycroft's shoulders. Greg kissed the top of his head.

"Having a meal out isn't 'exuberant'," he said, softly. "It's rewarding yourself. You worked all year. You worked for *three* years. You put up with a crap work-life balance because it pays well... if you're not going to spend it here, where will you spend it?"

Mycroft inhaled against his shoulder. "I'm - sorry. I don't mean to be - "
"Shhh... I’m the last person on the planet you need to say sorry to, alright? Relax, darlin’. You're not feeling great... that's okay." Greg flipped the menu over again, letting Mycroft see it. "You know I'll need someone to share a dessert with me, don't you?"

"G-Greg -"

"If we don't finish it, we'll take it home in a box. Have it on the couch with a film, maybe. Cuddle up."

Mycroft didn't make a sound. Greg kissed his head again, keeping a quiet eye for any affronted watchers - there were none. Nobody cared. Just a couple, he thought, cosy with food. Long day on the beach. Resting.

"Shall I order for us?" he said. There came a pause, and Mycroft nodded. "S'fine. I'll do that. You just hide there against my shoulder, and I'll feed you little bits and pieces... like you're a hamster in my pocket."

"Oh, god."

"Then we'll get a proper night's sleep for once. Cocoa and lights out by ten." Greg reached for Mycroft's water glass, moving it back into his hand. "I've been keeping you up way too late."

Mycroft lapsed into silence once more.

Greg took it as agreement, watched him take a steadying sip of water, and stroked back his hair.

When food arrived, Mycroft seemed to open just a little. Greg coaxed him into quiet conversation about the best places he'd eaten - Japan ("Anywhere in Japan..."); a small Turkish restaurant in London; a place in Berlin with two Michelin stars and a cheeseboard to die for. They ate slowly, quietly, sharing everything as the light began to fall, as the candles were lit by the staff, and tables of people came and went around them. It felt strange to be out in a restaurant and not drinking; Greg found he didn't care. It was nicer to look after Mycroft. The servers and the other patrons seemed to leave them to themselves, and by the time that dessert arrived, the beach had settled into soft blue darkness.

"What did you choose?" Mycroft asked, stirring against Greg's shoulder as their server approached bearing a boat dish.

"Loukoumades... Greek doughnuts." Greg gave their server a smile, which was fondly returned. She placed down the dish and left. "Lavender honey, crushed walnuts and chocolate sorbet, if I remember right."

Mycroft's breath caught a little.

Thought so. Greg leant over to the dish.

He picked up the first between his fingertips, sticky with honey and walnuts, and used it to scoop up a little of the sorbet. He could feel Mycroft watching closely.

As he held it to Mycroft's mouth, those anxious grey eyes finally lifted to his.

He felt like he hadn't seen them look at him in hours.

He smiled, gently, and held the doughnut still.
Tentative as a small animal, Mycroft ate it from his fingers. Greg watched enjoyment move across his features, real and soft, those beautiful eyes closing, the first hint of a flush in his cheeks.

And then, like a shadow, something passed across his face.

The joy, and all of Mycroft's softness, shivered away.

He looked down, pale; he rested his cheek against Greg's shoulder once more.

"No good?" Greg said, his heart skipping.

Mycroft took a moment to respond.

"No, it's - they're v-very good." He hesitated, then put his arm back around Greg's waist. "Thank you," he murmured. "You - should have the rest."

Christ... what's upsetting you, sweetheart?

Looking at me like you loved me this morning.

As Greg picked up a doughnut, placed it in his mouth and ate it, he barely tasted it. He was trying not to hear his own thoughts, but it was impossible to drown them out. Mycroft's silence gave them space to grow; they were growing.

Have I been too much all day? Pushing it?

Jesus, maybe he thinks I'm getting too cosy... making him lunch. Massage. Fussing.

Maybe he's worried I'm...

The test would be to give Mycroft some breathing room - see if he opened up - find out if, all evening, Greg had actually been making things worse without meaning to.

He hoped he hadn't.

Not least because he'd have to cool it - have to go steady on the kissing and the touching - remind himself why he'd been brought here, and it wasn't to pretend to a massage therapist they were married. He was here to fuck Mycroft, not to fuss him, not to tell him he should work less. Not to keep cuddling him, stroking him and playing pretend.

Pulse weakening, stomach a little heavy, Greg quietly took his arm from around Mycroft's shoulders.

Mycroft stirred, looking up at him at once. His eyes filled with a flash of something like fear - something Greg didn't understand.

"Are you alright?" Mycroft asked. Greg reached for the jug of water.

"Sure," he said. He refilled his glass, watching the last of the ice cubes tumble through the spout. "Have some more doughnuts, if you want... never going to eat them all myself."

Mycroft didn't say anything. He watched Greg drinking, nervous and quiet at his side. When Greg put the glass down, and took a doughnut, Mycroft's hand appeared gently on his upper arm - hesitant; asking.

Greg's heart heaved.
Calmly, he sat back. He placed his arm along the sofa again, as casually as he could.

Mycroft nestled back against his shoulder. His arms went around Greg's waist, and he cuddled close, breathing out in silence. Greg felt the tension melt out of his shoulders; he felt Mycroft's tremor ease back into comfort.

*Christ.*

Greg's pulse fluttered with frustration in the back of his mouth.

*You want to cuddle, but you can't look at me?*

*Punishing yourself again for enjoying something... closing down...*

*Two steps forward, one step back?*

Greg supposed he'd seen Sherlock do weirder things, when he was learning how normal people operated. Maybe Mycroft was just burned out - just tired - maybe he was coming down with something. Maybe it was the moon. Maybe it was in the water. Maybe it was a thousand things.

*Christ.*

*Please don't let it be me.*

*Don't make me have to stop. Just getting *cosy*. Just getting to the bit I *like.**

*Don't make me be all proper with you now, *sweetheart...*

Picking up a spoon, taking a little chocolate sorbet from the dish, Greg held it for Mycroft to eat.

"Hey..." he murmured. "Doesn't count if only I see it."

Mycroft hesitated. Greg could feel him looking at the spoon, seeing far more than it was. "M-My waistline would disagree with you."

Greg felt a quiet twinge cross his chest. He kissed Mycroft's forehead.

"When you remember me," he said, "sitting here with you, are you going to remember how slender your waistline was?"

Mycroft sank into silence.

Greg wondered at once if he'd gone too far - if he'd mentioned the unmentionable.

Mycroft's arms tightened around his waist. He leant forwards for the spoon.

He cleaned up every smudge of the sorbet with his tongue. He stirred, reached out for the dish and pulled it across the table, lifting it quietly into Greg's lap. He then took a doughnut - the largest one - and dabbed it through the sorbet.

As he held it up for Greg to eat, Greg looked past it into his eyes.

Mycroft was fighting tears.

He was fighting them, but he was losing.

The realisation was like a hammer to the heart.
Christ, posh - you're -

Fuck -

Mycroft knew. He knew Greg had seen it. He held the food anyway, watching Greg, his eyes filling quietly at their rim. He wanted to see. He wanted to remember.

Shit -

Shit - shit -

Why do they need you to be lonely? Why - why the fuck do they -

Swallowing what felt like his heart, Greg leant close and took the doughnut with his mouth. He held Mycroft's gaze as he did. Remember me. Remember me just like this, darlin'. Remember me adoring you.

You deserve better.

Christ - if -

Next week was going to hurt.

Hurt like hell. Worse than hell, now - knowing - knowing he'd be missed, knowing Mycroft wasn't just going to breeze off from this with a spring in his step and a new stamp on his passport. It was going to hurt them both.

They'd be in pain, missing each other, less than a couple of miles apart.

He wouldn't even be allowed to talk to Mycroft. Even to comfort him. Tell him he was missed.

Shit.

Holy shit.

This was more than 'cosy'. This was -

Jesus, this is -

How will I cope, thinking about -

Mycroft was reaching for another doughnut. Greg could barely even swallow the one in his mouth. It hurt to make his throat work; he could feel it closing, gripping so tight he feared he couldn't speak.

He didn't know what he'd say, even if he could.

Silent, heart pounding, he let Mycroft feed him.

He fed Mycroft in return, sharing the dish between them - every last grain of sugar, every fragment of walnut.

When it was clean, Mycroft moved it without a sound to the table.

There came a pause; he reached inside his jacket.

Drawing a credit card from the inner pocket, he placed it into Greg's hand.
"Zero-four-nine-six," he said, then added a folded euro note. "For service."

Greg's heart flickered strangely. The number 496 seemed to mean something to him. A birthdate? He couldn't remember. He couldn't think.

Mycroft was pulling away from him, getting to his feet.

"Excuse me," he said. As he turned to leave the table, Greg reached out automatically for his hand.

Their fingers brushed; Mycroft stopped dead.

"Are you - ?" Greg said. He didn't even know what he was asking.

Mycroft looked down. "Just - the bathroom."

"Oh. Alright." Greg's heart was thudding strangely; his neck felt hot. His chest was cold. "Meet you outside? Few minutes?"

Mycroft's fingers moved as if to wrap around his own - then let him go.

"Yes," he said, his voice hollow. "Yes, I'll - see you outside."

Mycroft walked away across the sand.

Greg watched him, overwhelmed, trying not to call out his name.
Promise

Mycroft spent almost ten minutes in the bathroom, pressing a wet paper towel to his face in silence. The urge to vomit was overwhelming.

He could not have embarrassed himself any more soundly this evening if he'd tried.

Alone, away from Greg, enough clarity had now returned for him to hate himself. His hopes for a pleasant final evening had turned into mutism and misery. He'd barely been able to look at the poor man. The only thing that had kept him from breaking into tears was lying against Greg's shoulder, listening to his pulse, wishing his own would settle to match it.

Back at the villa, he would feign illness. He'd take himself alone to bed before the notion of making love one last time could enter his wretched head - because he wouldn't survive such an experience. It was over; the last time didn't matter. The first time hadn't mattered. None of it had mattered, and the pain would ease in time. It would have to.

This had been a mistake.

By morning it would be corrected.

Back in London, he would bury himself in his work, in his duty - and as though his life depended on it, he would make himself forget.

When he couldn't hide in the bathroom any longer, Mycroft dampened his face one last time to ease the redness about his eyes. He took a long breath, looked into the mirror, and told himself that a year from now, this incident would cause him no more than an embarrassed wince.

*And may it serve as a stiff reminder of what happens when I indulge my petty desires.*

He left the bathroom, head high, and made his way between the tables to the door.

Staff thanked him as he passed, wishing him a good night. Mycroft could barely look them in the eye. The night air beyond the doors held the promise of coolness, and as he stepped out into the evening, it filled him with a brief and beautiful calm.

*Corrected, soon.*

*London soon.*

His quiet home - his quiet bed - the memory of who he truly was, who the nation needed him to be. Sanity would return. *I will forget. I will walk away.*

The voice came from the darkness to his right.

"Hey..."

Even before Mycroft looked, he was lost.

Greg was coming up the shadowed path from the beach. His tie was open around his neck, and his hair was out of place - as if he'd been running his hands through it.

Mycroft watched him approach, dying quietly with every step.
Reaching him, Greg held out a hand. "C'mon," he said.

Mycroft didn't even ask.

As they followed the path down to the ocean, the soft cushion of sand beneath their feet became the quiet crunch of a million tiny shells. Mycroft couldn't breathe. He could barely make out their surroundings. The moon overhead shed precious little light, and his eyes hadn't yet adjusted to the darkness. He kept his hand tight in Greg's and walked, telling himself he didn't need to see.

Greg led him away along the beach, following the line of the shore far from the restaurant's lights.

At its furthest end, the land curved down to meet the ocean. It lapped black and lazy across the jagged rocks, silvery each one with the light of the moon. Their surfaces shone like mirrors where it found them; the waves washed them smooth, over and over.

Without a word Greg stepped out onto the rocks, looked back, and reached for Mycroft's hands.

Mycroft gave them, his chest drawing tight.

Greg helped him across the short distance to the smaller cove. The water lapped around their ankles; Mycroft could feel it soaking into his shoes and the hems of his trousers. He didn't care. The hidden stretch of shore they reached was tiny and rocky, and even in the dim light, he could see that the shells here were larger. Less reachable. Safe from beachcombers. Walking on them wasn't easy. Greg held onto his hands, helping his every step, guiding him with care to a patch of ground where they could stand together at the water's edge.

Before Mycroft could speak - before he could even think - Greg took his face in both hands.

"Hey." His expression seemed to ache, dark eyes and pale skin in the moonlight. It turned the tips of his hair almost white. "I - need to say something to you. Something important. I need to say it somewhere they can't find you."

"S-Somewhere - they - ?"

Greg reached out. With two fingers, he tapped between Mycroft's eyes.

"They," he said. "Them. In there. You brought me here so they couldn't watch you. So we could be alone. So... h-here we are. Alone."

Mycroft said nothing, panicking in pale silence.

Greg took a moment to steel himself. Mycroft watched him swallow.

"Why're you pulling back from me?" he asked. "What did I do?"

Mycroft's heart withered inside his chest. The distress was breathtaking.

"No," he whispered. "No, I... you - y-you haven't done a thing to me, Greg. Please don't think that."

"Then what's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong. I'm - tired."

"Of me?" Greg said. Mycroft felt heat erupt at once in his eyes. He forced it back, shaking.

"No," he said. His heart strained. "No, not of you. I - "
Will never be tired of you.

" - have simply - h-had too much heat, and - "

You are kind, and gentle, and you care for me. And in four nights I will lose you.

" - n-not enough sleep - "

Making love with you. Wanting you, showing you, resting in you. Letting you rest in me. Your hands, your eyes. Your arms around me after.

" - and I - I am - s-struggling to - to keep myself - "

No.

No. Stop.

For god's sake.

Stop.

Mycroft covered his face, inhaling hard.

"There is nothing wrong," he said into his palms, and he hadn't meant it to sound like a plea - but it did. "I have a headache. I need to sleep. Nothing more."

"That's why you can't look at me, is it?"

Oh, god. "N-No - no, I - "

"What've I done to upset you?"

"Nothing!" Mycroft burst out. "Nothing, for god's sake - nothing - you are - kind, Greg - far kinder than I deserve - and I - I simply - "

"So kind you still can't look at me?"

Mycroft tore his hands from his eyes. His voice broke. "Greg."

"Everything ends," Greg said, shocking him into silence. "Everything. No matter what it is. No matter how good it is. Alright?"

His eyes burned into Mycroft, black and beautiful and hurt.

"Life's - shit, Mycroft. It gets good for a while and then it's shit. That's what life does. It's what life always does. You think you'll be everything someone needs, then they decide you're not. You think you're gonna be a hero, then suddenly you're a pen-pusher who lives in a flat the size of a garage. Everything good goes bad. Everything."

Mycroft's mouth opened. He couldn't speak. He gazed at Greg, lost, and watched his beautiful face tighten with pain.

"You're gonna be lonely next week," Greg said. Mycroft's heart wrenched itself into his throat. "I'm gonna be lonely, too. Only I'll have a crap job and a freezing cold flat as well. It's going to be shit. But it's life, Mycroft. It's just like that. You're happy for a while, then it kicks you in the fucking face..."
He swallowed, turning his eyes out over the ocean.

"Everyone rolls the dice," he muttered. "Happiness. Some people get years. Decades. Good on them. Must be nice to be lucky. Doesn't matter... we get what we get."

He shrugged, pale and unhappy. His eyes moved back to Mycroft.

"And we get a week," he said. "Frankly? Fuck your job. Fuck whoever thinks they can dictate that. Doesn't matter, though. Doesn't change it, does it?"

Mycroft had misplaced every word he ever knew; they were gone from his head. He could only watch Greg in despair, his pulse quick and weak as he listened.

"I could stand on this beach for four more nights," Greg said, "telling you exactly how hard I think your job can fuck off... and you'll still be there at your desk on Monday. Lonely. Missing me. Doing as they say. You'll leave me, and go back to them. You'll never see me again. It's going to happen."

He stared into Mycroft's eyes.

"You and me get a week," he said, as his shoulders shook. "One week. It's a week more than I thought I'd ever get with you. And yeah, it'll hurt when you wake up on Saturday and I'm not there... it's gonna hurt me too. But d'you want to lie there, thinking you wish you'd opened up? Or do you want to lie there thinking you made the most of every minute? 'Cause those are your options, posh."

He swallowed, hard.

"We get what we get," he said, and searched Mycroft's face. "You've got to enjoy it while you've got it."

Mycroft wanted to weep.

He wanted to throw his arms around Greg and beg him. Take me away. Steal me. Keep me. Don't give me back. Teach me to be selfish.

And I will teach you how to be fortunate.

"You..." He fought to speak, fighting nausea now along with the force of his distress. "Y-You are unhappy with...?"

Greg's expression quietened. His jaw worked, and he looked down at his shoes.

"Suppose it turns out I am," he said. "It's - tiring. What I do. Never ends like it should..." He bit the inside of his cheek. "Told myself I'd never become my dad. Sixty hour weeks. Living to work. Now all I'm missing is a couple of kids, and I'd be him."

Mycroft's heart slugged.

"You have friends," he said. "Family. You're - f-free to - "

"Family to inconvenience," Greg muttered. "Friends who work. Friends who have families of their own." He looked away along the beach; the moonlight deepened every line around his eyes. "You reach a point in life that you start thinking... Christ, this is it... over the hill now and down to the bottom."

Mycroft felt his stomach grip tight.
"You're capable," he whispered. "You're - brave, Greg. You're self-aware, you're self-focused - you have every possibly prerequisite to do what you wish with your life."

And you are free.

Greg huffed. He glanced at Mycroft, for the first time guarded.

"Money," he muttered. "I've - got debts." He said the word as if it were branded into his skin. "Divorce. It's never over. Monthly rent to pay. What else am I going to do, mid-forties? Throw in a decent salary to retrain as a plumber? Probably find I hate that too..."

He shook his head, took a breath and said,

"It's life, Mycroft. It's fine. You don't get everything you want. You get a handful of good things, and you should enjoy them while you've got them. It's the only thing you can do."

Mycroft couldn't bear it. He watched Greg close his eyes, and wished with every fragment of his being that it could be different. I would bring you good things. All of them. Every good thing you ever wanted.

"This week I get to feel like I'm free," Greg said, inhaling. He met Mycroft's gaze. "You get to have someone look after you. We do what we can for each other, find some joy, then we remember it. Just - don't pull back from me, alright?"

His eyes were full of pain and moonlight.

"I don't want to play pretend alone," he said. "Let's pretend together. We only get one week. I - need to feel it. All of it. With you."

Mycroft's throat squeezed around the words. He couldn't bring himself to say them. You don't understand. If you did - if you knew the depth of what I... what I'm starting to... you wouldn't wish to encourage -

Greg watched him, reading it written there in his eyes. He took a few moments to speak.

"You worried you're getting cosy with me, darlin'?"

Mycroft's heart shrank to half its size. 'Cosy'. Wordless, pale, he looked away across the ocean and tried to cope with that tiny, perfect word. He could feel Greg watching him, watching him suffer. He could feel it all starting to break. He couldn't bear it.

Greg watched him for a moment more - then quietly stepped near.

His arms went around Mycroft's waist, slow and easy. He brought Mycroft close to hold him back, chins guided onto each other's shoulders, their eyes closing as one.

Mycroft breathed in the scent of Greg's shirt; he felt the dark ocean breathe all around them.

Greg's voice seemed to rumble it way beneath his skin.

"You know I'm fine with it... don't you?"

Mycroft shook; hot and cold raced down the back of his neck. Greg fit inside his arms perfectly, perfectly, and in this moment Mycroft felt more alive than he had in twenty years.

Oh, god. If I had one wish.
Greg began to stroke his back, slow sweeps as steady as the waves.

"Myc, we're... in paradise. Whole world's ours. We're alone. Spending a lot of time together. It's normal to feel cosy."

"I - I don't think you..." Oh god. Don't say it. Oh god, say it. "... u-understand the magnitude of - "

Greg's arms only tightened. "What if I do?" he murmured.

Christ help me. "T-Then you - you know that this is unwise."

Greg breathed it in for a second.

"S'fine by me," he shrugged. "I mean it. Whatever 'magnitude'." He pressed a small kiss to the side of Mycroft's neck; its smallness sent Mycroft's heart reeling into nothing. "Whatever I can give you... whatever I can be for you... tell me. I'll give you it. I'll be it. I - know you don't get this often."

Mycroft felt heat burn once more behind his eyes. He turned his face into Greg's neck. "N-Never. Never in my life."

Greg took a moment. Mycroft felt him swallow.

"Then take what you can from me," he whispered. "While you can. I'll give you it. If you want to book tables under 'Holmes-Lestrade' - if you want to go dancing - want to write our names in a heart in the sand - it's fine. I can give you that, sweetheart. This is our week."

He inhaled, winding his fingers through the back of Mycroft's hair.

"Our week to play pretend," he whispered. "Help me pretend I won't be there at my desk on Monday, signing my life away invoice-by-invoice. I'll help you pretend you'll never be lonely again. We'll have a week of happiness - as much of it as we want - as much as we can give each other - then next week when you're broken, and I'm broken, at least we got to feel it for a while. At least there was a time we were okay."

Mycroft shut his eyes tight, fighting not to shake. He closed his hands in the back of Greg's shirt.

"Don't pull back from me," Greg breathed in his ear. "Please, love. Not now."

But it will hurt.

It will hurt so much more to have you and lose you.

Better not to know. Never to know. To keep you in dreams - perfect - what could have been - better to walk away, now, better to separate than to torture myself.

Four nights of a fairytale. Allowing myself to pretend.

Hearts in the sand.

'Holmes-Lestrade'.

Greg was offering what Mycroft had sought from sex workers across London for years - kindness, quiet affection; some illusion of love. They'd never given it to him. They'd never come close. He left each hotel room a shadow of a man, sickened by his weakness, guilty and lonely and lost, trying to
comfort himself that he was at least an easy night's work.

Greg was offering to do it properly.

To let him have that, for a while.

_God help me. No._

_No, this - this isn't... to use him that way is unbearable._

_But he is offering. Offering an exchange. He wants to feel free. He wants me to open to him. He wants me to accept. He's offering this freely. He's not under coercion._

_Oh, god... what have I done?_

Tears blurring his gaze, Mycroft could only hold onto Greg's shoulders. He didn't know what to do. His decisions couldn't be trusted. Worse was to come, one way or another. What he wanted - what he _truly_ wanted - he could never have.

All that remained wasn't real - but it could ruin his life as if it were.

Through the chaos, there came the sound of Greg's voice.

"Come paddle with me." Greg kissed Mycroft's neck, willing his own heart to slow down. "Can't cope hearing you think."

He felt Mycroft stir with uncertainty in his arms. "I - I don't - "

"You do," Greg said, "while you're mine." He knelt down, reaching for Mycroft's foot. "C'mon... let's remind you that you're human."

He expected further protests, but none came. He rolled up one leg of Mycroft's trousers, tucked it at his knee and slipped off his shoe. As he reached for the other foot, Mycroft's hand appeared nervously at his shoulder for balance. The gentle grip was full of trust. Greg kissed the inside of his knee, easing Mycroft's ankle from the shoe.

"When was the last time you went in the ocean?" he asked.

There came no answer. He could feel Mycroft shaking in silence, now barefoot on the grainy sand. _That's okay, sweetheart. You listen and I'll talk._

"Heard somewhere you should never go a day without your feet touching the bare ground," he murmured. "You know those things you file away, and always mean to start doing?"

As he tucked Mycroft's other trouser leg into place, he nudged off his own sandals with his toes.

"Got a list as long as my arm now," he said, reached down and rolled up his trousers. "When 'someday' comes around, I'm going to be busy."

As he got to his feet, he found Mycroft watching him in mute and pale despair. Greg took his hands.
"C'mon," he said softly, undeterred. "I know you're scared. I know you're wishing you'd just taken me to some hotel on New Year's Eve. Too late now."

Distress wracked Mycroft's face. Exhausted tears welled up in his eyes. He pushed them away with the back of his hand, too tired to hide them, and stepped with Greg into the sea.

The water was warm. It lapped around their ankles as they stood together, swaying quietly in the moonlight. Greg reached up for Mycroft, took gentle hold of his face, and brushed his thumbs over Mycroft's cheeks. He found silent tears there.

Greg leant up to kiss them, closing his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. He wanted to cry, too. *You're beautiful. You just want someone to love you. Someone to care.* "I'm sorry life's not easy. I'd make it easy for you, if I could. I'd make it good."

Shaking, Mycroft's arms wrapped around his waist. He didn't speak. He just pressed his forehead to Greg's, and held him.

Their noses brushed.

Mycroft didn't seem to be breathing.

"If you ever tell your higher-ups to get bent... come looking for me, will you?" Greg stroked his fingers through Mycroft's hair, scrunching the sun-dried curls. "Just send a car, posh. I'll get right in."

Mycroft's expression creased.

"Don't," he whispered. "P-Please. Don't."

"I mean it."

"You don't." Mycroft's hands dug into his back. "Y-You don't understand. You can't possibly understand."

"Let me try."

"N-No." The word gasped itself from Mycroft's mouth. "I - I should stop this. *Now.*"

"Why?"

"Because it will hurt."

"What'll hurt? When we go?"

Mycroft wrenched into silence once more, breath dragging through his throat. He clung onto Greg as if afraid to fall.

Greg almost spoke - almost pressed - then realised he didn't need to.

He kept stroking Mycroft's back, waiting, breathing with him.

At last, Mycroft spoke. His voice could hardly be heard over the waves.

"I do not want to *pretend,*" he whispered. His fingers closed in Greg's shirt. "I - I *want - *"
He shuttered into silence.

Greg could feel his heart pulling itself apart inside his chest.

_Fuck._

_Fuck. I want, too._

He forced himself to swallow, and let the sound of the waves calm him enough to speak.

"Myc..." _Oh god, please. "Mycroft... is there - any way?"

Mycroft didn't move.

"F-For - ?" he whispered

Greg held him tight, unbreathing. "Back home. You and me."

Silence came again.

Mycroft's face turned without a sound into Greg's neck. After a few moments, Greg realised he was crying.

_No, then._

Greg stroked his fingers through Mycroft's hair, closed his eyes, and told himself no-one promised that life would be kind.

For the longest time, they didn't move. They didn't speak or talk; Greg barely even breathed. They simply held each other in the water, in the darkness, as Greg swore to himself he'd spend the next three days making Mycroft Holmes the happiest man on the planet. He'd give him a long and happy marriage worth of love, just in miniature. He'd never let go of his hand. He'd say it with every hug, every glance, every single thing he did: _you are beautiful. You are wonderful. You are easy to love._

_And if I could, I wouldn't stop._

_And you won't ever have to see it end. You can just see it start, and then remember me. Never over._

_Just gone._

With the thought, Greg's throat finally closed. He felt it grip and seal, and he knew there wouldn't be words for some time. Pain blurred his gaze; he held onto Mycroft until he could handle it again.

When he could, he kissed Mycroft's shoulder and knelt down.

One hand stayed tight in Mycroft's, while the other searched beneath the water. He knew what he was looking for. There were hundreds of them lying on the shore, untouched - but he wanted one from here. This spot, right here.

When he found one, he knew it by feel and his fingers closed around it. He straightened up, saltwater dripping from his hand, and showed Mycroft.

It was a clam shell - smooth and flat, both identical halves still loosely joined. It was striped with soft bands of muted purple.

Mycroft looked down at it in Greg's hands, silent.
As Greg tensed his grip, Mycroft gave a sharp intake of breath. "Don't - "

The join snapped. Parted into Greg's hands, the two shells gleamed brightly in the moonlight.

Mycroft exhaled, shaking.

Greg drew him close. He slipped one half into Mycroft's pocket, closing his eyes. As he did, he found that his voice had come back.

He spoke softly in his lover's ear.

"Keep it."

_Forever._

_Look at it when you're eighty._

_Look at it and miss me and cry._

"Promise?" he whispered.

Mycroft shuddered. His hand found Greg's with the other shell, and he wrapped his fingers around them both. He guided the shell into Greg's pocket, sliding it away.

"Promise." Mycroft's voice didn't sound like his. A moment later, Greg found out why. "I am falling in love with you."

Greg felt the words move through him, changing him.

He cupped Mycroft's face in both hands, stroking his lower lip with a thumb.

"I'm fine with that." He felt his heart squeeze. "I'm glad you told me. And I'll take care of you, however I can."

Mycroft held his gaze, unmoved.

"No-one on this earth can take care of me," he whispered. His voice broke. "'Life is shit', Greg."

_Christ._ "For three days, I can."

He watched something pass through Mycroft's mouth - something he eventually chose not to express, and let go. His eyes closed; he took a second.
"You're kind." He rested his cheek wearily against Greg's shoulder, sinking into his hold. "Limitlessly kind. I wish you were callous and exploitative."

Greg wrapped both arms around him. He pressed a kiss to Mycroft's temple, his heart still hammering at his ribs.

"M'sorry," he murmured. "All this... I know I can't make it go away. But I want to make it easy. I mean it."

"God help me." Mycroft mumbled against his shoulder. "I am truly sorry."

"What've you got to be sorry for?"

"This entire situation."

Greg almost smiled. "I could've said no, posh. I didn't have to come."

"I could have had some restraint. I didn't intend for this to happen, Greg. Truly. I - sh-should have anticipated my... utter inability to - "

"Hey... hey..." Greg kissed Mycroft's forehead again, gripping him gently. "Stop it. You can't control this stuff. Nobody can. Even you." He stroked his fingers over the back of Mycroft's neck. "Stop punishing yourself. Please."

Mycroft swallowed. "I'm - s-sorry if I've made this - "

"You haven't," said Greg. He promised it, murmuring in Mycroft's ear. "You haven't at all... see? Look how fine everything is..."

He began to sway with Mycroft gently again, letting the water stir around their ankles.

"Honestly, m'just glad you're talking to me again." He kissed Mycroft's shoulder. "Worried me for a while."

Mycroft inhaled, shaking. "Forgive me."

"Nothing to forgive." Greg smiled, letting it warm his voice. "Any day now, you'll start believing that I like you."

Mycroft made a small sound against his neck. He tightened his arms around Greg's waist.

After a moment, he said,

"What - does it mean? The symbol."

Greg bit the corner of his lip.

In silence, with a gentle fingertip, he traced it upright on the back of Mycroft's neck - the downwards pointing 'V'; the '3' that laid atop it.

Mycroft didn't speak for almost a minute.

"I've - made a mistake." His voice broke with the weight of it. "A fatal one."

Greg nuzzled quietly at his cheek.
"Which decision was the mistake?" he asked.

Mycroft released a long breath. "I fear we will soon find out."

Mycroft was quiet as they climbed back over the rocks. He was quiet up the beach, then quiet all the way home in the car.

Greg let him have his quiet. He kept an arm around him and held him close, stroking his shoulder with a gentle circle. Mycroft's hand came to rest upon his knee. Though alone in their own minds, it felt like they were together somehow - connected in this situation no-one else could possibly understand. Greg had never felt so protective of someone in his life. You're falling in love with me. You want me. You'll miss me. He couldn't stop repeating it to himself in his mind.

When they got in, Greg locked the door of the villa behind them.

"D'you - want a drink?" he asked, very aware of his own voice in the quiet. "Coffee or something?"

Mycroft laid his jacket over the back of a chair.

"No," he murmured. "No, I... might use the bathroom. Prepare for bed."

"Alright." Greg gave him a quiet smile. "Early night, is it?"

Mycroft hesitated, watching him for a moment. An unsettling thought seemed to go through his mind; it was gone almost as soon as it had appeared.

"I believe so," he said. "I - think it would be for the best."

Greg gave him a look of reassurance. "Every problem looks better in the morning," he said.

Mycroft's gaze quietened.

"Quite," he said, and looked away. He headed in the direction of the bathroom.

A moment later, Greg heard the door click shut.

Heart beating strangely, he took himself to the kitchen and opened the bottle of rum.

There was nothing on TV. Greg didn't need to turn it on to know. In silence he sat and looked at the empty screen, warming the small glass between his hands as he tried and failed not to sink into his thoughts.

He'd not drunk neat liquor in years.

The last time...

Shutting his eyes, Greg threw back the last of the glass. He ran the final drop off his lip with his tongue, rested his head back against the sofa, and breathed.

'I didn't mean for this to happen - I swear - '

'An accident, was it? Fucking fell on him?'
'You just work late so often! You're never even here! What am I supposed to do? Sit home and wait for you all my life?'

Greg wished he'd said it: 'Yes.'

He hadn't. He'd just let her scream, and he hated himself for it sometimes. 'Did you think I'd magically work fewer hours after the wedding?' He'd been unable to speak at that point, too broken up. There were a lot of things he'd still never said.

He and Angela had had time - as much of it as they could want. They'd promised each other all of it, a whole lifetime, and it had fallen apart. Just having the time hadn't made them happy. If anything, it meant they'd dragged on unhappy for too long - and Greg remembered it too well, feeling like 'forever' deserved a second and a third and a final, final chance.

In truth, they'd been doomed the first time she worked the ring off her finger.

But he'd made a promise to give her forever, and everyone told him marriage was about accepting each other's mistakes. All of Angela's family had talked about her as a victim. 'All those late shifts though, Greg. It can't have been easy for her. Loneliness is very hard to deal with.'

He still wondered if they'd have said the same, if he'd been the one with the affairs.

Greg rolled the empty glass across his heart.

Funny. The way these things turn out.

He didn't really want to think any more. Thinking wouldn't change things. He just wanted to be here - here and happy, letting his heart make all the decisions. That was the good thing about the heart. It didn't fret and worry and predict like the head did, rolling through a hundred thousand miseries he'd never actually encounter. The heart was far more trustworthy; it acted on what was actually real.

Right now, when Greg thought about Mycroft, it started to thump like he'd never been hurt. That seemed like enough. It wasn't 'forever' - but that meant it could be what it really was.

The bathroom door opened with a squeak.

Greg looked up at once.

As Mycroft emerged from the bathroom, his ice blue shirt was open around his shoulders. Beneath it, he had only bare skin. He moved towards the lounge, back to Greg, and turned the lights out as he went.

Greg watched him, lost. His pulse beat oddly slow behind his ribs.

At last, as the room blinked gently into darkness all around them, Mycroft came over to the sofa.

He took the glass from Greg's hand, put it aside, and climbed with quiet care into his lap.

Greg didn't dare to think. Mycroft's hands stroked along his jaw, shaking gently. They cupped his face and tilted his head back, and his heart began to pound.

"What - " Greg said - cut off as Mycroft kissed him.

He couldn't bring himself to pull away. He let Mycroft take what was wanted from his mouth, kissing back, heat rushing through his chest as their lips gently moved together. Mycroft's fingertips trembled at his jaw. The kiss deepened with a nervous breath. Their tongues touched, lips sealing,
gentle as rain on flower petals. Greg found himself keenly aware of Mycroft's bare skin, so much of it, how desperately he wanted to touch - equally desperate not to scare Mycroft. He wasn't sure what this was. He didn't know what was wanted. He placed his hands on Mycroft's thighs, a light and quiet touch, ready to remove them at a moment's notice.

After some time, the need for air parted their lips.

Into the soft space, Greg managed,

"Are you - alright?"

Mycroft's fingers slid through his hair.

"Take me to bed," he whispered. "Please."

Greg's stomach tightened. "For - "

"I - need to be with you." Mycroft's eyes were still closed; his fingers curled in Greg's hair. "Please. I need to make love."

"You're - s-sore, darlin'. You need sleep."

"I do not care."

Jesus.

"I don't want to hurt you." As Mycroft leant down, brushing his mouth over Greg's neck, Greg's pulse hitched with a breath. "G-Gorgeous - if you're - "

"Greg... please." Mycroft's voice weakened with despair. "Don't make me beg you. Not for this. Please - just - help me."

Greg closed his eyes to the darkness.

He slipped his hands beneath Mycroft's shirt, feeling the skin of his back - warm, fragile and familiar. Something deep within his bones began to glow.

"You're going to stop me if I hurt you," he said. "Alright? You're going to stop me the second it's too much."

Mycroft inhaled.

"I shall," he whispered, shivering. "I promise."

Heart thumping, Greg brushed his hands down to Mycroft's hips.

"How about we go to the bath?" he murmured. He stroked his thumbs around Mycroft's hipbones, gently - slow, tiny circles. "I can look after you there in the water... take care of you. Take it easy."

Mycroft's breath caught.

"Yes," he whispered. "Yes - please."

Sandalwood oil, pillar candles and quiet. As soon as they settled in the water, Mycroft reached for
his mouth. He ran his hands over Greg's skin like he'd never get another chance, raked his fingers through Greg's hair until it was on end, and pressed their bodies as close as he could. The water's warmth wrapped them together; the feeling of safety and slick bare skin was beyond words.

Mycroft finally settled astride his lap.

As their bodies eased into one, he drew his arms around Greg's shoulders and held on tight.

"You okay?" Greg whispered against the damp skin of his neck. Mycroft contracted around him, tight; he shut his eyes.

Mycroft trembled. Without a sound, he began to rock.

Oh... oh, fuck...

Pleasure, slow and soothing, lulled through Greg's veins with every gentle press. He hauled his brain back to words.

"S-Sweetheart?"

Mycroft swallowed, his throat tightening under Greg's lips. He was moving slowly, silently, as if he wanted to remember every second of it. His cock rubbed between their wet stomachs, over and over, though he made no push for friction. His hands were shaking.

Greg's muscles contracted with a shock of enjoyment. "M-Myc - gorgeous - tell me you're alright..."

Mycroft's fingers curled around his shoulder. He kissed Greg's temple, huffed, and began to rock a little deeper. Greg stiffened and groaned.

"Myc - "

Mycroft dragged in a breath. He reached for Greg's mouth and kissed him, hard, crushing their mouths into one with almost bruising desperation. Within the fierceness of the kiss, their slow and gentle sex continued.

They kissed until Greg couldn't breathe, until the slow motions of Mycroft's hips were hauling him close to the brink. He gasped as Mycroft let him go, his cock aching and his nerves alight.

Mycroft kept their foreheads pressed together; he carded his fingers through Greg's hair. Gazing at each other, panting, they watched pleasure and fear wrack each other's faces as they moved, deep brown eyes locked into pewter grey. Greg tightened his grip of Mycroft's hips, shaking, pushing up into him slowly in rhythm. The water swirled around them, currents of warmth like ribbons as the candlelight stroked over Mycroft's wet skin. He gripped Greg's shoulders and ground downwards, now vocalising softly in the quiet. Wordless emotion filled his gaze. Greg saw every unspoken plea; he saw them all. More. Deeper. Please. He didn't take his eyes from Mycroft's. He held onto them until the last, letting Mycroft see him - letting Mycroft know he was here, closer than words, closer than skin.

Mycroft gazed back at him, overwhelmed.

When he came, he came whimpering, "Don't stop... don't stop..."
The sheets were cool and clean; they felt good on damp skin. Mycroft nestled at once into Greg's arms. He pulled the sheets up, tucked them around Mycroft's shoulders, and gently placed a kiss on the bridge of his nose.

"You alright?" he rumbled.

Mycroft nodded without a sound, cuddling close to his chest. Greg curled a hand around the back of his head.

"Sore?" he murmured.

Mycroft hesitated, then shook his head. His arm stole around Greg's waist beneath the sheets. "I-I'm fine..."

Greg let his eyes close. "Promise me," he whispered.

Mycroft nuzzled into his neck. "P-Promise."

Greg stroked across the curve of his back, feeling the darkness curl itself around them. A good night's sleep, he thought. Things'll be easier in the morning.

"I - I-like you very much, Greg..." Mycroft's voice came quiet against his neck. "Thank you for - w- what you've done for me. It means a great deal."

Greg smiled a little, tracing a heart at the base of his spine.

"I'd do more if I could," he said. "A lot more. Hope you know that."

Mycroft seemed to take a moment to cope. "T-Really?"

"Mmhm." Greg breathed in, letting the words come. "Think we're good together. If I could, I'd make you happy. Not just happy for now." He stroked the tip of his nose through Mycroft's hair. "Happy to the bone. Happy to the soul."

"Greg..." Mycroft barely whispered it. "G-Greg - I..."

"S'okay, sweet. I know it's not that easy." Quietly Greg kissed his forehead. "Let's sleep, huh? Been a rocky night. We'll take it easy tomorrow... look after each other."

Mycroft seemed to hesitate.

He stirred in Greg's arms, lifted his head from his shoulder, and looked into his eyes. Greg felt his heart tug in response.

Mycroft touched his cheek, quiet fingertips that were perfectly gentle.

"Goodnight, darling." Mycroft leant close. "S-Sleep well."

Their lips pressed.

By the time they parted, Greg was sinking to sleep.

He drifted off to the feeling of Mycroft's fingertips running very slowly through his hair.
Greg woke the next morning to sunlight. His muscles felt heavy, weighing him down to the bed, and the quiet seemed to echo a little. He drifted in it for some time before his brain started moving at any speed.

Memories of last night returned, blurry and indistinct.

*Christ.*

Greg reached out across the bed, wanting to cuddle - wanting to start out properly this morning - but his hand stretched through empty sheets.

Frowning, he opened his eyes.

The bed beside him was unoccupied. Some effort had been made to neaten it around him as he slept. Sunshine fell across the snowy covers, and the decorative beaded pillow had been put back in place. There was no sign of Mycroft's phone charging beside his own on the nightstand.

Greg glanced over his shoulder, and found the bathroom empty - the door wide open.

He didn't know what time it was. From the strength of the sun, it looked like mid-morning.

"Mycroft?" he called.

There was no reply.

Greg shifted, pushed the sheets back, and sat up.

It was incredibly quiet.

"Myc?" he tried again.

Receiving no response, Greg reached into his bedside drawer for boxer shorts. He pulled them on quickly, then retrieved last night's crumpled shirt from the floor. He shrugged it around his shoulders as he got out of bed. He wondered if Mycroft was in the lounge maybe, working. He might even be out on the terrace by now.

The lounge was empty. Trying the handle, Greg found the front door of the villa was locked. At its stiff clunk, his heart tightened strangely.

Something was wrong.

"My?" he called, concern rising, and turned around.

Mycroft was standing in the kitchen doorway.

He was carrying a tray, set with breakfast for two. His hair was loose and a mess, his bare skin
wrapped up in just a white bathrobe.

His eyes were soft and bright.

Greg's entire soul seemed to exhale.

He wasn't sure what he'd thought.

"Hey," he said, as Mycroft's mouth turned up slightly into a smile.

"'My'...?" His gaze glittered. "I'm losing letters by the day."

Greg's heart strained. He didn't know why the sight of Mycroft seemed so miraculous this morning - why he was suddenly so fucking beautiful.

"D'you - want a hand?" he asked, glancing at the tray.

"You could bring the cafetiere, if you wished... it's still on the side." Mycroft glanced over his shoulder. "I'd planned to bring you breakfast in bed, but it seems you're ahead of me today..."

Greg gathered up a small smile for him. "Did you sleep alright?" he asked.

Mycroft placed the breakfast tray down on the table. The ocean beyond the glass wall was a perfect shining blue, so bright in the morning sun it was unreal.

"Mm. Rather deeply, in fact." Mycroft gave him a careful glance. "I - feel better for it."

_God._

_Thank Christ._

"You seem better," Greg said. He watched cautiously as Mycroft came across the room to him. "I'm - glad you're alright..."

Mycroft lifted his hands, laying them gently on Greg's chest. He looked down through his eyelashes for a moment.

"I am alright." He took a moment, lifting his gaze to survey Greg with care and quiet nerves. "I was - emotional last night, Greg. Thank you for your endless patience with me."

Greg's mouth quirked.

"S'alright," he murmured. "So long as you're happy... s'all I want." He slipped his arms around Mycroft's waist, a light hold that Mycroft could break if he wanted. "How're you - feeling about...?"

Mycroft took a second to acquire him an honest answer.

"'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may'," he said.

Greg felt the corner of his mouth lift. "'YOLO'."

Mycroft's eyes danced.

"If you must." He leant into Greg's arms, and settled comfortably against his shoulder. Greg felt his heart squeeze gently. "Robert Herrick phrased it with rather more eloquence, but..."

"Same idea." Greg smiled, gathering him closer. The slow hug felt healing; it felt like they both
needed it. "Hey. I meant it... what I said last night. All of it."

Mycroft shivered.

"As did I." He hesitated, and Greg almost felt the little wave of pain that passed through his shoulders. "I'm - sorry that it puts you in an awkward position..."

"Myc... s'fine. Doesn't feel awkward to me." Greg pressed a small kiss to the side of Mycroft's jaw, closing his eyes. "Whatever you want today - however you want to spend it - however cosy you wanna get - I'm fine with that. 'Gather ye rosebuds'... might as well gather you the best ones, hadn't we?"

Mycroft tightened his arms around Greg's waist, saying nothing.

Greg rested his cheek against Mycroft's shoulder. He could feel the jagged edge of his heart starting to soften, relief and warmth easing through his chest as they hugged. All fine... all sorted. No worries.

"When're you planning to work today?" Greg murmured. "Have you - got lots to do?"

Mycroft took a second to answer, stroking between Greg's shoulder blades with dazed fingertips.

"I - thought I might prioritise other matters today. The country is standing. Any emergencies will prompt a phone-call. I hoped to occupy myself with extracurricular activities."

Greg bit his lip, smiling against Mycroft's shoulder. "Do I count as 'extracurricular'?"

Mycroft stirred in his arms. "Mm."

"D'you want to go out? See somewhere new, maybe?"

Mycroft trembled a little. "Yes," he said. He paused, then added, "Very much."

"We can ask Google over breakfast. 'Things to do in St Barts'."

"That seems sensible."

"Mmhm. We'll find something to do together. Blow off some steam, gather some rosebuds... and if work call, you can pass the phone straight to me. I'll tell them you're busy with a third-party consultant right now. They can wait their turn."

Mycroft smiled, reluctant humour lightening his eyes. He glanced at Greg's lips, as the colour lifted in his cheeks.

"A wonderful memory to have," he remarked.

Greg smiled. "S'what I'm here for, love. Wonderful memories. C'mon... let's have breakfast."

Though no-one could possibly tell, Anthea had had no sleep.

It meant that her composure and professional appearance today were thanks to caffeine, dry
shampoo, and the ability to apply eyeliner in a moving car, all aided by sheer force of will. It was half past two in the afternoon, and the city of London was running like clockwork.

As she made her sixth coffee of the day, she kept one eye on the laptop cradled in the crook of her arm.

Four thousand miles away, in Saint Barthélemy, it was half past ten. The two of them were having breakfast. They'd pulled their chairs together so they could touch as they ate, and he was feeding Mr Holmes - slices of fruit, little pieces of pastry, kissing his forehead as they talked.

A more miraculous scene could hardly be envisioned.

Anthea's instincts towards Mr Holmes had been honed over a number of years now - and she'd flattered herself that they'd been keen at the outset. A high-level official could only function with a high-level assistant. A hawk-like attention to detail, preemptive decision-making and an ability to predict the unpredictable were vital political tools. Anthea considered herself a skilled user of all three.

But it seemed, in this instance, that her powers of prediction had not quite been at their apex.

She'd been certain Mr Holmes was going to bolt. It was why she'd barely taken her eyes from the laptop all night. She'd expected him to slip away once Lestrade was asleep - at which point, he would need her. She'd have to clear his passage back to England. She'd had everything ready to charter flights, send drivers and alert security professionals to escort him, and she'd started rehearsing her furious lecture for the moment the wretched man stepped foot on English soil.

In the end, he'd slept soundly by Greg's side. Having failed upon her first prediction, Anthea now found herself convinced of its exact opposite.

If Mr Holmes hadn't found the strength to leave Lestrade last night, he never would.

She'd known for days that a crisis would come. As soon as the blessed idiot told Lestrade his real name, Mr Holmes was doomed. He'd quite possibly been doomed long before then. Indeed, Anthea now believed a solid case could be made that the moment he'd cooked up this ludicrous plan, Mycroft Holmes had been sealed his own fate in perpetuity. The fact he'd felt the need to conceal certain details from her should have alerted him to the presence of jaw-dropping idiocy. Alas, it had not.

Repressing a sigh, adding a single level spoonful of sugar to her coffee, Anthea reflected - not for the first time - that her master was an infuriating man.

For all his masterful grasp of the motivations of others, Mycroft Holmes had a single astonishing blindspot.

It was himself.

He didn't understand the mechanisms of his own heart whatsoever. If he did, he would understand that he considered few people and few things in this world to be his own - and that when they were his, he would not relinquish them lightly.

And if he'd taken five minutes to canvas his assistant's opinion, she'd have warned him sternly that Gregory Lestrade carried a streak of the same.

Lestrade had on record a marriage in which he'd forgiven affairs, plural, then instigated several rounds of expensive counselling before finally admitting its demise. His unnecessary compassion for
Mr Holmes's drug-addled brother also suggested a tendency towards... not quite heroics, Anthea supposed, stirring her coffee - but certainly a compulsion to care for those in need. His choice of career testified similarly. Lestrade's exemplary service could have taken him far higher through the ranks of the police force by now, but something in his soul kept him in the trenches. He wasn't capable of sitting in a comfortable office, issuing decisions that he wouldn't see borne out. Simply put, he was a man of action.

And his comfortable, easy confidence had now turned Mr Holmes's citadel walls into glass - and Anthea was reaching the brink of a breakdown.

*Who could possibly have foreseen?* she thought, biting the inside of her cheek, as she returned to Mr Holmes's desk and laid the laptop down with care. She watched Lestrade pouring her employer a fresh coffee, while taking a first sip of her own.

If she had a scrap of proper loyalty towards the security services, she'd have reported this showpiece of stupidity at once. The potential for corruption and disaster were staggering. Mr Holmes was not a minor asset to the British nation. He would be exceedingly difficult for the country to replace, and Lestrade was exceedingly difficult for him to resist.

But Anthea, too, had been soft-hearted.

She wanted him to have this. She'd witnessed years of the man's desperate attempts to find comfort and kindness in arms that were hired by the hour. He wasn't built for it. He couldn't cope with it. His longing for sex was a mistaken longing for intimacy, and he wouldn't ever find that in a hotel room with a stranger.

He'd find it somewhere private, somewhere safe, with somebody kind.

She'd listened to the two of them having dinner together the first evening - Lestrade's playful liberties, his teasing, his tenderness - and drawn up the initial paperwork by the following afternoon. Last night, she'd feared a wholly miserable end to it all.

And thank God - it hadn't happened. Mr Holmes had stayed.

There was still a chance.

Lestrade now had three nights left on the clock to assure Mr Holmes of his loyalty and longevity, and prompt the truth. If he could do that, they might all just survive this flaming fiasco.

The moment that her surveillance feed heard Mr Holmes admit to him there was a chance, she would have the initial documents sent to St Barts. The process could begin before they even left the island. She'd already performed her own thorough background checks into Lestrade, and there was nothing of concern whatsoever.

Human Resources would hammer him hard, of course.

Viciously, Anthea imagined. The cost of protecting an intimate partner of Mycroft Holmes would be frankly astronomical - almost as high as guarding Mr Holmes himself.

But frankly, they could damn well pay it.

The country needed the man. He now needed Lestrade. It was a necessary expense, and they would have to find the money from somewhere.

However desperately Human Resources tried to stop the registration, they would find no reason to
reject it. Anthea had been thorough in her checks. Lestrade’s background was clean. He belonged to Mr Holmes, and the sooner they discussed the process, the more time they would have to prepare for it.

As she watched the video feed, and the two of them settled quietly into kissing, Anthea’s heart drummed inside her chest.

*Tell him, you poor idiot.*

*The man will adore you senselessly forever. You can have a fortnight in the Seychelles every year. You will be happy. It will be divine.*

She’d thought of sending some message to Lestrade.

A casual error, she’d thought - an accidental forwarding of the registration document - some harmless slip of the finger. But it would alert Mr Holmes to her covert surveillance, and nothing would so utterly destroy the man’s sense of safety. He had to reach his own trust in Lestrade. Anthea’s employer was set deep into his ways. If he changed, it had to be by his own directive - nobody would coax him there. If he discovered she was watching, and hoping and interfering, he would slam shut. The man was a bloody oyster.

All she could do now was have faith in Lestrade.

Listlessly sipping her coffee, Anthea promised herself something special from Brahmin if she survived all this nonsense. Tending the British nation in Mr Holmes’s absence had been nothing, compared to worrying about the damnable man. It was a miracle she’d only lost one night of sleep.

On her laptop, the sounds of kissing had rather deepened. Hands were now seeking fondly beneath clothing, accompanied by little whispers that her microphones couldn’t quite catch. Some breathed suggestion from Lestrade made Mr Holmes stifle a moan; he gasped his restless assent.

Anthea watched, raising an eyebrow, as Lestrade gathered Mr Holmes up into his arms - and carried him back towards the bedroom.

*Heaven help us... let the man breathe, Lestrade...* 

Sleekly she lowered the volume on her laptop. She was now quite familiar enough with the sound of Mr Holmes mid-coitus, and certain they could look after themselves for a while.

She brought up her e-mails instead, finished her coffee, and finally got around to some work.

By the time the two of them reappeared on the lounge cameras, showered and dressed, it was nearly four o’clock - noon in St Barts. Anthea raised the volume on the laptop once more.

" - by boat or a hike, but it means it should be quiet there... bit more secluded for us. Apparently you can see iguanas and all sorts."

They headed into the kitchen, holding hands for even this short journey. Anthea watched as they appeared on the other cameras; she tried not to smile as Lestrade retrieved their picnic bag. He opened the fridge.

Mr Holmes was leaning in the doorway, watching. "Not certain I’ve ever taken much of an interest in iguanas before."

"First time for everything," Lestrade said. "There’s wild tortoises, too. It’s off-the-beaten-track..."
"nature reserve..." He was now filling the picnic bag with more food than they could possibly need. "Beach looks gorgeous, too. We can have a lazy afternoon there."

"Have you - had any thoughts regarding our evening meal?"

"Why, gorgeous? Something you fancy?"

The camera wasn't quite sensitive enough to catch Mr Holmes's blush - but Anthea knew it was there.

"There's a restaurant called Orega... I understand it's fusion cuisine. French and Japanese. I know you're not familiar with Japanese food, but it - might be pleasant." The little note of humour broke her heart. "I can serve as your introduction, perhaps."

Lestrade grinned. "Sounds brilliant. Sign me up. D'we need to reserve?"

"It might be best. Shall I...? My phone is in the lounge, I believe."

"Sure. I'll finish up the picnic."

They stopped to kiss.

Kissing goodbye, Anthea thought. Even for this briefest of partings.

Oh, Mr Holmes... how did you ever imagine any other outcome to this madness?

She wouldn't be able to monitor them somewhere more remote. CCTV at Orega might be accessible; otherwise, she would have to lose track of them until tonight.

By the time they returned to the villa, Mr Holmes might already have confided in Greg.

And what a blessed relief it will be.

Anthea glanced at the rest of her day's schedule.

Nothing immutable, she thought. Sleep deprivation was now dogging at her heels. While she hadn't yet begun to slow, she could feel depletion of her faculties looming. Mr Holmes would be safe with Greg for now, and she would be wise to take the opportunity to rest.

As she reached for the lid of her laptop, a curious flicker crossed the surveillance feed.

She blinked, glancing down. The two of them were still there, kissing slowly against the fridge. Mr Holmes's hands were buried in his lover's hair. Nothing appeared to have happened.

She wondered if it had been the shadow of her arm, crossing the screen.

Then there came a second flicker - and the video was severed.

Anthea froze.

The empty feed stared back at her, stamped with a cold white NO SIGNAL.

Quickly she opened the settings of the surveillance programme, flying through them to ascertain the cause of the problem. The cameras were not registering any contact at all; it was as if they'd suddenly dropped out of existence. Concerned, Anthea attempted to boot up the security camera on the outside of the villa - it was owned and maintained by the hotel who serviced the property, separate to her
own systems.

It loaded with barely a blink, showing her the empty drive and the closed front door.

A small bird swooped low between two royal palms.

The feed was live.

Biting her lip, Anthea wondered if she could fabricate some emergency. A brief call to Mr Holmes would put her mind at ease. This was not usual. Her cameras were meant to be secure - and if some external agency had been able to disable them, it meant they were able to access them too.

Before she could reach for her phone, the door of the office opened.

At the sight of the woman who appeared, Anthea's heart shrank to half its size.

She entered Mycroft's office as if the space were now forfeit, with her assistant and two members of Thames House security in her wake. The white-blonde shine of her hair was like the glint of light from a drawn blade. She was as elegant and unsettling as a mythical creature, and her sudden appearance no less startling - five-foot-ten, jet black business attire, the cheekbones of a queen and not a speck of jewellery to detract from them.

As her eyes located Anthea at the desk, they flashed. A tight smile formed upon her face.

"Mycroft Holmes's assistant?" she enquired.

As Anthea got to her feet, she reached out and closed the laptop. Her hand remained perfectly steady.

The snap of the lid was the quiet snap of her heart.

"I am," she replied.

Ilka Fielding regarded her with the keenest of interest. "And where is Mycroft Holmes in this moment?"

Anthea held her gaze.

"Mr Holmes's annual leave," she said, "was authorised by Human Resources in the week of - "

"I am Human Resources, girl. I did not ask you if I'd authorised his leave. I asked you where he is." Ilka inclined her head briefly to her assistant. "Note down the evasion of the question. I imagine we'll be referring to it later."

The nervous young man began to type on his tablet at speed.

Anthea watched him, her heart thudding in her ears. If she lied, it might be assumed that Mr Holmes had instructed her to do so. It would be used against him.

With a slow breath, she said,

"Mr Holmes is in Saint Barthélemy, as stated in his annual leave application."

"And with whom has he travelled there?" Ilka asked.

Anthea said nothing, holding her stare.
Ilka's slow smile was enough to perish the blood.

"Given that you've now spent four days surveying them remotely," she murmured, "I should think you know very well, young lady... I suggest you answer the question."

*God help me.*

"Mr Holmes told me nothing of his personal plans," Anthea replied. "Only the details of his flights and accommodation. All else he handled privately."

Ilka made a small, unmoved noise. "And you took it upon yourself to keep a watchful eye on him, did you?"

"His security is part of my -"

"And an excellent job you've done," Ilka interrupted. "Your dedication to his safety is commendable... though I do question your commitment to his welfare, Anthea. Otherwise, I'd have expected to hear from you the very moment you realised this unauthorised connection is growing wildly out of hand."

Her pale blue eyes gleamed.

"Instead you've let it become untenable," she said. "Unfortunate for Mr Holmes. Fortunate, though, that I was also observing." She raised one white blonde eyebrow. "Your security feed was very useful. Thank you. So much easier than arranging surveillance ourselves."

*God.*

*God almighty. No.*

Ilka tilted her head. "Is this person someone with whom Mycroft was previously acquainted?"

Anthea said nothing, frozen into silence.

Ilka held out a hand.

"The laptop," she said, briskly. "Give it to me. Let's see if it's feeling more conversational than you are."

Years of e-mails.

Mr Holmes's brother; Lestrade's conversational reports. Not a hint of impropriety.

Until now.

It would all come out.

Hiding it wasn't an option.

"Mr Holmes is operating in compliance with accepted procedure," Anthea said, her voice steady, keeping her hand upon the laptop. "Without evidence that he's violated any internal code of conduct, I'm not authorised to hand over our work files -"

"No," Ilka interrupted, as if Anthea were being hopelessly dim, "but as a senior official, and the Head of Human Resources, I am authorised to confiscate them if I fear that an employee is in danger of jeopardising his own safety and security. Mycroft hasn't violated any internal code of conduct -"
yet. If I have reasonable concerns that he might do so, it's my duty to support him in ensuring that eventuality doesn't happen."

Anthea's mind raced.

"Mr Holmes is only halfway through his annual leave," she said. "It would be presumptive to posit 'reasonable concern' over any of his actions. The situation is changing daily. A proper appraisal can only be made once he has returned to London."

Ilka ran her tongue across her teeth.

"Then his immediate return to London shall be arranged," she crooned, "in order for me to appraise this situation in the proper detail."

Anthea's heart dropped into her stomach.

"In the meantime," Ilka continued, "I will now be taking your laptop, and any other electronic devices, to ensure that you are clear of responsibility in any potential wrongdoing."

Anthea felt the hair rise on the back of her neck.

"There has been no wrongdoing," she said, her voice hard.

Ilka hummed.

"And yet you're being so very obstructive," she said - and glanced at her assistant, ensuring he wrote it down.

Anthea drew a deep breath.

Mr Holmes would tell her to hand the bloody thing over. She knew it. She could almost hear his voice in her head. 'Give her the blasted thing, Anthea. This situation is beyond your control.'

It didn't make it any easier to step away from the desk.

As she did, her hands tightening shut, the security officers stepped forwards. One took the laptop; the other palmed her phone. Anthea watched in concealed despair, her throat thickening. *I'm sorry, Mr Holmes. I'm so sorry.*

As the laptop and the phone were placed into her elegant hands, Ilka Fielding smiled.

"Excellent," she sighed, running her fingers across the seal of the laptop. "Finally we can attend to Mr Holmes's proper welfare." Her eyes flickered into Anthea's, gleaming. "As his assistant, I'm sure you'll be just as invested in a sympathetic outcome to this unfortunate misadventure as I am."

Anthea said nothing, trying to project her thoughts in silence across a distance of four thousand miles.

Ilka's brow curved with a frown.

"Perhaps you and I should have a conversation of our own," she murmured, her voice low. Cold cascaded down the back of Anthea's neck. "I'd like as much clarity on this situation as possible... and your disobliging attitude, young lady, suggests there's more cause for concern than I knew..."

Her eyes slid to the security officers.
"Please escort Anthea to my office," she soothed - then said to her assistant, "Clear my schedule for the rest of the afternoon. This will take some time. What time did the flight leave?"

Her assistant answered at once. "Seven AM, Miss Fielding."

"Then we should be expecting news within the next few hours... wonderful. When we're upstairs, do remind me to amend Mycroft's annual record - won't you Harry?"

She flashed Anthea a quiet smile.

"He'll be owed back some holiday days."
Trouble

It was all a part of the same: the hush of the waves upon the shore, the gentle fingers playing through his hair, the rhythm of Greg's heart. Nothing had ever felt quite so peaceful as this.

They were lying in the sand of L'Anse de Colombier, miles from even a road. Greg's chest was warm and comfortable beneath Mycroft's cheek. His heart drummed as steady and slow as the ocean, perfectly at peace. Another couple were snorkelling out by the rocks; a small herd of wild goats were grazing on the vegetation further along the shore.

Otherwise, the two of them were alone. The sun was warm on their legs and feet, and the backpack beside their towel had everything they'd need. Greg had brought a book, but hadn't touched it. Mycroft hadn't checked his e-mails all day.

As he considered the question that had been posed, Greg hummed low in his throat. The noise rumbled against Mycroft's nose and cheek.

"Unlimited funds?" he checked. "But I have to live there forever?"

Mycroft reread the question on Greg's phone, eyes crinkling even in the shade. "Mm."

Greg breathed in.

"Right... big city, then. Somewhere there's a lot going on. Somewhere I can meet people and feel like I'm useful." He shifted on the towel, drawing Mycroft closer with one arm. The faint breeze stirred the edges of the sun umbrella above them, fluttering along its soft blue fringe. "Not bothered about a garden, so long as there's a nice park nearby... first thought was somewhere big, but actually, that'd be depressing. Big empty place to rattle around in at night. I'd only really want a big kitchen."

Stretching his head up from the sand, he kissed the top of Mycroft's forehead.

"So I can cook for you," he explained. "Posh dinners take up a lot of pans. We'll need the room."

Mycroft's heart strained. You want me to think your ideal home would contain me. You want me to have that. He lifted his head and nuzzled at Greg's chin, closing his eyes. "You are - sweet."

"What about you?" Greg asked. "Ideal home. Unlimited funds, but you have to stay there forever."

Mycroft considered the question for a while, resting his hand over Greg's heart.

"Perhaps a... more modern apartment." Taking up residence in his ancestral family seat had seemed an excellent idea, before he'd realised that a family seat was meant to contain a family. Now it contained little other than silence and ghosts. "Something - stylish. A rain shower and a gym. Somewhere like Milan... New York, perhaps. Washington."

Greg made a noise of interest. "Away from London?"

"Mm." Pausing, Mycroft supposed he'd been invited to play pretend. "Two home offices," he said, glancing up. "Off the kitchen. Meet for coffee every few hours."

Greg's smile was a marvellous sight. "His and his?" he checked, with a raised eyebrow.

"Mm." Mycroft splayed his bare toes in the sand. "I can conduct business while you pen the latest
The smile became a grin. "Or give people massages."

"Massages are for me, Gregory. Murder and mayhem for the masses."

"Ahh, I see..."

Mycroft nestled back against Greg's shoulder, returning his attention to the phone. He scrolled along to the next question. "What small things do you believe make the day better?"

Greg hesitated. "Not - really a good answer. Not fair on you."

Mycroft made the natural deduction. "Company?"

"Mhm." Greg's arm tightened around him, carefully. Not wishing to hurt me. Having someone to wake up with. That - drive you get to do new things. Step out of your routines a bit. Make new ones..." He paused again, thinking. "Call me a pervert, but it's... nice, long term. Sex. Someone who knows you."

Mycroft's heart stirred. "I imagine so."

He felt Greg's fingers gather in the back of his linen shirt. "M'sorry..."

Mycroft lifted his head, gently. He reached up to kiss Greg's lips.

"I didn't mean it in that manner," he murmured. He gazed down into Greg's round brown eyes, touching his cheek - willing him with love not to feel guilty. "I imagine it is pleasant. I can see why it would make life more enjoyable."

Greg looked back at him, still a little pained. He kissed Mycroft's mouth.

"What - small things for you?" he asked.

Mycroft thought about it, just enjoying the sight of his face.

"Peace and quiet," he said, at length. Knowing Sherlock is well. Imported coffee. Books. He ran his fingertips along Greg's jaw, feeling the stroke of stubble there. They felt like small pathetic things, now he spoke them. He supposed that soon they would feel like everything. "Creature comforts."

Greg held his gaze, his eyes gentle.

"Wish you had more than that, darlin'. I really do." Mycroft smiled. It was a kind sentiment. "Thank you."

"D'you... want to quit with the questions?"

"Not at all." Mycroft retrieved the phone, placed it on Greg's breastbone where the screen was more visible, and scrolled through for something interesting. Greg peered down with half-amused interest. "What do you wish your last words to be?"

Greg's mouth quirked.

"Something normal," he said at last. "Do you want some toast, gorgeous?" Something like that. Something nobody'll remember and feel sad about. What about you?"
Mycroft considered the matter. "Winston Churchill said, 'I'm bored with it all.' Rather apt."

"Fair enough." Greg pushed back a handful of wild grey hair. "Suppose we all are, in the end."

Scrolling through for another question, Mycroft added,

"The composer Percy Grainger supposedly told his wife, 'You're the only one I like'."

Greg smiled, his eyes crinkling at the edges. "Glad he told her."

Mycroft found another question. "What are you afraid that people see when they look at you?"

"Christ..." Greg breathed it in. His eyes searched the sun umbrella above them, watching the breeze play through the fringe. "A worn-out old copper. Lonely, forty-something divorced bloke with a bin full of wine bottles." He paused. "Or my dad."

Mycroft huffed. Amazing.

"You have no awareness that you're wonderful," he murmured, "do you? You haven't the faintest idea."

Greg's eyes lit from within. "What the hell, Mycroft."

Mycroft raised an eyebrow. "I'm entirely serious."

"Behave."

"You are capable, confident - self-assured - protective. Kind. Astonishingly handsome. You are - invigorating, Greg. Frankly I'm surprised I've only had to endure one prowling celebrity this week."

Greg's grin spread from ear to ear.

"You're too kind about me," he murmured, his eyes lost in Mycroft's gaze. Joy shone from him. "Far too kind. Never been called 'invigorating' in my life."

"Then you require new associates, Greg... some who are more appreciative of your worth. I suggest you acquire them." Mycroft glanced down at the phone. "What is something you think everyone should do at least once in - ""

"Hang on," Greg said. He wrapped both arms around Mycroft's waist, tugging him gently to lie on top of him. "What's your answer?"

Mycroft shifted to make himself comfortable. "Mm?"

"People looking at you," Greg said. "What're you afraid they see?"

Mycroft didn't have to think long. He snorted, casting Greg a wry glance.

"They see a disdainful and embittered career politician," he said, without hesitation, "who considers most of the human race to be a noisy species of plankton... and they are completely correct."

Greg's eyes glittered. "That's not the question," he said.

Surprised, Mycroft raised an eyebrow. "No?"

"The question is what you're afraid people see," Greg said. "Politician' is what you want them to
He ran a hand down Mycroft's side, stroking him as he spoke.

"You're afraid people see past 'politician'. You're afraid they'll see what you really want... that sometimes you just wanna feel things. You want to taste things, touch them. You want to be somewhere nice with someone who likes you. You want to fuck somewhere you can let the sound out. That's what you're afraid people see."

He gave Mycroft a half-smile.

"Who you are," he said. "Who you actually are."

Mycroft realised his mouth had opened.

He closed it, trying to think of a response - anything - but nothing came.

He simply looked into Greg's eyes, and let it be true.

After what felt like a small eternity, words returned.

"Perhaps," he said, "if others see it... there is a chance that I might see it." He felt his heart heave.

"And that cannot happen."

Greg gazed into his eyes. "Quit your job," he said.

Mycroft's soul writhed. So easy. "I - safeguard the British nation. I'm - vital to -"

"Mmm. When're they going to thank you for that?"

God help me. "I don't do it for gratitude."

"What do you do it for?" Greg frowned gently, stroking his cheek. "Money? You don't even let yourself spend it, gorgeous. You don't turn it into anything. It just grows somewhere in a bank, doesn't it?"

Mycroft's heart tightened.

"I - do it out of duty," he said. "For my country. Because it's the proper application of my skills."

Greg's frown deepened.

"Who told you it's your job to look after a whole country?" he asked. "Why didn't they tell you it's your job to enjoy the one life that you get?"

Mycroft's throat stuck for a moment.

"It - isn't a question of - " He felt his gaze shutter. "I chose my career to suit my skills. And I do very well at it."

He watched Greg bite into his lip.

"You... got told off if you came home from school with nine out of ten, didn't you?"

Mycroft took some time to answer.

"My parents' expectations made me who I am," he said, even as his pulse climbed. "I don't resent
their guidance in the least."

"They made sure you understood it's your duty to put aside what you want, though... right? So that you'd be sure to put other people first." Greg poked his tongue into his cheek. "Like Sherlock. Looking after him."

Mycroft felt a wave of irrepressible cold creep across his shoulders.

When he spoke, he tried not to hear the crack in his own voice.

"I'm an older brother. It's - normal and proper that I assisted with his care."

"You were seven."

"My parents had lives to lead. They had important lives."

"So that's why yours still isn't?"

"Greg - "

"Look, you... were taught some wrong things. Some really wrong things. Alright? You don't have to live like you do." Greg gazed into his eyes, his arms still wrapped tight around Mycroft's waist. "There won't be some big reward at the end of it. You know that? You'll just continue, Myc. Just as you are, until it's over - and you realise you didn't get to live."

Mycroft realised he was shaking.

"My career is my life," he breathed. "It is my entire life."

Greg's eyes filled with pain. "It... doesn't have to be."

Mycroft bit into the end of his tongue. "Physician, heal thyself."

Greg's expression flickered. He breathed it out, glancing down. "Yeah. Yeah, I - I get that."

"Do you?" Mycroft found his jaw set, his heart beating quick and hard. "You seem happy enough to sacrifice the stability of the country in the name of my petty whims and palpitations - while consigning yourself without a thought to everything you fear."

Greg's mouth opened. He shut it, then took a second to speak.

"I've got - debts. Long-term cases to finish. A team relying on me."

"I have a country relying on me."

"Yeah, but you're worth more. You're Mycroft Holmes. You're an actual card-carrying genius. They expect you to have a country rely on you, and you're not even allowed a bloody boyfriend?"

Mycroft could feel his stomach twisting itself into knots. He didn't want to discuss this.

"What I've lost," he said, "can't be regained. What you're at risk of losing can still be prevented. Who instilled blind duty into you, might I ask?"

Greg's eyes flashed. "Nobody did," he said.

"On the contrary," Mycroft said, "seeing as my childhood is fair game for discussion, perhaps we
should take a short detour into yours." He lifted his chin. "This father who haunts you. Worked himself to the bone, did he?"

Greg said nothing for a moment. Some of the light dimmed in his eyes.

"Yeah, as it happens. He did."

"And he ensured you were well-aware of his sacrifice, I imagine?"

"If he hadn't," Greg said, "nobody would have put food on the table."

"And now you remain in a career that disheartens you," Mycroft said, drowning him out, "through a vague and ghostly sense that you should. You believe that the passing years are inevitable, that 'life is shit', and that the years after forty are simply to be worn out like a pair of shoes."

Greg's jaw locked. "Money doesn't grow on trees."

Mycroft held his stare. "I'll wager an entire orchard of money that you learned that phrase from your father."

"Look, you're not - " Greg breathed in, hard. He shut his eyes, covered his face with his hands for a moment, then let it go. "We're stopping this. Okay? I don't want to fight. Not with you."

"We are not fighting," Mycroft said, annoyed. "I'm trying to make you happy, Greg, while one of us still has a chance."

"I am happy!" Greg burst out. "I'm fine! Alright?"

He sat up, pushing Mycroft off him - pulling himself away from Mycroft's arms.

"So I hate my job," he said, shaking. "Big bloody deal. Who doesn't? At least I can forget about it. At least I'm allowed to find someone to come home to. Someone to care that I hate it and it's killing me. 'Physician, heal thyself'? Are you listening, Mycroft?"

Mycroft's heart clenched. The loss of Greg's touch felt like he'd been thrown suddenly halfway across the planet. His throat tightened; he looked away along the shore, lost in the sudden silence. He said nothing.

"Jesus - " Greg paled. His expression broke. "Myc, I... I'm sorry."

Mycroft's heart ached.

"N-Not at all." He drew in a breath. "I - apologise for - "

"No. No, no - don't - don't apologise. Christ, come here..."

Greg crawled across the sand, scattering it across their towel. He pulled Mycroft at once into his arms.

"M'sorry," he breathed, hugging Mycroft tightly. Mycroft felt something crack behind his ribs. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm... J-Jesus, you deserve the world. You deserve the whole world - I mean it. I've just got a funny way of telling you."

Mycroft couldn't think. He put his arms around Greg's shoulders, held onto him and closed his eyes. He could feel himself shaking.
"You're a big deal," Greg whispered, fingers carding through his hair. "You're... bloody hell, Mycroft, you're England. And I'm just a nobody who's gonna miss you, barking about stuff I don't understand. Like you'd give all that up for - "

He shuddered.

"For anything. I'm sorry, darlin'. I don't live in your world. M'sorry I'm talking like I think I do."

_I wish you did._

Mycroft pushed his face into Greg's neck, closing both hands in the back of his shirt.

_I wish I lived in yours. With you._

He could hear a boat somewhere in the bay. Its engine was like the droning of a fly, pitched and pervasive. Mycroft hated it with every fibre of his being. He wanted to hear Greg's heart again, hear him breathe, return to that peace where everything was part of the same.

"You do a great job with your brother," Greg was murmuring, and Mycroft's soul wrenched at the inside of his bones. "With your job. You care about people you've never met, people who won't ever thank you... and I'm a selfish embittered old bastard who'd ditch my team and my duty in a heartbeat. So - don't listen to me. Not for a second. I don't know what I'm talking about. I'm sorry, sweetheart."

_Leave them. Ditch them._

_Ditch them for me._

_Be there when I come home. Care that I hate it and it's killing me._

The boat was coming closer to the shore now. Mycroft's heart thudded with frustration and distress as its noise grew. He didn't want to do this over the noise of some gaudy pop-star's speedboat - but it seemed that they didn't have a choice.

"I'm sorry," he breathed, tightening his arms. Greg's scent was warm and soft and full of comfort. His hands were gentle and they shook as they rubbed Mycroft's back. "You're - right, Greg. You're completely right."

"I'm not, darlin'. It's not of my business."

Mycroft's heart slugged. _"I want it to be your business."_

"Myc, we - w-we don't get that choice... we just have to live with it." Greg held him tighter, kissing his cheek. "We have to make our peace, love. Have to leave these things unsaid."

_We don't._

_Oh god._

_We don't have to live with it._

Mycroft buried his fingers in Greg's hair, feeling his heart sliding up into his mouth.

_Would you?_

_Caring for me. Worrying for me. Championing my welfare._
"I'm just a nobody who's gonna miss you.'

"Myc..." Greg had noticed he'd gone still. He drew back a little, cupped Mycroft's face in both hands and looked at him very seriously, reading something written in his features. "Myc, what... what's that expression for? You look like I'm terrifying you..."

Mycroft placed his hands over Greg's, feeling his fingers tremble.

*If you knew - then -*

*At least you could make the choice. Even if the choice was no.*

"Greg," he said. *Oh, god.* His voice cracked over the sound of the speedboat. "Greg, there's - s-something I... a-and while I would never -"

The boat engine finally died.

Mycroft glanced along the shore in despair, hoping its owner knew the magnitude of the moment they were interrupting.

Then he saw the men who were disembarking, moving up the beach.

And the sight of them stopped his heart.

"Oh -"

Mycroft looked as if a monster had emerged from the sea. He reached for Greg's arms, fingers closing at once in his sleeves.

"Myc?" Greg took hold of him. "Gorgeous - what's wrong?"

Mycroft was still staring along the beach. All the colour had bled from his face. Greg quickly followed his gaze.

There were three men in dark suits coming this way. They looked fairly ordinary - overdressed for a beach, sunglasses and sharp jackets. They weren't speaking as they walked.

"Who are they?" Greg said, as he felt Mycroft begin to shake. The question seemed to kick Mycroft's mind into motion.

"Security services." Mycroft let him go, hurrying to his feet. "MI5 agents."

"Agents?"

"Do not resist them. This is an isolated location. Keep both your hands visible at all times."

Greg's heart convulsed. "An isolated l-... Mycroft, are you *serious*?"

"Do *not* resist them," Mycroft said again, and Greg realised Mycroft was now standing in front of him like a shield, watching the men approach. Greg scrambled nervously to his feet. "If they speak to you, don't attempt to lie. Don't attempt to run. Do as they say."
Greg's heart hammer at his ribs. "Mycroft, are we in danger?"

Mycroft didn't reply.

He faced the three men at his full height, watching as they finally came within speaking distance. Far behind them at the ocean's edge, Greg could see other suits waiting with a speedboat. *Oh, shit. Shit, what is this?*

"Mr Holmes, sir."

The voice that called out was perfectly calm, as crisp and clean as a hotel bed.

Mycroft didn't move.

"Would you kindly come with us?" the agent asked, coming to a stop on the sand.

Greg's breath cut. He watched the fingers of Mycroft's right hand twitch. "And where precisely do you plan to take us?"

"Just you, Mr Holmes. To Saint Maarten for your flight."

_Fuck. Jesus. Fuck._ Greg stared in panic at the back of Mycroft's head, wishing he could see Myc's expression. He didn't know how they were meant to be reacting.

"And Inspector Lestrade?" Mycroft said, deathly calm. Greg's heart began trying to kick its way out of his ribs.

"He'll be returning to England separately, sir." The sunglasses gave away nothing of the agent's expression. "Safe and well."

Mycroft didn't speak for a second.

"I will need your word on that," he said.

"I imagine my word won't matter all that much to you, sir. But Miss Fielding has offered hers."

Mycroft's fingers gathered themselves into his palms.

"Greg is not to be harmed," he said, his voice as hard and cold as granite.

"That's not our business here," the agent replied, quite calm. "We've been sent to escort you. Nothing more."

Mycroft seemed to exhale. Greg watched his shoulders briefly tense, then fall.

"I'll come with you willingly," he said, and Greg's heart shrank back from his ribs. "Please give me a final minute. I - wish to say goodbye."

_No._

_No - fuck, no -_

The agent who'd spoken said nothing for a second, hands in his pockets, tongue visibly poked into his cheek. The other two watched him, waiting.

He then dropped his eyes, and gave a short shake of his head.
The two stepped forward.

Greg's heart wrenched. "Mycroft -"

"Stay where you are, Greg." Mycroft didn't move as they grabbed hold of his upper arms. He stepped with them as they pushed him forwards; he didn't fight. "It's okay. You'll be alright."

Greg's feet began to move. "No - no, you - y-you can't just -"

They were taking him away. Greg's heart howled.

"Myc!"

"Goodbye, Greg." Mycroft's voice broke; he called back over his shoulder. "I will miss you."

The lead agent stepped around them.

Before Greg could take another two steps, the man had thrown out a hand. He caught Greg hard by the front of the shirt, closing his fist tight in the fabric.

"Whatever information," he said, holding Greg still, and lowering his voice between the two of them, "that you might have been privy to... you weren't."

Greg struggled, panicking; the man's grip only tightened.

"Whatever things you think you heard while you were here, you didn't. And whatever things might have happened... best they get forgotten, mm? Pretty quickly. For his sake."

Greg couldn't breathe. He was staring over the agent's shoulder at Mycroft, watching them escort him along the beach towards the boat like a criminal. *This isn't happening. This isn't real. This can't be the end.*

The agent reached inside his jacket, pulling out an unmarked envelope.

"Plane ticket. Leaves from Princess Juliana Airport tonight." He slapped the envelope against Greg's chest; contempt edged his voice. "If you opt not to use it... no worries. Nice climate here. The sort of place a man could happily settle, don't you think?"

*Jesus.*

"What's going to happen to him?" Greg said, his heart thudding. "Why - why have you -"

"He's not your concern any more." The agent stepped away. He shoved Greg back. Greg tripped and hit the sand, dropping the envelope to the ground. "Forget him, and we'll forget you."

The agent turned. He followed the others without another word, striding away down the beach.

Greg's heart was ripping at the inside of his chest.

'Stay where you are, Greg.'

But this was it - this was happening. These were the final seconds. Unless he did something, this was the last time he ever laid eyes on Mycroft Holmes.

As he saw them moving Mycroft into the boat, his heart lurched. *Fuck. Fuck, no.*
Greg found himself on his feet before he knew what he was doing.

He started to run.

His feet slipped and skidded in the sand. It dragged at his every movement - he couldn't build up any speed. The heat and the sun pierced his skin and his eyes as he ran. He could see them forcing Mycroft to sit. They weren't being gentle. He had to stop them. He didn't know how.

They were waiting for the final agent to join them; he was sauntering towards the boat with his hands in his pockets.

Greg's heart hardened.

*Just have to catch you.*

He sped up.

*They can't go without you.*

Close to the water, he heard one of the others shout out a warning. Heads turned. The agent turned, too - he wasn't quick enough. Greg threw his arms around the bastard's neck from behind and locked, dragging him backwards off his feet.

With shouts of pain they fell together into the hot sand. Greg grappled to get hold of him, burying one fist in his hair and the other in the back of his suit. He didn't have a plan. This was it. *They can't go without you. They can't take him without you.* The agent fought him, swearing in a fury. Greg gritted his teeth and held him down. He could hear Mycroft's voice shouting in desperation, but the words were lost. Greg forced the bastard's face against the sand. *Take me too. Take me where you're taking him. I'm trouble. I need to go too.*

Footsteps approached.

*Shit -*

Greg twisted round to see what he was dealing with.

Before he could even get sight of the second man, the slug of a fist across his face sent him reeling.

It wasn't the punch of a hopeful criminal resisting arrest on a Saturday night. It was a trained and calculated blow, and by the time Greg's senses returned to him, he was lying in the sand and panting with pain. There came a kick to his side; he cried out, clenching shut to protect his organs. More kicks - more blows. Both of them were battering him now. Somewhere beyond the pain, beyond the fists, beyond the burning heat of the sun, there was Mycroft. Greg could hear him in a frenzy, screaming, trying to order them to stop. The others were holding him back and he was fighting them. An engine was starting.

There came a final vicious kick to Greg's forearms where they covered his head. He curled with the pain, panting, blood and sand now scratching at his face.

At last, he felt the two of them turn and walk away.

Mycroft's voice was just audible over the engine - shouting, raging, pleading.

Greg couldn't move. He couldn't even lift his head to watch them take him away - to find Mycroft's eyes and in some way say, *I'm sorry. I tried. I'll miss you too.*
As the speedboat took off across the bay, Greg dug his fingers into the sand. *No. Jesus, no. This isn't happening.* The engine droned away at speed. As it reached the open ocean, muffled by the waves, the couple who'd been snorkelling came running to his side.

They were American. Greg couldn't hear their voices properly. They were asking him if he was okay, if he could stand up. A punch to the mouth had left him bleeding, and it was pouring down his face. His thoughts roiled through his head like ships in a storm. He couldn't see through sweat and pain - the two of them were just blurs trying to help him, and though he could feel the woman trying to clean the sand and blood from his chin, hear her panicking, he couldn't focus on her face.

Realising why, Greg closed his streaming eyes.

There was nothing left for him to see.
They helped him to a café in Gustavia. The manager there patched him up with a first-aid kit in the back office, asking him where he'd been, what had happened - if they'd taken his wallet.

She thought he'd been mugged.

It was easier to let her believe it.

He told her he needed to get home to his partner. He promised he'd contact the police when he got there. Though reluctant to let him go, she gave him money from the café's petty cash tin for a taxi.

By the time the car pulled up to the villa, Greg had almost convinced himself he'd walk in and find Mycroft there - there to grieve his black eye, the bruising along his jaw, the cut in his lip. They'd go lie quietly in bed together, hold each other in silence until the panic went away. This was all a mistake. It wasn't real.

The front door of the villa was unlocked. It swung at his touch.

Greg moved from room to room without a sound, slow on his sprained knee. He didn't dare call out. He didn't want to hear the silence in reply. As he moved through the villa, he began to realise why it looked different to this morning, why there was something wrong - and as he reached the bedroom, it became painfully and desperately true.

Every trace of Mycroft was gone. The wardrobe was stripped. The bathroom shelves had been emptied. Surfaces were cleared. Every hint, every trace had been obliterated. Greg's own things remained; his battered suitcase laid open on the bed.

The rest was gone.

Greg went through every drawer.

Distress burned in his eyes as he pulled each one open, searching, desperate. He didn't know what he was trying to find - anything, something - something to show it was real. Mistake. All a mistake. Can't be. Can't be gone.

As he reached for the top drawer on Mycroft's side of the bed, there came a hollow rattle from within. Greg's heart clenched. He hauled the drawer open - this was where Mycroft had kept his phone, his watch, his wallet at night - his passport - precious things.

They were gone.

At the bottom of the drawer sat half a clam shell, streaked with soft purple bands.

As Greg looked down at it, he could almost feel his pulse peter into silence.

He moved his fingers numbly to his own pocket and reached inside, praying, praying it wasn't true - praying he'd just left his here this morning, and there it was.

The smooth curve of the shell's other half touched his fingers.

Mycroft's sat abandoned within the drawer.

Someone had been here. They'd gathered up Mycroft's things, packed them, walked out with them.
They'd decided he couldn't have this one.

Greg picked it up in utter silence.

Sinking to his knees on the carpet, he looked down at the two halves of shell. He watched his own hands place them together.

As they fit, he began to cry.

From St Maarten to Curacao, and then Curacao to Amsterdam - nine and a half hours penned between two halves of a noisy family, who continued their conversation across him as if he were not there. Every flight attendant and security officer studied his facial injuries with unconcealed wariness. In Amsterdam, he was randomly selected for extensive security checks. He told them he'd been mugged in St Barts; they asked why his flight out had been in such different circumstances. He told them there'd been an emergency. They didn't believe him. They searched every item of his luggage, all his books and underwear and unused condoms, and detained him so long enough he almost missed his final flight to London.

By the time he collected his luggage, and stumbled from Heathrow into the freezing night air, Greg could barely stand. Pain ached in every part of his body. He felt like he'd left all of his senses behind; his soul was still lying on a beach in St Barts, bleeding and panicking and failing.

All the way in the taxi, he couldn't bear to look outside the window. He watched the fare screaming skywards instead, staring at the blazing red numbers in the darkness. He couldn't cope with the sight of London. He could hear it all around him, traffic noise and cars and buses and life, and it made him want to vomit.

He'd only had one thought since the plane left St Maarten. It was torturing him even now.

What if you're still there?

What if you got away, made it back to the villa? What if you're looking for me?

He'd had to take the flight. Even a one-way ticket was the better part of a thousand pounds. None of his cards would have coped with that. It had been his one chance to get home - and now he'd taken it, he didn't know if it had been the right choice. He couldn't stop thinking about Mycroft in the villa alone, finding all their things were gone, Greg’s suitcase and his clothes and the shells.

Numb, Greg pulled his phone from inside his coat.

4% battery.

He scrolled through his contacts, his wrist shaking. It was hard to see through his swollen black eye. He tapped the name of the person whose voice he now needed to hear more than anything in the world.

The phone rang, muffled as he pressed it to his ear.

He kept it ringing for almost ten minutes, heart hammering, swaying with the jolting of the taxi in the darkness as he waited for the call to be answered. He could still feel grains of sand in his shoes. His
clothes beneath his coat still smelled of gardenia and vanilla after-sun; there was dried blood on both his cuffs.

At last, the phone cut halfway through the connecting tone.

Greg stiffened.

"Mycroft?" He gripped the phone, his heart breaking. "My, it's me. I'm here. Are you alright?"

There was silence.

Unbreathing, Greg checked his phone.

The screen was black; his battery had died.

They came into land atop a multi-storey car park in south London, where an unfamiliar car was waiting.

It seemed the night's grief was far from over.

As Mycroft climbed from the helicopter, shaking, he saw her pull away from the MI5 agent stationed at her side. The man shouted at her to stop; she ignored him.

She came running in her heels across the landing pad.

"Mr Holmes - "

She had his winter coat. She was pale and upset, dark shadows smudged beneath her eyes. Her hair flew in the wind from the helicopter's blades.

The sight of her broke the last remnants of his dignity into fragments.

As she reached him, wrapping his coat around him, Mycroft collapsed into her arms. They locked around him, tight. They held on.

"I'm sorry," she gasped against his neck. They'd never touched before, never - not once in all her years of employment. He wanted to fall to the ground. "I'm so sorry."

Mycroft's heart convulsed. These might be their only few seconds to speak privately. "What have you told them?"

"She was watching the villa. She confiscated my laptop and my phone. I told her nothing in addition."

'She.'

God help us.

"Let me send him the registration forms," Anthea begged, as MI5 agents came striding across the landing pad to separate them. "Even if he just consents to the process starting, they'll have no grounds to - "
Mycroft's heart tore itself apart.

"They assaulted him. They beat him to stop him trying to reach me. They're prepared to use violence. It's a miracle they -"

He shuddered, closing his fingers tight in the back of her coat.

"Leave him. Please. Do not contact him. If they have any indication I'm attempting to reach him -"

"Sir, if he starts the registration process, they won't be able to -"

"Please - please, for the love of god, listen to me." Mycroft heard his voice strain as his throat tried to close. "I had four days of his life. And you think that he'd give me the rest?"

The agents had nearly reached them.

Mycroft let go of her coat.

"Leave him," he begged her. "Please. Please, leave him safe." His eyes closed. "All hearts are broken."

Before she could respond, he turned on the agents advancing towards them.

"Lay a hand on my assistant," he barked, "and each one of you will sorely regret it. I am Mycroft Holmes. You will not manhandle us like petty criminals."

Though they stopped in their tracks, he could see the open contempt on their faces. Their eyes swept from his dishevelled hair to the crumpled linen shirt beneath his coat, the bites all too visible at his throat - the affection his lover had left upon his skin - the shame of his humanity.

"Why so many of you?" he demanded, sharp, studying each of their faces in turn. "For what purpose?"

The closest responded. "To escort you, Mr Holmes."

Mycroft sneered. "A guard of honour, is it? Am I under some threat? I'm certain my driver can deliver me safely home without quite so much assistance."

The agents passed a small smile between them.

"Apologies, sir," their spokesman said. "You're needed at Thames House."

"Needed?" Mycroft's pulse drove itself skywards. "At this time of night? After ten hours in the air? You will see us to my home."

"We'll see you to the car, Mr Holmes - and then to Thames House." The agent lifted his chin. "Miss Fielding will meet you there."

Mycroft's fists curled.

Oh, she'll meet me.

She'll meet me and she'll answer to me.
Thames House was almost deserted. In reception, a cleaning lady jumped and looked up in alarm as Mycroft swiped himself through the security doors. He stormed for the lift with Anthea striding at his heels, outstripping the agents sent to fetch them.

"She spoke to me for some hours this evening," Anthea said, her voice low as they approached the lift doors together.

Mycroft's jaw set.

"She has no authority to interrogate you," he muttered, jabbing the button for the lift.

"It wasn't an interrogation. It was a 'chat'.'"

"She has no authority to force you to discuss any matter whatsoever without my explicit permission, least of all my bloody personal life."

"As I told her," Anthea said. Weariness dogged her voice. "Repeatedly. It made no difference."

The doors opened. As one, they swept inside.

Silence filled the lift as it ascended to floor seven. Mycroft could almost feel the thoughts of the agents around them - men who felt powerful and safe within Fielding’s authority; felt powerful with weapons concealed beneath their suits; men whose faces he'd now memorised in photographic detail.

Out of the lift, he did not wait for them to follow. He proceeded directly towards Human Resources, blew through its double doors in a fury, and stormed through the gloom towards the private office at the back. The lights were on inside, glowing warmly through the frosted glass.

Mycroft did not knock.

As he barged open the door, prepared to shout, he found Ilka Fielding sitting pleasantly behind her desk. She was sipping a cup of herbal tea while watching her laptop, from which she glanced up as if it were any ordinary afternoon. The laptop was playing audio.

She gave him a glittering smile.

"How dare you - " Mycroft bit through his teeth - and then realised what she was listening to.

His own voice, wracked with desperation, came from the speakers. "Fuck - please - please, harder - G-Greg - oh god Greg, please - "

Mycroft's heart heaved into his throat. Video footage.

*That's - she's watching - *

He stepped forwards, slamming the lid of the laptop shut with a hand. The audio cut. Nausea slugged through his stomach.

He faced her across a foot of space.

"You have no right," he hissed, "to install unauthorised surveillance in private accommodation."

With a mild look, and a sip of her tea, Ilka Fielding said, "I didn't. What I have is the right to view any pre-authorised security footage relating to the wellbeing of an employee."
"That footage is *not pre-authorised*. I was *wholly unaware of* - "

Ilka pressed a smile against the rim of her tea cup. "Oh dear," she murmured, glancing over Mycroft's shoulder.

Mycroft paused.

"Sir - Mr Holmes - I..." Anthea's voice broke. "I - w-wanted to ensure you were - "

Mycroft briefly closed his eyes. *Buried in the forms I signed that week without thinking*, he thought. *Distracted. Thinking of him.*

"Leave," he said.

"Sir - I - I didn't realise the feed would be intercepted by our *own* - "

"*Leave, Anthea.*"

He waited until he heard the door of the office close, and she was gone - leaving the two of them alone.

He stared into Ilka Fielding's eyes. They were a shining, jewel-bright blue, as clear as the waters at L'Anse de Colombier.

He loathed every inch of her smooth, smirking face.

He let her see his hatred.

She read it in his expression, smiling, and took a sip of her tea. She didn't care.

"Have a seat," she offered. "Would you like a hot drink? You're rather underdressed for February."

Mycroft stayed standing. Humiliation burned in his throat. "For what reason," he seethed, "was I just dragged *four thousand miles*?"

She gave him a fond, pitying look.

"Mycroft..." she said, her eyes playful. "I'm quite sure I don't need to answer that."

"I believe you should."

Ilka reached casually for a printed report beside her laptop, spinning it around with her manicured fingertips to examine the name at the top.

"*Detective Inspector Gregory Noel Lestrade*," she read, with interest. "Born twenty-fourth of December 1975... and - unless I'm much mistaken, Mycroft - do correct me if I am - *not* currently registered as a partner of yours."

Mycroft bit the side of his tongue.

"Not a partner," he said. "Merely a guest."

"A guest?" she said, raising an eyebrow. "Generous with your hospitality, Mycroft. *Very* generous, based on the footage."

*God almighty.* Mycroft held his nerve.
"I am revoking your authority to access that footage," he snarled.

Her mouth shrugged. "Sadly," she said, "as Head of Human Resources, I'm now revoking your authority to do that. I fear for your welfare, Mycroft. I believe the footage is vital evidence. Therefore it stays on my system."

"Evidence as to what?"

"A possibility." Ilka's eyes didn't leave his face as she sipped at her tea. "The possibility of an unregistered intimate relationship - which, as you're well aware, is expressly forbidden under the terms of your employment."

*Then terminate me.*

*Terminate me, you wicked bitch, and I will wrench the heart out of this country as I go. I will leave it to die, twitching. I will leave you to rule over its ashes.*

"There is no such possibility," he breathed. "As you would know, Ilka, had you discussed this with me."

Her mouth tightened in a doubting smile.

"Mycroft... we're aware you've been associated with this individual for quite some time. We've uncovered e-mails and text messages going back nearly seven years. I'm not sure how you can continue to argue with me."

"Lestrade has assisted me from time-to-time with a private family matter," Mycroft snarled. "Our relationship is purely platonic."

Her left eyebrow twitched. "You do have a relationship, though?"

Mycroft gritted his teeth. "Our association," he bit out. "We do not have a relationship."

Ilka put her tea cup aside with a sigh.

"You seem to be under the impression you're in some manner of trouble," she said. "Nothing could be further from the truth. As Human Resources, my sole concern is ensuring that you are able to fulfill your duties - however I can."

She sat back in her chair, crossing one leg over the other.

"And in the past week," she said, "a potential problem has come to light... a problem I very much wish to help you with. If you've been engaging in an unregistered intimate relationship, your safety is in jeopardy - and this Lestrade individual is therefore a threat to you. A threat we'll have to deal with."

Mycroft's heart clenched. "I have *not been engaging in* -"

"No? You're claiming that the two of you aren't intimate?"

"For god's sake! It isn't a relationship!"

"From the footage, Mycroft, you seem incredibly intimate. Shall we take another look? Frankly, his familiar manner with you concerns me deeply..."

"*It was carnal!*" Mycroft spat. His heart pounded in his ears. *Do not hurt him. Do not harm him.*
Please. Leave him. Let him be. "Is that not clear enough to you?" he raged. "Must I spell it out? The man is nothing to me! I took him to the Caribbean to fuck him. To have my fill of him. In privacy. I wanted him so I had him. I haven't the slightest interest in continuing anything of the sort with him. I don't intend to associate with him whatsoever. I've had what I wanted from him. Are you now going to invade every hotel room where a high-level agent makes use of a prostitute? No! Because you will never have a night's rest again!"

He leant over the desk towards her, shouting.

"I used Lestrade for sex! He means nothing to me! Put that on record! Pass me a pen, and I shall write it across your forehead and sign it here and now!"

Her smile had gone.

In its place, there was a cold and quiet stare.

"Then we can expect you to cut all contact with him?" she said.

Mycroft held her gaze. His heart clawed at his ribs. "Obviously."

"Even this 'platonic relationship' you claim you once shared?"

"We had no relationship," Mycroft said. His voice shook. "Nor shall we. Ever. Platonic or otherwise. I will not contact him."

"You are of course welcome to register him as a partner," she said, fixing him in place with her eyes. "I'd be happy to guide you through the process. From how you speak about him, though, it seems this association was more about your unfortunate tendency towards sexual indulgence..."

'Indulgence.'

Last night. Warm water, candles - sandalwood oil - Greg's lap - gentle hands down his back, helping him to rock. Greg's soft sounds of reassurance. The voice that called him sweetheart.

The arms that wrapped around him as he came.

"He is nothing," Mycroft breathed, shaking. He stared into Ilka Fielding's eyes. "I used him for sexual relief. I thought to combine it with my annual leave for the sake of my privacy. To contain it. So he would understand that his presence there was to attend to my physical needs, and nothing more."

Holding his eyes, Ilka reached for a document wallet lying to one side on her desk.

Mycroft glanced at it.

It was marked along the edge with the names 'Holmes / Lestrade'.

"Then this form," she said, and showed him, held it open for him to read. Initial Authorisation for Registration of Intimate Partner. "It won't be needed, will it?" she hummed. "I've taken the liberty of filling in Lestrade's details... we were able to glean almost all of his personal information just from our casual checks. You'll see they're correct. There might be a few minor points you'd need to add."

Mycroft stared down at the form, feeling his heart shrink to nothing.
It was a trap.

If he took it, he was admitting that intimacy had formed. She might as well have handed him a confession to sign - a confession saying he'd embarked upon a relationship, unregistered.

They'd left Greg lying there, bloody and battered in the sand.

They'd do worse if he gave them a reason. Police officers could be transferred overseas with a single form. Evidence could be planted in Greg's house or on a laptop to convict him of anything the security services wished to convict him of.

Thousands of people disappeared from London every year.

She could make him one of them with a stroke of her pen. This form needed two signatures to be processed. One signature turned it into a death warrant.

For one brief and perfect moment, Mycroft imagined it - Greg reading through it, pen in hand. That soft-eyed smile.

A partner. His Greg. Signed and sealed.

Never lonely again in his life.

*After four days.*

Mycroft's throat thickened, gazing at the sight of their names. *Four days. It might as well be a marriage certificate.*

*Life is shit.*

*I can't have you.*

*I can only protect you.*

He closed his eyes as they burned.

*Then it was love, after all.*

"I do not care about Gregory Lestrade," he heard his voice say. "I used him. I'm now finished with him. Shred the form. Monitor my communications, if you wish. Monitor my every movement. You'll see that I never contact him again."
He kept his eyes closed. He didn't want to know if she was smiling. He didn't want to see her win.
"My only priority is the welfare of the nation," he murmured. "I care for nothing else in this world."
He felt her close the folder, and put it aside.

"How reassuring to hear," she said, softly. "You must be glad we retrieved you, Mycroft... before any risk could develop."
Mycroft's heart gripped. "No risk would have developed."

"Mm? Good." Her voice brightened. "Shall we expect you tomorrow? Or do you intend to take the rest of your annual leave?"
Mycroft's shoulders shook. "I will take the rest," he said. Grieve. Remember. Then forget. "Expect me on Monday," he said, turning away. "Do not speak to my assistant without my permission again."

As his hand touched the door, Ilka Fielding said fondly,

"Human Resources are here to help you, Mycroft. We want you to be happy."
Mycroft's stomach twisted.

Only one person in this world had ever cared if he was happy. That person was now safe beyond his reach.
He said nothing, opened the door, and stepped in silence from the office.

"Escort Mycroft home please, gentlemen," Ilka Fielding called through the door, as he moved like a ghost towards the exit. Anthea hurried to follow him, her head dropped in utter silence. "He's had a tiring week."

Mycroft didn't look to see if they followed.

It was over; it did not matter.
Brother

Wednesday 14th February

He wasn't alright.

She'd seen him here before - several times in the last fortnight. Though he came to the café at different hours, on different days, he always did the same thing: stood under their awning and smoked like he was waiting for someone, watching the street, his shoulders high. He came inside for a coffee, took it back outside and drank it - then when he'd finished his coffee, he left.

Each time, he looked like he hated himself.

She'd never seen someone look like that before. Plenty of people in London were tired; plenty of them had troubles. She had them sometimes, especially on days like today. It was Valentine's, and it was raining, and she'd hoped at least for a card - dating five years now - supposedly engaged, no date set, no end in sight.

But life wasn't a romance, and love didn't last like that. At least she had someone.

The guy who smoked under their awning didn't have anyone.

That much, she knew.

He looked like the world had fallen into pieces, and he didn't know how to put it right. The first time he'd come here, he had a black eye and a split lip and a tan like he'd been working abroad. Everyone had stared at him when he came in, worrying he was a bad type. The injuries and the tan were fading now - London was washing them away from him - but he clearly wasn't feeling any better. He seemed to get worse every time she saw him. The circles beneath his eyes were growing darker. He was thinner, paler, more tired. He smoked outside for longer and he seemed more afraid when he came in, nervous of people's glances - like he wasn't meant to be here - like he felt too big, too visible, like he knew he was a mess and he couldn't bear it.

He'd been here for nearly an hour today, standing beneath the red awning in his coat as rain fell around him. He'd smoked most of a packet; he must be freezing. Darkness had fallen and still he'd stood there and he'd smoked, even as the café emptied around her, even as she'd cleaned up and tidied and waited for him to come in for his coffee.

He didn't want to go home.

She wanted to ask him why.

She wondered if he was a widower, trying to find somewhere to be. They had old gents like him come in regularly. He was younger than most of them, but he had the same look in his eyes - like he'd rather walk the streets all night, than go home to somewhere his person wasn't.

The Speedy's barista hoped she was wrong about the grey-haired man.

She hoped he was just over-worked - just tired, like all the rest of London. She had a feeling it was
more than that, but she hoped for him all the same.

At a minute to nine, just as she was about to flip the sign, she saw him drop his cigarette to the ground and twist it out underfoot.

As he let himself through the door, the lack of people seemed to comfort him. He came up to the counter, his gaze low, pulling his wallet quietly from inside his coat.

As he glanced at her, big dark eyes full of pain, her heart squeezed beneath her apron.

"Can I get a regular macchiato, please?" he muttered. "To go. Thanks."

She nodded, took his money, and placed it quietly in the till.

He waited at the end of the counter while she made his coffee. He kept his head down, his shoulders high and his hands deep in his pockets. The rain was still falling outside, harder every minute now.

She wondered how late he'd stand there tonight.

She wondered what he was waiting for, and what had happened, that standing outside in the rain on Baker Street felt like it would help.

Still raining. Had been for almost an hour.

Greg knew because he'd been standing under the awning, watching it fall and trying to think. He'd spent two weeks now trying to think.

Another hour hadn't helped.

As the Speedy's girl clipped the lid on his macchiato, she gave him a gentle glance. She had a lip ring, glittery blue eyeliner, and her whole life ahead of her.

"Anything else I can get you?" she said. She held his gaze.

Greg felt something lurch inside his chest. He looked at her, breathing it out.

"No," he mumbled. "No, I'm - thanks."

Carefully she handed it over. "Sit down," she said, "if you want. S'warm in here."

He'd paid for it to take out - and she'd been cleaning up to go home. She'd not had another customer in half an hour. There'd be someone waiting for her, listening for her key in the lock.

Greg didn't know how to beg her.

_Don't. Please._

_Don't be kind to me._

He couldn't cope with kind.

It was three weeks since he'd had it - three weeks of muttered conversations ending as soon as he
entered the room; three weeks of half a bottle of wine every night, or he couldn't fucking sleep; three weeks of wondering if he'd dreamed it all. He only knew it was real because of how much it hurt.

Gazing at her, Greg wondered if she knew - if it was pouring out of him like smoke. Everyone at work knew. He'd not told them, but they knew. Everybody he passed on the street seemed to step away from him now. It felt like other humans could see grief daubed in black on his hands and his face and over his face, and he didn't know how to warn them to stay away.

The words stuck in his throat.

There was nothing left that he could give her.

Numbly he picked up his macchiato, hating himself for not thanking her. In silence he left the café.

His space under the awning was still dry.

Greg stood there, wrapping one arm around his body as the other held his coffee. Its warmth barely reached him. He held onto it, telling himself it would work this time. He'd drink it, and think, and make a decision. This coffee was his deadline. He wouldn't miss it this time.

He couldn't stand here all night.

*You know you would, mate.*

Greg closed his eyes.

Where else in the world could he stand?

He couldn't go home - not now he'd stood here so long, come so close - not now it was so late. That fabled door and its crooked door knocker were just a few steps away. He couldn't walk back through the rain to the tube and get on it and let it carry him back to his flat. He couldn't be there any longer. He couldn't see it one more time - bills and letters on the doormat; reeking dishes in the sink; empty bottles by the bed.

There was a single clean surface remaining in Greg's flat. It was his bedside table.

On it sat two seashells.

He'd settled them together at the join. He woke up in the night just to look at them, run his shaking fingers over them, trying to calm his breathing as he followed their ridges. He hadn't washed them. He couldn't bear to. They smelled of salt and sand and everything else that didn't really exist.

He couldn't bear to see them sitting there any longer. Not tonight. He didn't want to go home.

What he wanted was to knock on the door.

With a shaking breath, Greg loosened the lid of his coffee. He took a few seconds just to smell it and settle himself, telling himself it would be alright this time. He was here, and he'd stayed for nearly an hour. This was where you came in London when you didn't know what to do, and it would be okay.

He just wished he could stop hearing it.

*Whatever things might have happened... best they get forgotten, mm? Pretty quickly. For his sake.*

The words were still being breathed in his ear, three weeks later.
"For his sake."

They'd left Greg in a bloody pile on a beach. They could do worse to Mycroft. That night at the Diogenes, he'd talked about them like they knew everything, like they could be anywhere, and then they'd proved it. They'd shut the whole thing down. A speedboat, a conversation, and Mycroft was gone.

Greg didn't know if he was now reaching into things he should leave alone. He'd not heard a word from Mycroft. He didn't even know if he was back in London. He didn't know anything.

Something in him said he should leave it like that.

Fuck.

Fuck me up. I need to know you're alright.

Greg's hand shook around his coffee. He drank the scalding liquid just to burn through his distress, barely tasting it. He hardly ate anymore. Nothing tasted of anything. He couldn't eat, when he spent half his time wondering if Mycroft had been sent somewhere. Punished somehow. Those men had known enough to come and fetch him, and Greg couldn't cope with the thought that his interference would now cause Mycroft even more trouble.

I don't want to interfere - I just -

Just to hear your voice.

"I'm quite fine, Greg. Now forget me."

Grief burned behind Greg's eyelids.

He could hear it like Mycroft was right here. He could conjure up his voice without a flaw. As the lights turned out in the café behind him he drank, ignoring the lump in his throat, telling himself he should let go of this. Sherlock might only make things worse. He wasn't great with his brother. He wasn't great at subtlety, either. Greg didn't even know what he'd be asking Sherlock for. What was there to solve? "Is Mycroft alright?"

Sherlock would ask why he wanted to know.

"Fuck," Greg whispered, shaking, and took another drink. He was halfway through his coffee, and no closer to a decision than he'd been this whole time. He was meant to be working late tonight. He'd left early to come and stand here instead. He'd told Sally he was feeling under the weather, going home for painkillers and sleep.

None of them believed him.

For three weeks now, he'd been unable to focus for longer than a few minutes. He couldn't care less about his work. He didn't even care enough to hide it anymore.

Everyone in London knew he was falling apart, even coffee shop baristas - and if he didn't get up those steps and knock on that door, he'd never be okay.

Sherlock could probably just ring Mycroft, speak to him, two quick minutes and the problem would be solved. "He's quite well, Lestrade. Good evening."

Then -
Greg looked down into his coffee, pressing his lips together.

*Then.*

Then he'd have to make his peace. He'd know Mycroft was alright; it would still be over. They'd hoped for seven nights of happiness, and not even been allowed that. Four nights - all done.

And Greg would have to cope.

He'd have to sort himself out at work. He'd have to stop walking around London like a ghost. He'd have to stop driving out to the Tesco Superstore just to see lights and people and not be alone in his flat at two AM breaking apart over seashells. He'd have to return to the real world, the world he'd lived in his whole miserable life, and forget about the one where gentle grey eyes looked to him for comfort and reassurance - the one with restaurants and cocktails and a bed with an ocean breeze, with a hand that stole into his own just to walk to the kitchen.

It had been so fucking perfect.

But he'd have to let it go. He'd have to forget it and move on.

Before he did, he needed to know that Mycroft was okay. He'd just nip upstairs right now, chat to Sherlock, find out if he'd heard anything - see if he knew whether Mycroft was back in London - then that was it. He'd go home, he'd put the shells somewhere he couldn't see them, he'd tell himself life wasn't a fucking fairytale, and he'd move on.

Gripping the last inch of his coffee, Greg glanced sideways at the door.

*Oh.*

*No, fuck -*

*Fuck, what if he takes one look at me and -*

*What if he takes the piss?*

*Jesus, what am I even doing here?*

*What the fuck do I do?*

As if activated purely by his stare, the front door of 221B Baker Street swung open.

John Watson leant out into the rain, shielding his eyes with one arm.

Greg stared up at him, pale.

John gave him a gentle frown. "He says get yourself up here. He can't cope with you hovering any more."

*Christ.*

Greg abandoned his cup on a nearby table, and John ushered him in through the door.

The stairs had never creaked so loudly beneath Greg's feet. He felt like he was heading up them to be executed. It was too late to back out, though - and if any good or any bad was going to come of this, it was coming now.
"Tea?" John said, as they reached the landing. Greg's stomach clenched at the sight of the chair, empty and waiting for him. "Your first one's gone cold."

"Erm. S-Sure. Thanks."

John patted him on the back. "Have a sit down." He slipped through the kitchen doorway.

As Greg stepped anxiously into the lounge, he found the great detective already waiting for him. Sherlock was sitting in his armchair, fingers gated on one knee, his expression quite calm. He was wearing a striped blue bathrobe.

The sight of his bare shins was strangely reassuring.

Greg sat himself down, cleared his throat, and put his hands together in his lap.

Sherlock faced him across the lounge.

There came a long and painful silence, in which Greg felt every misery of the last three weeks being pulled from his skin and his clothes in scraps and clues, pieced together like patches of fabric to produce the whole hideous truth. Nothing seemed to cross Sherlock's face. He was just reading for now, searching, combing, those bright grey eyes that for the first time looked unnervingly like Mycroft's. The two brothers had the same fingers, the same long legs, the same presence of self that now made Greg want to curl up and cry. *Fuck, I miss you. You were beautiful and you were mine. Now you're just fucking gone."

At last, he saw Sherlock exhale.

"Good evening, Greg," he murmured.

Greg lowered his eyes to the floor. "Hi, Sherlock."

John appeared with tea. He placed Sherlock's mug from the Science Museum at his side, turning the handle to the angle that Sherlock preferred it, then brought a novelty Christmas mug with a penguin on it over to Greg.

Greg's hands shook as he took it.

"Thanks," he mumbled, holding it to his chest.

John gave him a reassuring smile. "Biscuit? Got some digestives somewhere."

"No, ta... I'm - not really hu-"

" - eating," Sherlock said, quietly. "Or sleeping."

*Shit."

*Shit - shit - *

Greg put the mug aside, covered his face with his hands, and kept them there for nearly a minute.

They let him have his silence.

*It'll be alright. It'll be fine, for Christ's sake. Just explain."

When he took his hands from his face, John and Sherlock were there waiting for him. He couldn't
cope alone with it any longer. His throat heaved. He wanted to throw up.

"Begin," Sherlock said, leaning back in his chair. "Leave nothing out."

Greg's heart gripped. "I'm gonna have to leave some of it out."

Sherlock huffed. "Spare me certain details, then... but tell me the rest."

God almighty.

"I - w-wondered if you've heard from him. That's all." Greg gripped his hands together. "I haven't. Just hoped he's alright."

"If who is alright?" Sherlock said, raising an eyebrow.

Greg bit his tongue. "You know who, Sherlock."

"I'm afraid I don't, inspector. Enlighten me."

Greg steadied himself with a breath. He glanced at John, who seemed clueless. "Your brother," he managed. The name was agony to say. "Mycroft."

"Why should he not be alright?" Sherlock asked, and Greg shut his eyes for a second.

"Can't you - tell from - " He gestured vaguely at himself. "I know you know. Don't make me say it."

John cast Sherlock a wary glance; it went ignored.

"I'm a consulting detective, Lestrade. Not a television psychic." Sherlock's eyebrow arched. "I need data before I can understand what you're asking. Do furnish me with some."

Greg held Sherlock's gaze, saying nothing. He wished his heart would beat a little slower.

"Start from the beginning, perhaps?" Sherlock offered, and reached out a long-fingered hand for his tea. The sight of his careful grip made Greg's heart contract. That was Mycroft's grip; it was how he held a coffee cup, how he extended a finger. It was unbearable. "With the reassurance," Sherlock added, neatly, "that John has heard many unbloggable things said from that chair. Not all of them reach the greedy eyes of my adoring public. Your privacy is quite ensured."

Greg rubbed his hand around the opposite wrist, telling himself he needed answers. He couldn't leave without them. It had taken him three weeks to get up those bloody stairs.

With a long breath, he began.

"I... got to know Mycroft a bit. New Year's Eve," Greg breathed in. Just over a month ago, he thought. That sofa right there. Mycroft smiling at him like there was nobody else in the room, watching him with those glittering grey eyes, holding his glass for Greg to top up. His pale neck. His soft murmurs. "Since then, we - spent some time together."

"What manner of 'time', inspector?"

Greg closed his eyes. "Sherlock."

"If you're unwilling to give me details, Lestrade, I'm unwilling to give you answers."

"Time just the two of us, Sherlock. The kind of time that flies by. The sort of time I'm not really
"You have entered a sexual relationship with my brother," Sherlock said, completely calm.

Greg let it roll over him in a wave. He couldn't even look at John. The silence ached; he gave in at last.

"Yes," he managed.

"A casual relationship?"

Jesus Christ. "It was supposed to be."

"And it developed into an affair of the heart?" Sherlock said, tilting his head.

Greg had the sudden suspicion that this wasn't surprising Sherlock. It wasn't disgusting him, either. He was relaying the facts as if he'd already known them.

Greg wasn't supplying them; he was confirming them.

He gripped his own wrist, tight. "Yes."

"For you, or for Mycroft?"

Greg's voice shook. "F-For your brother, at first. But - for me as well. I've - only realised since - "

"When was this?"

"A month ago."

Sherlock's expression didn't move. "And what happened to end it?"

Greg stared into his eyes. Tell me you know something. Tell me you knew I'd be coming.

"Your brother's - bosses - found out somehow. Intervened. Shut it down. I've not seen him since, and I'm worried. Worried what's happened to him. I don't know if he's even in London. I don't know anything. I - c-can't stop thinking about him - "

"This affair was illicit in nature?"

Greg shook, covering his face. "He's - not meant to - "

"Did you know that at the outset?"

"Fuck. Yes."

"My brother warned you?"

"Yes."

"You chose to begin the affair regardless?"

"Yes," Greg said, feeling his heart strain. "We - t-took precautions. Kept it quiet."

Sherlock's eyebrow arched. "What sort of precautions?"

Oh, fuck. "We, erm... went away."
"Went away’?"

Greg gripped his wrist. "C-Caribbean. St Barts." For the first time, he dared to glance at John Watson - who'd now been holding a cup of tea halfway to his lips for nearly two minutes, mouth open. "Jesus, I didn't plan this. Any of this. Mycroft didn't either. Now he's just gone, and I don't know if he's alright. I need to know. Even if it's - i-if it's over, if that's it - I just - "

Sherlock interrupted. "Who gave you the injuries?"

Greg's eyes shut. He'd thought they were healing up by now. People at work had stopped asking about them, anyway.

"Government agents," he muttered. "I don't know." He bit the inside of his cheek. "I tried to stop them dragging your brother off. Didn't manage it. Obviously."

Sherlock's eyes widened a little. The expression vanished within a heartbeat, replaced with a vague lift of one eyebrow as Sherlock reached for his cup of tea.

"And you've had no contact from Mycroft since?" he said.

"No." Greg's heart drummed against his ribs. "I - k-kinda hoped he'd - find some way to let me know he's alright, but... then I got to thinking I shouldn't interfere. I was warned to forget about it. About him."

He stared into Sherlock's face.

"I can't," he managed, and heard his own voice crack. "I n-need to know he's okay. I can't forget. I can't sleep. I can't eat."

"And you wish for my help in locating him?" Sherlock said.

Without a sound, Greg nodded.

He watched Sherlock take a drink of tea. Those pale, elegant fingers placed the mug aside - and with a flicker of his eyebrow, Sherlock said,

"I have my conclusions for you, Lestrade."

**Oh -**

**Christ -**

"What conclusions?" Greg said, desperate.

Sherlock gave him a thin smile. "I conclude that you've had a very narrow escape."

Greg said nothing. He waited, watching Sherlock with a rising sense of concern.

"Whatever madness inveigled you into fraternising with my brother," Sherlock said, "I can only hope it never resurfaces... and suffice to say, you've avoided a grisly fate indeed. My brother is the most unpleasant and calculating man in London. I can't imagine the strength of mind it took to actually engage in sexual congress with him. One can only assume you have an iron-clad stomach and a libido the size of a continent, Lestrade."

Greg didn't move. He didn't speak.
"Out of the corner of his eye, he saw John's jaw drop. The cup of tea was moved quickly to a surface."

"Sherlock..." John said. He shot Greg a look of apology, deeply uneasy. "Sherlock, Greg's... come to you for help. This isn't - "

"He's had all the help he needs," Sherlock said, waving a hand. "Whichever MI5 agent prevented him from running off into the sunset with my brother has done our dear Inspector Lestrade more good than we ever could, John. Perhaps we should swap to something more celebratory than tea."

Greg got to his feet. The whole room reeled around him; he clenched his fists tight until it stopped.

"He might be in danger." The words hurt. "Your brother. He might need help."

"Would it matter if he did?" Sherlock enquired, frowning. "His employers have made it clear that the two of you are no longer involved. I suggest you listen to them."

Bile welled in the back of Greg's mouth. "The sacrifices, " he bit out, "that Mycroft's made to keep you safe - "

"Oh spare me, Lestrade... yes, my oh-so-noble brother - such a romantic hero - the man has used you carnally for a while, spirited you off for a spot of fun in the Caribbean, been discovered, and now cut off all contact with you to preserve his position. Believe me, inspector. If he'd wished to reach out to you, Mycroft would have found a way to do so."

"Then he's in danger," Greg half-shouted, shaking, "or worse, because he would have found a way."

Sherlock ran his tongue around his mouth, clicking it.

"A viable theory," he said, "if I hadn't heard from him myself two nights ago."

Greg's heart clenched. "You - you've heard from - "

"Mm." Sherlock recrossed his legs. "The usual tedious monthly phone-call. Am I well, am I staying out of trouble, am I in need of monetary funds... the standard trivia."

Then -

Then he's -

Greg's heart lodged in his throat. "You - d-definitely - ?"

Sherlock gave him a blank look.

"It was my brother," he said, with a little shrug. "He called from a withheld number. He asked the usual tiresome suite of questions, requested that I please contact our mother once in a blue moon, and that was all."

Greg could feel his hands still shaking. "How - h-how did he - sound?"

"No different than usual," Sherlock replied. "Vaguely impatient, bloated with his own importance, and supercilious."

He held Greg's gaze, his expression unreadable.

"Lestrade," he sighed. "The situation is this. You made a spectacularly unwise choice of 'sex pal' in my brother. The man is a committed servant of the Crown - and secondary to that, he's a reptilian
wretch who would probably put ordinary people to work in mines underground if he could. I'm sorry this liaison has come to an unpalatable end for you, but alas... my brother's life continues quite as normal. You are forgotten. I suggest you look to your own welfare, Lestrade, rather than his. Perhaps drown your grief in doing some laundry, mm? Maybe even a shower and a shave. There's an idea."

"Sherlock," John whispered. The colour had run from his face. "Sherlock, what - what are you - "

"Might I please go for my bath now?" Sherlock chirped over him, smiling flatly at Greg from his armchair. "Terribly sorry and all that. Watch Dirty Dancing. Eat chocolate ice cream. 'Plenty more fish in the sea'."

_Fuck._

_He's fine. And you're - _

_And I'm - _

The room seemed to be closing in.

_Satisfied now?_ he asked himself. _Got your answers?_

John called after him as he moved towards the stairs. Greg didn't stop. He walked down them in silence, hardly hearing his own footsteps. It felt like he didn't really exist anymore. He'd come here to stop thinking. He'd gotten what he came for.

The door let him out into the rain.

By the time he reached Baker Street Tube Station, he was soaked to the skin.

He got home, left the lights on, and crawled in silence into his bed. His wet clothes clung to his body. It was barely ten o'clock. He didn't want to be awake anymore.

_'Forget him, and we'll forget you.'_

_'Goodbye, Greg.'_

_'I will miss you.'_

Sleep came in shades, and brought little comfort.
"You alright?" Sally asked, eyeing Greg closely as she brought him the latest stack of reports.

Greg didn't know whether to dignify the question with a response.

"Maybe starting with flu. M'fine." He pulled the top report towards himself. Something about forensics. His eyes wouldn't even turn the letters into words. "What is this?" he said, numbly. "What d'you need from me?"

Sally visibly bit her tongue. She shifted her weight to the other heel, folding her hands across her chest.

"Are you fit to work?" she said, weary.

*Don't start with me. Not today. "M'here, aren't I?"

"You're not right. You've not been right for weeks." She paused, now regarding him with unconcealed suspicion. "Ever since your 'holiday'."

If one more of them put air quotes around that, Greg was going to lose his fucking mind.

"I wasn't *on holiday,*" he told her, his voice hard. "Classified work for the commissioner. We've been through this."

Sally pushed her tongue into her cheek. "Hell of a tan you came back with, for someone who wasn't *on holiday.*"

*Right.*

Greg dropped his pen onto his desk.

He stood up, shoved back his chair, and pulled his coat from the back of it.

"Where are you going?" she asked, not bothering to cover her exasperation.

"Smoke."

"You've been five times this morning. It's not even noon, Greg."

"It's not even noon, *sir,*" Greg snarled. "And I'll smoke as much as I bloody want. How about you go be insubordinate at someone else for the afternoon, hey? You're driving me round the bend."

He didn't wait for her to reply. He left his office unlocked, pushed his hands into his pockets, and exited the division with a bang of the door.

He didn't want to smoke in the car park. There was too much chance he'd be joined. He couldn't deal with that today. He couldn't deal with any of it. He made his way instead to reception, left the building and headed for the Starbucks near Charing Cross, thinking he could at least have twenty minutes of being somewhere else.

As he walked, his head took itself back to Baker Street.

A night's broken sleep hadn't made it any easier to process.
He couldn't put the two things together - a Mycroft who fought MI5 agents to try and reach him; a Mycroft who'd moved on without a care. He should have known Sherlock wouldn't give a shit. It had felt for a few minutes like he would - like he was piecing things together in his mind - and Greg had started to have some kind of hope.

So much for that.

By the time he reached Starbucks, he was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he almost tripped over a homeless bloke slumped in the entrance of Embankment Place. He received a mouthful of abuse for it, began his apologies, and got told to piss off.

Feeling worse than ever, Greg let himself into Starbucks and stood numbly in line for ten minutes, letting the noise of the coffee machine crowd out his thoughts.

At last, wishing the macchiato in his hand were wine, he headed back out onto Villers Street.

He braced as he passed the homeless bloke again, hoping he didn't get a load more grief.

The hiss stopped him dead in his tracks.

"Lestrade."

Alarmed, Greg looked down.

Beneath a grubby black beanie hat, and above a wild false beard, Sherlock's eyes flashed their unmistakable silver-blue.

Greg's jaw dropped.

It took him a second to speak.

"Sherlock?" He glanced around the street, wondering if he was imagining this. "What... what the hell are you doing here?"

"Taking the case, Lestrade." Sherlock held his startled gaze. "My brother. His mistreatment by the security services."

Your -

Greg forced himself to loosen his grip on the scalding coffee.

"What do you mean 'mistreatment'?" he bit out, sharp. "Last night, you said I had 'a narrow escape'."

"Indeed you did," said Sherlock, "and thank goodness. They've underestimated you, Lestrade. It will cost them dearly."

Sherlock tipped his head low, shuffling back out of sight as a woman clicked past in her heels.

"There are a number of security cameras in the vicinity," he muttered, "and while not all of them will be monitored, some of them may be. We mustn't arouse their suspicions. Buy a coffee for me and it will cover us to talk. I imagine you have questions - so do I. And if we're lucky, it might transpire that one of us also has some answers."
"Bugged?"

"Almost certainly."

"Christ. When?"

Sherlock took a drink of his coffee, keeping his head down. "I noticed minor changes on the morning of Wednesday 24th January, not linked to Mrs Hudson's usual rampantous dusting..."

They were sitting against a disused shop front beneath the covered roof of Embankment Place, facing the Regent Dry Cleaners opposite. No-one passing by was paying them a scrap of attention.

"I made a number of initial assumptions," Sherlock went on, in a murmur, "but I could draw no firm conclusions... my brother's behaviour in the three weeks since has confirmed to me there's been a significant change in his circumstances."

Greg felt his heart writhe inside his chest. "You said he sounded normal when you spoke on the phone."

Sherlock snorted, casting him a quick look.

"I said that for the benefit of anyone listening, Lestrade. Mycroft is clearly undergoing considerable mental distress. All the signs are there. At first I wondered if political infighting might have endangered his position... but now I know of your involvement, things are clearer."

Sherlock took another drink, his eyes narrowing as he watched a passing huddle of students.

"Mycroft hasn't answered any of my attempts to contact him," he murmured. "Two nights ago, during his telephone call to me, through discreet questioning I ascertained that he is in fact unaware of my attempts. I assume you've encountered a similar wall of silence."

Greg's pulse quickened.

"I've rung him a hundred times," he said. "A thousand times. Nothing."

"Mm. That mobile phone number is dead to us, then. I imagine the phone itself has been taken away from Mycroft." Sherlock adjusted the band of his beanie. "Though, as it's still able to receive calls, it suggests that my brother's superiors are monitoring attempts to contact him... you should stop doing so immediately."

Oh Christ.

Fuck, this isn't good.

"Mate, this... this is wrecking me a little. I can't cope thinking he's in trouble. I need to find him."

"Of course you do," Sherlock tutted, as if this were perfectly obvious. "Look at the state of you, Lestrade. You're a mess. My brother sounded no happier on the phone. I'm hoping to give our watchers the impression that I couldn't care less about him, to induce them into false security... but his distress was very clear to me."

He looked sideways at Greg, raising an eyebrow.

"Unsurprising that I've also been put under surveillance," he remarked. "Mycroft's superiors have
correctly concluded that I'm the most likely channel you would use to contact him."

Greg inhaled, processing this.

"So - they're letting him ring you," he said, "but you're not able to contact him?"

"Mm. He was quite clearly aware that his call to me was monitored."

"Jesus."

"Most likely to ensure that he didn't try to get some message to you."

"Sherlock - Sherlock, this is bad - "

"It is." Sherlock scanned the nearby shop fronts with a flicker of his sharp eyes. "I considered waiting until Mycroft is permitted to contact me again, then trying to communicate in code... unfortunately, my brother's superiors have access to the highest level codebreakers in the country. They will be watching that window of communication very closely. I don't think it's wise, Lestrade. We'll need to find some other way."

Greg's heart thudded hard. "So - so you'll help me?"

"Of course." Sherlock frowned at him over the fake beard. "Why would I not? He is my brother, and you are a close associate of mine." His mouth thinned as he shuffled. "I also don't appreciate attempts by the British security services to repress my freedom. Mycroft doing so was tedious enough - a brother's prerogative, I suppose... I'm not willing to tolerate the rest of them."

A shudder of relief rushed through Greg's every vein.

"Fuck," he breathed out. "Thank Christ. Thank you. What the hell do we do?"

Sherlock clucked his tongue, thinking.

"Electronic communication of any sort will be immensely risky," he said. "It's easily monitored and leaves a trail. Mycroft's masters will have disabled any method of contact that might be expected... it means we must do the unexpected if we're to have any hope of reaching him."

Greg's stomach twisted.

"Christ, this isn't meant to be happening." He dropped his head back against the metal shutter, shutting his eyes. "It was just one week."

"Just one week?"

"A week to - be together." Greg hesitated. "Mycroft and me. He said that's all he'd be allowed." He kept his eyes shut, trying to forget it was Sherlock sitting beside him, trying to forget the sound of Mycroft's voice as the agents laid into him on the beach. "Jesus, I don't even know what the happy outcome is here, mate. Even if we do find a way to contact him, what do we say?"

"We ask if he requires help," Sherlock said. "We ask if he's being subjected to duress."

"What if he says no, Sherlock? What if he's - happy with...?"

Sherlock shifted.

"I don't believe my brother's welfare is a priority to his masters," he said. "Having spoken to him, I
don't believe that Mycroft now believes it either - but escaping a distressing situation is not necessarily easy, especially if it's a long-term situation that was once much coveted."

Greg's pulse slugged. He knew that well enough.

"We must give my brother the opportunity," Sherlock said, facing him. "We must let him know that you're concerned. His superiors will be providing him with whichever version of the truth suits them. He's likely been told that you're unaffected by the situation... that you've quite comfortably forgotten him. He might not even be aware you returned to London."

Greg shuddered slowly.

"The guy hinted to me - in St Barts - suggested I'd maybe want to stay there. Not come back."

"Mm. It would have suited them well, I imagine," Sherlock frowned, shaking his head. "My brother's slavish servitude to the establishment could therefore continue forever. His involvement in the security services has always unsettled me. It is a waste of his skills."

He glanced sideways at Greg.

"Mycroft is a hard nut to crack," he noted. "Might I ask how you managed that?"

Greg gave him a frown.

"Just spent some time with him." He looked down at the grubby pavement beneath them, exhaling. "He doesn't let himself be happy. I - like making people happy."

Sherlock snorted.

"Mycroft lives in hope of finally impressing our father," he muttered. "Given that the man was cremated sixteen years ago, the chances are looking slim."

Greg smiled faintly, gating his fingers around his empty coffee cup.

"I'm - glad you're here, Sherlock," he said. "Really, I mean it."

"Mm. I believe we'll achieve more together than we would separately."

"What do we do? D'you have any ideas?"

"Several." Sherlock inhaled, gazing listlessly across at Subway. "One in particular seems promising."

"Yeah? Hit me with it."

Sherlock pulled his lower lip between his teeth.

"The most secure method of communication is face-to-face," he said. "A verbal conversation leaves no record outside the minds of its participants. If we want to hear the unaltered truth of the situation from my brother, we need it from his own mouth."

Greg's pulse sped. "Makes sense. So - d'you know where he lives?"

Sherlock tutted.

"Every square inch of the property's exterior will be monitored," he said. "Even more closely than usual. Are you envisioning that we shimmy up a drainpipe in the small hours? Behave yourself,
Lestrade."

Greg fought the urge to roll his eyes.

"How else are we going to speak to him?" he demanded. "Wait until he goes to the supermarket? You behave. I've not slept for three fucking weeks."

"Clearly. You've also been drinking far too much, and it's not going to help at all." Sherlock's eyes narrowed. "If we're to lessen the scrutiny upon us, you must make some effort to suggest that you're resolved to your fate. Please wash yourself and your clothes, shave, and attempt some outward semblance of returning to normal life."

Greg covered his face for a second. Jesus, Sherlock. Where's my spoonful of sugar?

"Right. Then what?"

Sherlock hummed. "I'll require another day to think. Then I will make my suggestion to you. Come here again tomorrow and I'll meet you."

"Right." The thought of returning to his flat tonight, sitting there and waiting, made Greg's breath thin. "Right. That's - fine."

Sherlock lifted an eyebrow at him. "Problem?"

"No, it's - I'm just..." Jesus. Of all the people. "I'm not - doing great right now. M'not sleeping well. It's fine, Sherlock. I'll just - tell myself to get on with it."

Sherlock read his face for a moment, drawing conclusions.

"You do not wish to be alone," he said.

God help me. "N-Not so much."

Sherlock thought about it. "My flat is monitored," he said at last. His eyes flickered. "Then, most likely so is yours... and so, perhaps... mm. Advantages."

"What - d'you mean, 'advantages'?"

"If you were to relocate temporarily to Baker Street, the security services would be able to witness us interacting... a stage version of it, at least. We can attempt to lead them astray. Allow them to see you taking steps towards forgetting my brother. Allow them to see me encouraging you as such."

"R-Right." Greg almost didn't dare to hope. "Sherlock, are you sure? You honestly don't mind?"

"No. John will do a good job of fussing over you - and if the security services believe they now have full access to all our conversations, they're likely to grow lax in monitoring us."

"So we'll - still meet here tomorrow, yeah? To talk plans?"

"Mm." Sherlock discreetly adjusted his beard. "You should return to your flat after work, then stage the decision to leave it. Bring yourself to Baker Street and beg our shelter. I shan't inform John that you'll be coming. His reaction, at least, will be genuine - for the benefit of those who watch."

A quiet shudder passed up Greg's spine. "This is creeping me out, mate."

"Mm. All the more incentive to give my brother a chance to escape it."
"From this moment on, assume at all times you are being monitored. Your car, house and office are not safe. You must watch yourself as closely as they do. At Baker Street, mention nothing of our meeting here."

Sherlock's eyes focused on his face.

"And if you mention Mycroft," he added, "do not expect to hear favourable terms from me."

"I won't."

"Good." Sherlock looked away. "Go now. Your absence from Scotland Yard will have been noted. It's only a matter of time before someone is sent to ascertain your whereabouts."

Greg didn't need telling twice. He hauled himself up from the filthy ground, brushed down his coat, and said,

"Same time tomorrow, yeah?"

"Let's make it one hour later. We can't be too careful."

"Fine. I'll - see you this evening, I guess."

"Mm." As Greg started to go, Sherlock said, "Lestrade?"

Greg turned back around. "Yeah?"

Sherlock's eyes glittered at him from beneath the grubby hat.

"Be of good courage," he advised. "You are needed."

As Greg pushed his way through the door of the division, he barely noticed his surroundings. For the first time in days, his head was full of something other than grief. His thoughts raced as they threw together ideas, discarding them just as fast. Things were going somewhere. There was hope on the horizon, however small.

It meant he had no time to brace himself.

He'd stepped into his office before he realised it was occupied. Looking up in alarm, he found the chief superintendent sitting in his chair - with Sally standing at his side, her arms crossed, shoulders stiff, eyes trained firmly on the carpet.

Greg's heart dropped like a stone.

"And where've you been?" the superintendent demanded.

Greg held his ground. "Coffee."

"Perfectly good coffee in the canteen," his superior grunted. "Where've you been?"

Greg said nothing. He stared at his sergeant, trying to call her eyes to his.
Sally ignored him, biting the inside of her cheek.

"Having some trouble getting up in the morning, Lestrade?" the superintendent went on, looking him up and down in disgust. "You should treat yourself to your swanky coffee then. Maybe with some caffeine in you, you'll even make it here with an ironed shirt and a proper shave. You're a mess, man. Get it sorted."

*Jesus.* "Sorry sir."

The superintendent was wholly unmoved.

"Just been hearing all about your slack attitude lately," he said, leaning back in Greg's chair and lacing his chubby hands upon his stomach. "Looks like it was all true."

Greg glanced at Sally in time to see her shut her eyes.

His teeth gritted quietly.

"Didn't realise I had a slack attitude, sir," he said, earning himself a snort. The superintendent got up with a squeak of Greg's chair.

"My office," he said. "*Now.*"

He strode past them both, not looking back.

Greg waited in the doorway.

Pushing her tongue around her teeth, Sally swung on her heel. She strolled over.

As she tried to pass him, Greg blocked her with his arm.

"Four years," he muttered. She turned her head away. "D'you ever get tired of undermining me, out of interest? Or is it just a constant joy?"

Sally shrugged, not meeting his eyes. "Just doing my job."

Greg's heart clenched.

"Your job to kick me in the face when I'm down?" he hissed at her. "D'you remember all the crap when Anderson's wife found out about the pair of you? *I* remember. And I remember cutting you slack. Turns out I should've shopped you in."

She rolled her eyes to the striplights.

"Look," she sighed, "this isn't *personal*. All I said to him is you've been a bit -"

"*Lestrade!*"

Greg's jaw worked. "*Coming, sir.*"

He wrenched the door of his office shut behind her.

Care

The grandfather clock carried nine PM through the house.

Mycroft reached in silence between the heavy drapes.

The pack was where he'd left it on the table, the lighter lying on top. Retrieving a cigarette with his eyes still closed, he placed it between his lips and lit it. The brief flash of flame warmed the alcove around him, glinting in the raindrops on the window and washing his hands and face in a glow of orange.

The colour felt intense, almost painful on his skin - like it shouldn't quite be here.

This was no longer a world of orange.

With the cigarette held in his mouth, Mycroft snapped the lighter shut and closed up the packet. He placed them back beyond the drapes without a sound. They would be needed again soon enough.

Drawing his knees to his chest, he pulled in a first deep lungful of smoke and let it calm the very worst of it - settle it all into silence again, enough for him to think.

There were things he couldn't think about. There were things within his mind that he couldn't even approach, knowing if he did then the nausea and the misery and the anger would still be crippling him into the small hours. He couldn't touch those wounds. He couldn't even look at them to judge their extent - just let them sit in his soul and rot.

Instead, he thought about the gardener's boy.

Mycroft hadn't even known his name.

His heart had called the boy 'you'. Every time that he'd appeared, there you are. He'd been older than Mycroft - just enough to seem wonderful, a handful of years and no more. He helped his father at the weekends, pushing barrows and dragging sacks of gravel across the estate. The work had made his shoulders broad. His hands looked rough to the touch but his face was boyish and suntanned, and it always smiled for Mycroft.

'Master Holmes.'

The boy's father looked so proud the first time he'd said it. This had been taught in advance, Mycroft realised. 'When you meet Mr Holmes's son, you're to call him Master Holmes. Be polite to him. Take your hat off. Wish him good morning.' The gardener had lived in the nearby village all his life, served Mycroft's grandfather in his youth, and he was a humble man but a proud one. His son radiated the same quiet dignity of the earth. He used a spade like it was a noble act, digging for hours beneath the Saturday sun without a word of complaint, his jumper tied loose around his waist, and Mycroft had gazed from every window in the house at the shine of sweat on his shoulders and the flecks of mud on his forearms.

The gardener's boy didn't seem to worry about a thing in the world.

None of the rest of Mycroft's family seemed to notice his existence. They never mentioned him or spoke about him - to the point that Mycroft almost wondered if anyone else could see him.

Some days, he was all that Mycroft saw.
The summer after he turned seventeen, Mycroft's mother decided she wanted a Japanese-style garden installing - stone lanterns and a pagoda. She'd never been anywhere near Japan, and her giddy insistence on a pair of "funny little foo dogs" at the entrance made Mycroft rather wince - but she thought it would be a marvellous place to take tea with guests on spring afternoons, and so the labourers were called in.

The gardener brought his boy throughout the week to help.

Hardly a boy now, of course. A young man of twenty. Mycroft overheard the kitchen staff one morning, saying he was engaged to a girl from the village.

He told himself the kitchen staff were always prone to gossip. Very little of what they supposed was ever true.

One hot and arid Tuesday, when the distant sound of building work was threatening to give her a migraine, Mycroft's mother had begged him from the conservatory couch to go out and 'reason' with the builders. She was convinced such excessive noise wasn't necessary.

Mycroft made his way from the house with a weary tread, wondering how he should phrase a request to drill through concrete more quietly.

He never made it to the labourers. He got as far as his mother's rose garden, which had been her pet project last year, and found the gardener's boy watering them with his white shirt tied around his waist. The knowledge of any assignment rather evaporated from his head.

A smile - an immediate soft smile, too friendly to be just polite, his eyes too bright, his grin too shy, his sudden self-consciousness too perfect, and Mycroft had died a thousand deaths before the young man even opened his mouth.

"How are you, Master Holmes?" he said.

They talked as he watered the roses.

Someone had taught him how to make conversation with those that society considered his betters - to ask polite questions, to offer compliments and grace, to say 'Master Holmes' and 'sir', and not bore the master's son with petty details about himself. Mycroft was only seventeen; he didn't know how to ask. What is your name? What do you do, when you aren't here? Is it true that you're engaged? Instead he answered the boy's questions at length, nervous, desperate just to stand beside him a little longer and watch him gently tip water over the velvet-red roses.

His mother's migraine would be in full swing by now.

Mycroft didn't care.

He walked with the gardener's boy to put the watering can away, then stood talking behind the shed with him for what seemed like another hour, gazing into his soft green eyes, watching him grin.

The gardener's boy was gazing at him, too.

It made Mycroft's heart pound. There was something intense in his gaze, something that wasn't just polite. The gardener's boy didn't want him to go. He wanted Mycroft to stay, to talk a little longer. Mycroft couldn't even begin to contemplate the implications of that. As the afternoon's heat began to ebb the gardener's boy pulled his shirt from around his waist and put it on again, leaving it unbuttoned, and that strip of tanned skin was somehow even more tantalising when framed in crumpled white. He was standing closer to Mycroft, asking him things more softly. His eyes
flickered to Mycroft's mouth when he spoke.

At last, just as Mycroft began to fear that his absence from the house would be noted, the gardener's boy took a breath.

"Come with me," he said. "Quick."

Mycroft didn't ask. He didn't think. He just followed the boy away between the greenhouses. As they reached the gate through the wall that bordered the estate, the gardener's boy reached back for his hand.

Mycroft seized it, his heart leaping.

They broke into a run.

In the quiet cool of the woodland just off the estate, the gardener's boy backed him up against a tree. He ran his fingers down Mycroft's arms, caught his wrists and raised them up above his head, pinning them against the bark - then leant down.

The boy's mouth was warm and demanding. As his tongue eased between Mycroft's lips, a series of slow-motion detonations blew Mycroft's soul into fragments. He pulled against the boy's hold, shaking; the sound it caused against his mouth soothed something in his soul he hadn't realised hurt. He drank the soft moan, desperate for more of them, and his wrists were transferred to the grip of one hand.

The other hand delved between them, cupped between his legs and began to rub.

As he panted the boy murmured to him, whispered. Soft things. Warm things. Fond things. He let Mycroft grind against his palm and bit gently at his ear, humming, loosened Mycroft's belt and slipped his hand inside his underwear. The gentle wrap of rough fingers, thicker than his own, was too enjoyable to cope. As Mycroft came in whimpers the boy bit and kissed at his neck, hushing him, telling him it was all alright.

Afterwards, sweating beneath his clothes and still trembling, Mycroft knelt down in the leaves. He undid the boy's belt, loosened his trousers and buried his nose longingly in that soft thatch of dark hair, male scent and sweat and earth, even as mud and damp soaked through to his knees, not caring, caring only for the thick fingers now shaking in his hair, petting him, the deep gasps he was causing, the heavy thickness sliding in and out of his mouth.

He could still feel the boy's arms tight around him, thirty years later.

"Come here tomorrow night." He could still hear the soft voice in his ear. "Come meet me, okay? Promise? Figure we can be friends."

Mycroft had never had a friend.

It felt like it went on for months, meeting the gardener's boy in the woods. They used to kiss and touch and lie down in the leaves on his coat, just the two of them. Mycroft was too afraid to tell him he was wonderful. He tried to tell him with his hands and his mouth, with the soft sounds they shared together, and as the nights went by it felt too late to ask his name. He was just you. He was everything. Mycroft had never had someone to love him, to say kind things to him. The gardener's boy didn't care about his family or his future or his schooling or his prospects, none of it - not any of it - just his skin, and his touch.

Mycroft still didn't know how Father found out.
He'd been so careful. Leaving the house after dark when he wouldn't be missed, destroying clothing that couldn't be washed in secret, taking pains to conduct himself no differently than usual. Even still, it had all come to light. Someone must have seen.

He still couldn't bear the memories of the argument. The pain still heaved at the stitching of his soul. He remembered the next morning with almost nauseous clarity - dragged into the car by the hair, thrown in the back along with a suitcase to spend the rest of his summer with his great aunt and uncle in the Scottish borders.

When he returned from school at Christmas, there was a new gardener.

Father had never spoken to him properly again. He'd never really looked Mycroft in the eye.

He didn't think his mother was ever told. They'd have kept it from her - she was too delicate, too sensitive a creature to cope with the thought of her dutiful Edward being mauled in the leaves by some grubby-handed brute from the village.

_He was mine._

_He was kind._

_And you had no right to take me from him._

Blowing out a thin column of smoke, Mycroft gazed through the window at the moonlit estate. It was too dark to see where the grounds ended and the woods began. Part of him wanted to go - now - to get his coat and head out into the darkness, walk between the dismantled greenhouses, follow the path to the gate and out into the woods, and see if his feet remembered the way.

Maybe the gardener's boy would be there, somehow.


But it wasn't the gardener's boy he wanted.

Mycroft dragged on the cigarette until his hand stopped shaking, until the blur in his eyes had sharpened once more.

Some time later, there came a quiet knock upon his study door. The slow creak of the hinge was muffled by the drapes, and her voice came calmly through the darkness.

"Mr Holmes?"

Mycroft fortified himself, stubbing the cigarette out on the window pane. Over three weeks he'd burned the edge of it black, melted the chipping white paint. Cigarette stubs littered the window-seat beneath him.

_Work, _he thought. _Some semblance of care required._

"Yes?" he said, and he could almost feel her intake of breath.

"Are you - in the window, sir?"

Closing his eyes, Mycroft rested his head back against the wall. "Yes."

Her heels crossed the floor towards him. "I have something for your attention."
Mycroft reached numbly for his cigarettes and the lighter.

"Can it wait until morning?" he said, opening up the packet.

"I don't think it should, sir."

Placing a cigarette between his lips, Mycroft lit it.

"Is the nation's very future at risk?" he enquired through his teeth, realising even then that he possibly wouldn't care.

Anthea's fingertips appeared between the heavy velvet drapes, drawing them back. She had a laptop cradled in the crook of her arm. She made no comment as to his lack of tie, his shirt sleeves rolled or the mess of his hair, nor the heavy stench of cigarettes that now filled the cold space. She'd made few comments on anything recently. She knew there was little to be said.

She transferred the laptop into his arms without a word, closed the drapes, and walked away.

As her footsteps moved towards the door, Mycroft squinted down at the glare of the screen. He lowered the brightness with a wince, dragging on his cigarette, and realised he was looking at a surveillance feed of his brother's flat.

Dear Christ - what now?

He then realised he was seeing three figures, not two - and he felt his heart cave.

John pulled him in out of the rain at once.

"There... here, sit down..." He took Greg's coat over his arm, and knelt beside the sofa to look at him, peering into his face. "You're not well. When did you last eat?"

Greg didn't remember. He shook his head, numb, and watched John's mouth flatten in gentle disapproval.

"We've got some leftover pasta," John said. "We'll start with that and a cup of tea, I think. Then you need a decent night's sleep."

Sherlock's voice came from somewhere in the kitchen.

"Is that Lestrade? What's the matter?"

"Put the kettle on, will you?" John called. He shifted, catching Greg's gaze and holding it very seriously. "How much've you been drinking lately? Don't lie to your doctor."

Greg's stomach tightened. "You're not my doctor."

"I wish I was... and I'm taking that as 'too much'..." John breathed in, slowly. "You need time off work. Alright? You're depressed, Greg. You're not well."

Greg's gaze shuttered. He looked away, trying to swallow back the words. They came from his mouth without his permission. "I've got time off work."
John paused, reading his face. He knew something wasn't right. "How long?"

Greg shut his eyes. "'Til Monday."

"Is that - enforced time off work?"

Greg nodded, numb.

"R-Relieved of duty. Told to sort myself out. Think long and hard."

"Jesus." John laid a hand on his forearm. "Right. You'll stay here with us, okay? We'll get you back on your feet. Get you sleeping again. Get you to the GP, and see what they can do for you."

Don't need the GP. Don't need my job.

Only one thing I need.

Sherlock appeared from the kitchen in his dressing gown and goggles, holding a beaker of something bright blue. He frowned as he caught sight of Greg. "Why is he here?" he demanded.

John pressed his tongue into his cheek.

"Greg's staying with us for a few days," he said. "Did you put the kettle on?"

"Why staying with us?"

"Because he's not well, Sherlock."

Sherlock's brow furrowed. "Why? What is wrong with him?"

John breathed in. "Christ give me strength," he muttered, then, "It doesn't matter, Sherlock. Just fill the kettle, will you? You don't have to make the tea. I'll do it. Just start the damn thing boiling."

"For god's sake... is this about my brother? He's in perfect health, Lestrade. He's no more insufferable than he's ever been."

"Sherlock - "

"John, this sort of hormonal moping isn't going to - "

"Sherlock!" John barked, and in the face of sudden military severity, Sherlock paled and clutched his beaker. "Go make tea! Milk and two!"

Sherlock vanished back into the kitchen as quiet as a mouse. A moment later, they heard the squeak of the tap and the clatter of the kettle being removed from its base.

Turning back to Greg, with a steadying breath, John said,

"I'm sorry. Honestly. It's... these things are always..." He sighed. "I'm sorry, Greg. I mean it. We'll get you sorted."

Greg swallowed around the lump in his throat. "Thanks, John."

"I'll go warm up that pasta for you. You okay just sitting?"

Greg nodded weakly. "Yeah. Th-Thanks."
John patted him on the arm, stood up, and moved away into the kitchen.

Greg watched him go, thick-throated. He looked down at his suitcase propped against the sofa, and passed a hand over the back of his neck in agitation.

*At least I'm here.*

Baker Street had a warmth that his flat didn't have. It had John, too - calm, reliable, not interested in letting a friend go down without a fight. Even Sherlock's theatrical scorn was reassuring. There were people here, and it didn't matter if he was on the brink of disciplinary action at work. It didn't matter if he couldn't bear to be alone. None of it mattered.

This was progress.

It didn't feel like it, but it was.

---

*Oh - god -*

Mycroft couldn't breathe.

He'd been watching the feed for several minutes, barely even aware of the cigarette burning down towards his fingertips.

*He's with Sherlock. He's -*

*Not well -*

*Relieved of duty -*

He found her downstairs in the kitchen, annotating a report.

As he dropped the laptop onto the table with a crack, she jumped and sat bolt upright.

"What is this?" he demanded. Every inch of his skin felt like it was burning. He stared at her, his jaw locking with anger, his heart beating against his ribs. "What do you mean by showing me this?"

Anthea said nothing. She watching him carefully as her fingers curled tight around her pen.

Mycroft felt his shoulders start to shake.

"Why show me him suffering?" He searched her gaze. "*Why - torture me* with - or is this supposed to reassure me? Are you trying to bring me some perverse comfort, that my misery is shared?"

His throat clenched.

"Because *it does not,*" he bit at her. "Not for a moment. To know that -"

His heart gave a lurch, convulsing with the thought of it.

"*Unhappy.* Unwell. Do you realise I spend the greater part of every day trying to convince myself he's safe and content? What else do you think I have to reassure me?"
She said nothing, still watching him.

Mycroft felt his chest ache.

"You invaded my privacy for four days," he said, and saw guilt fill her eyes at once. "And now you think you have a window to my soul, do you? You do not."

Something broke in his heart. He heard it break in his voice.

"You didn't witness even half of what passed between us," he told her, shaking. "Not a fraction of what we shared. What he gave to me. Now you show me him broken and unhappy, as if I'm meant to gain something from that - as if something will change - as if you're aiding me somehow. Bringing me peace. Resolution."

His fists balled. His voice rang from the ceiling.

"There is no peace for me!" he shouted, raging at her across the counter. She didn't move. "There is no resolution!"

She opened her mouth.

Mycroft shouted her down.

"Bring me this in a year!" he shouted, pointing at the laptop. "Bring me this when he's forgotten me, and he's happy! Show me him laughing - show me him like he should be - show me him when he marries again and I can at least know that he is loved and he is safe and not alone. For god's sake. Do not show me him broken. I saw him beaten until he bled, trying to reach me. Did you think my memories of him aren't yet poisoned enough?"

Her eyes were filling with tears.

Mycroft stared at her, wishing he could ignore the heat now rising in his own.

"You're hurt, are you?" he said, his throat gripping. "Distressed, that I've shouted at you?"

Without a word, she shook her head.

The realisation only made him angrier.

"Do not pity me," he breathed. His heart reeled. "Don't you dare. This was a call to action, was it?"

He pointed at the laptop. "You want me to go to him, do you? At any risk? And he and I will kiss, and it will all be a miracle, will it?"

The silence rang around them. Mycroft had never wanted so dearly to fall to his knees and howl.

"There are no miracles," he told her. Three words were branded into his soul. He felt them flame as he spat them at her. "Life is shit. Fielding will find out in minutes if I reach for him. Do you understand how close to danger I brought him? What things she could authorise, if she decides they're necessary? She can end his life as he knows it."

A shudder coursed through his shoulders.

"And that's what you want for me," he said, weakening. "A few more minutes in his arms, then to see him dragged away. Is your understanding of this situation so poor? There is no prison on this planet too remote. There is no false charge too implausible. Fielding will cripple him. I want him to be happy."
Anthea's expression changed. She gripped the edge of the counter, steeling herself, and he saw her lift her chin.

Mycroft's throat filled with bile at once.

"Don't you dare," he seethed. "Don't even think that in my presence."

His assistant inhaled. She began to speak. He drowned her out.

"No-one would endure that for me! No-one would put himself through that for me!"

She stood from her chair in a fury, knocking it backwards onto the tiles with a clatter.

"You can't possibly know, Mr Holmes!" she shouted. "Because you haven't given the man a chance!"

"Are you seriously suggesting that in four days - four days out of forty-six-years - "

"- hear it from his own mouth, and then perhaps you can - "

"- quite clear to you? The only person in a bloody decade who has - "

"- and unwell, and distressed, and it is because he - "

"- without bloody paying them! Him! Only him! The first one, the only one, and yet you - "

"- worst possible scenario is that he confirms what you're already - "

"- that I have the capacity to secure a commitment of that magnitude? With him? After four fucking days?" Mycroft gasped, and felt his knees almost give way. Anthea shrank into silence at once, concern flashing across her face. He gripped the edge of the countertop so hard his knuckles whitened, near to panting with misery and nausea, one more shock of grief away from losing his mind. "Do you have eyes in your skull?" he begged her. "That is Greg Lestrade. He is without equal. He is wonderful. And you think that after four days, he'd be amenable to the professional equivalent of a marriage proposal? From me? Are you truly so ignorant of the broken bloody wreck you serve?"

Anthea's cheeks flushed red, her chest heaving as she stared into his eyes.

"If you're so certain," she said, voice quiet, "that he will reject you, then you've nothing to lose. Ask him, Mr Holmes, and prove me wrong."

Mycroft's fists curled.

"I'm not going to eviscerate the last scrap of my dignity in the name of proving you wrong," he said. "I have nothing to gain but humiliation on top of my grief."

"You have everything to gain," she groaned, covering her eyes with her hands in despair. "For god's sake, Mr Holmes. The man is falling apart. So are you. And there's no good reason for it whatsoever."

Mycroft felt the room lurch around him. He shut his eyes, breathing hard, and gripped the edge of the counter.

Beyond his closed eyes, he heard her gathering up the papers she'd been reading.

"You risk nothing in telling him," she muttered, her voice angry and low. "You stand to gain a man who adores you. It's unfair of you to keep this from him."

Mycroft's heart jolted. "Unfair?"

"It is deceptive," she went on, unmoved. "If he knew the wholeness of the situation, he'd be able to make his own decision. Instead you're denying him that - hiding it in a panic - all so you can wrap yourself tight in your own loneliness."

Mycroft felt himself turning white.

"Leave this room," he breathed. "Immediately. Before I start to reconsider your empl-"

"Lestrade isn't rejecting you," she interrupted, and seized her stack of files and her briefcase. "You can keep trying to convince yourself he is, Mr Holmes - but you know as well as I do that he's not been given the chance. And you can't bear to give him it in case you discover the truth: you are rejecting you. And you will be a very lonely and regretful man if you continue to do so. Good night sir. I hope you sleep."

She slammed the kitchen door behind her as she left.

In the silence, Mycroft heard his own heart echoing back at him.

He couldn't cope with what it said.

---

Two AM took its time in coming. Greg found himself lying on Sherlock's couch beneath a blanket, watching an old episode of Countryfile with the volume turned close to zero.

Though it wasn't any easier to sleep, it was easier to be awake.

John and Sherlock were upstairs. Somehow that made it better. He wasn't alone. He wasn't lying in the dark in his flat by himself any more, trying to cope and failing, begging himself not to cry. If he had to, he could wake one of them, and the morning would come with a plan.

Curling the blanket around his chin, Greg wondered vaguely if he'd have believed how much this would hurt. When they were lying on the beach, and Myc was teasing him about his sun tan, the thought that it would lead to this was a million miles from his head.

The truth was that nothing in life had really hurt like this. Not her first affair, not the last. Not divorce. Not anything. This hurt on a level that stopped him functioning. Whatever had happened to him in St Barts, it had changed him - and there wasn't a way back now. There was only somehow forwards.

Maybe it would be different, if they'd had time to say goodbye. A runway somewhere. A last hug. Maybe it would all have played out like Mycroft planned, and they'd have walked away from each other as gentlemen, and that would have been that.

Maybe it would have come to this anyway.
He supposed he'd never know.

Greg closed his eyes for a moment against the glare of the TV.

*So long as you're alright, posh.*

Nuzzling into the cushion, he drew a long and silent breath. *So long as you're okay. I'll walk away, if you promise me you're okay. I'll forget somehow. I'll let you be.*

This sofa was where it had all begun. Right there, New Year's Eve - talking properly for the first time. They'd known each other for years and never talked. Sherlock's posh and pretty brother, just as fascinating on the inside as the out, only prettier by the minute, gazing at Greg like he'd never been chatted up at a party before.

This was where it began.

It ended on a beach four thousand miles away, failure and hot sand burning in his wounds.

*Where did they take you, darlin'? Did you sleep that night?*

*Are you sleeping now?*

London, somewhere. This city. This big ugly city, this fucking pit of hell, eight million breaking hearts - and one of them was Mycroft Holmes.

*D'you think about me, darlin'?

*D'you wish I was there?*

It didn't feel like it could have been real. How could it? A white bed and each other, and the sea beyond the glass. Candlelight, gentle arms. Colours in the sky so bright they couldn't possibly exist.

As heat rose in Greg's eyes, he pressed them in silence against the blanket.

He'd give anything for one minute of it back. One minute just to lie in the sand, quiet at Mycroft's side in the sun, listening to him type. Everything had fallen to hell now. There was no way home. He'd died on that beach in St Barts - that might as well have killed him and dumped him in the sea. He could no sooner return to his old life than he could just open his eyes and find himself there in the villa, hot sun on the tiles, Mycroft walking towards him in white linen.

*Holy shit.*

*I miss you.*

*Every bit of you.*

They must have been watching - spying. They knew where to find Mycroft, and they knew he was getting close. Maybe they hadn't liked Greg telling him he was worth more. Maybe they'd worried he was making too much sense to their prized human resource.

He didn't know what he'd say when they found Mycroft.

He had an awful feeling he'd have mere minutes to convince the man to quit a lifelong career - and the only incentive Greg could offer was himself.

*Love me instead. Come be loved and safe in my cold, tiny flat. When final demands come, we'll just*
go to bed. When we're hungry, we'll go to bed. When they turn out all the lights, and switch off all the power, we'll go to bed.

And if they were thrown out onto the streets, they'd come here - here to Sherlock's sofa. There'd be room on it for two.

If there wasn't, Greg would sleep on the floor.

And if the blanket wouldn't stretch, he'd be cold. He'd sit and watch Mycroft sleep, wrapped up warm, and that would be enough.

Opening his eyes, Greg gazed through his soundless tears at the moving colours on the screen. They felt as distant and unreal as all the rest of his life. It occurred to him, staring numbly at the picture, that someone could be watching him right now - cameras. Monitoring equipment. They'd probably been watching him for weeks. If they'd put concealed stuff in Sherlock's flat, they'd have put it into his too. Maybe they'd watched him awake every night, unable to cope, drinking so he could sleep.

Now they knew he was here with Sherlock, and still not sleeping.

He hoped they were worried.

He hoped they were watching every single move he made.

You know he deserves better. You know he was starting to believe me. You're scared of me. S'why you took him away from me.

Keep watching me, bastards.

We're not done.

We're just coming into end game.
Greg awoke the next morning to the quiet clink of cutlery on a plate. He looked up from the sofa cushion, blinking, to find Sherlock in pale grey pyjamas setting out breakfast for him on a small folding table.

"Oh! Jesus, Sherlock... you don't have to - "

"Hmph." Sherlock rearranged the fork to line up properly with the edge of the toast. "Doctor's orders. Frankly, Lestrade, I think you need a reality check and not spaghetti hoops. But apparently I am not a medical man."

Greg smiled a little. He could hear John cooking in the kitchen, humming, frying something.

"Thanks," he said, and looked down at the sizeable plate he'd just been given - scrambled egg, bacon rashers, hash browns. There was hardly any room for the spaghetti hoops.

His stomach ached at the sight.

"I understand there's more in the kitchen, if you require," Sherlock said, clipped. "Would you like tea or coffee with your excessive fuss?"

Greg almost wanted to hug him. "Coffee’d be great, Sherlock. Thanks."

Sherlock drifted back towards the kitchen without comment.

Greg removed the slice of toast perched atop his pile of breakfast, and beneath it discovered the spaghetti hoops. He smiled as he took a bite. They were alphabet spaghetti. He hadn't had it since he was a kid. He and Holly had used to spell rude words in it when their dad wasn't looking.

As he chewed, his gaze passing quietly over the letters, the combination of a double EE caught his eye.

And he realised.

SPEEDYS
TWO PM

Picking up his fork, Greg scooped through the message and spread the letters across his toast. He ate them, ignoring the thudding of his heart, and said nothing as Sherlock brought him his coffee.

"I'm to ask if you slept well," Sherlock said, putting the mug down and aligning its handle with Greg's fork.

Greg smiled. "I've had worse."

Sherlock hummed. He wandered back towards the kitchen.

"He says he slept perfectly, John. May I have my poached eggs now? Or will further table service be
Greg started his morning with a long bath, a shave and a jog around Hyde Park, then took two bin bags of his clothes to the launderette on New Quebec Street.

As he waited with a takeaway coffee and a copy of GQ, he found himself wondering if this had all been noticed. The people here looked like ordinary people; the street outside was full of ordinary traffic. He supposed that at least a hundred windows overlooked the door, and any one of them could contain someone keeping an eye on him.

He wondered how Mycroft coped, living his life like this.

Presumably it grew around you over time. When you got powerful enough to need it, the intrusion of your privacy was presented to you as looking after your safety. By the time you realised what it was - if you ever realised - it was too late. You were too invested. You'd sunk twenty years into building this hell around you. How could you just wriggle out of it? And what could ever make escape feel worth it?

With a noiseless sigh, Greg turned the page in his magazine and found a guide to hidden gems in the Caribbean.

Imagining the eyes that watched him, he flipped ahead without reading.

He got back to his flat with clean laundry at one o'clock. He put it all away, emptied his fridge of expired food, washed up and took his recycling out.

He then caught the tube to Baker Street, and stepped through the door of Speedy's at ten minutes to two.

The girl with the lip ring was working. Greg's heart twisted a little at the sight of her, wishing it was someone who wouldn't recognise him - but as he reached the head of the short queue, and she glanced up from the till, her face opened in delight.

"Hi!" she said, startled. She took him in, the shave and the clean clothes, and she looked so glad it made him feel guilty. "What can I get for you?"

Moved, Greg ordered himself an omelette with chips and a coffee. She smiled brightly, took his ten pound note and promised him it wouldn't be long.

He took a seat at the back next to the TV. The lunch time rush was over, and it was quiet in the café. The other customers all looked like day trippers or office workers, and they were in twos and threes, chatting happily amongst themselves. Greg found himself relaxing somewhat. As he waited for his food, he busied himself on his phone and tried not to look out for Sherlock, hoping he wasn't just going to saunter in through the front door.

Greg's omelette arrived. He ate it, keeping an eye on the time.

After he'd finished, with no sign of Sherlock, he got himself a piece of flapjack and another coffee from the counter. He picked at them slowly, pretending to read the paper. It was nearly twenty past two, and if Sherlock didn't show up soon, it was going to seem suspicious why he'd been hanging
around here for so long.

When the flapjack was down to crumbs, it had turned half past.

Greg started wondering if he'd misread the message. He couldn't imagine the chances of that appearing randomly in spaghetti, with Sherlock slumped in annoyance outside the Charing Cross Starbucks since eleven this morning.

As he listlessly filled in the crossword in the paper, trying to decide if he dared to get another coffee, a worker in navy overalls and a hi-vis jacket entered the café. He spoke briefly to the girl at the counter, then headed directly for the television beside Greg.

As the worker leant awkwardly over the table, examining the fittings, Greg clicked his pen and slid it away. _Sorry, Sherlock. Can't sit here all day._

"Sorry mate," he said, and made to leave his chair. "I'll get out of your way."

"Not necessary," the electrician murmured. "Finish your crossword, Lestrade. The answer to seven down is 'Rachmaninoff' - and I'm afraid you've misspelt 'exaggerate', for two across. Two Gs. One R. Explains why you're having so much trouble with 'Guadalupe'."

Greg's mouth turned up into a smile.

He flattened it at once, retrieved his pen and corrected the error.

"What's the plan?" he asked, his voice low.

"Still in development." Sherlock retrieved a screwdriver from his work belt, and began to loosen the screws attaching the television to the wall. "I have realised an additional component is needed."

"A component?"

"We require the involvement of a third party. You and I will be recognised by the security services."

"Can we not just dress up as electricians?" Greg muttered, pretending to ignore him.

Sherlock chuckled quietly behind the television.

"Not where we'd be going, Lestrade. Their defences are unlikely to fall to a wig and a fluorescent vest."

"Jesus." Greg reached for his coffee, long gone cold. "For the record, you don't suit blonde."

"Noted."

"So you're saying we need another person... what about John?"

He glanced up, watching Sherlock pull a face as he removed another screw from the bracket. "Well known as my associate," Sherlock said. "Possibly also monitored." He stuck his tongue between his teeth for a moment, twisting the screw-driver into the fitting. "With the greatest of respect to John, he also lacks the... _cojones_ to attempt what I have in mind."

Greg forced himself to look down at his crossword. "Why is my heart suddenly pounding?"

"Because you're afraid. And rightly so. We will have a single opportunity for this to work. If we fail, we will not be able to repeat it... there might also be ramifications."
"Ramifications?" Greg muttered, filling 'SINATRA' into five down.

"Mm. If alerted to your attempts to access my brother, the security services are likely to take steps against you. They will restrict your movements."

"Why does that sound so bloody sinister?"

"I'd suggest 'because it is', Lestrade. My brother is a valued resource to the British government. And you are a troublemaker, attempting to carry him off." Sherlock tipped another two screws into his pocket, now supporting the television with one arm. "My plan is entirely feasible," he said, "given the right person to help us, but it is a glass cannon. If it backfires, it will backfire spectacularly."

God almighty. "D'you by any chance have a second, less-risky-but-just-as-effective plan?"

"No. Otherwise I would have presented that one first."

"Right." Greg breathed in, finishing the last of his coffee. "So you're saying we need someone else."

"Mm."

"Someone with 'cojones',"

"Mm." Sherlock detached the final screw, lifting the television down onto the table. A small piece of the bracket clattered beneath Greg's chair. He bent down to get it. "To elaborate, someone rather charismatic - someone who is happy to improvise, and talk their way through resistance if needed."

Greg's heart gripped in his chest. The truth was that he didn't have that many friends anymore. Outside of Sherlock and John, he had his sister - her family - but the last thing he needed was to get them involved in all this mess. He briefly imagined asking Sally Donovan if she fancied going head-to-head with MI5, in the name of checking that Sherlock Holmes's brother was alright. Christ, my life. When did this fucking happen? How long has it been so mental? He didn't really want to think about it.

"Ideally," Sherlock added, sliding his screwdriver back into his belt, "someone not obviously associated with you. The security services might have looked into your social circles. We can't take any chances."

Greg rubbed his forehead, trying his best to look as if he were exasperated with his crossword and not the flaming wreckage of his existence.

"So you want someone ballsy," he checked, in despair, "who I know well enough to ask for help, but not well enough that anyone knows I know them, and they need to be able to improv-"

And it hit him.

As Greg breathed in, hard, Sherlock made a noise of great interest. "That seems promising."

"Christ. I... think it might be."

"I suggest you walk to somewhere noisy," Sherlock said, "where it will be obvious if you're followed - take a tube journey, perhaps - contact them, and ask if they resent the intrusion of the authorities into the lives of British citizens. And let us hope it's an emphatic yes."

"I need to know the plan first," said Greg. "If he asks me, I'll need to - "

Sherlock tipped the television to lie face-down upon the table with a clunk, removing his screwdriver
from his belt again. He started opening up the back.

"I will explain," he said, "but I will ask you to withhold any response until I've finished. It's likely to seem outlandish at first hearing."

Greg watched Sherlock remove the back panel of the television, frowning as he examined the wires. "What're you actually doing to that TV?"

"I have no idea," Sherlock said, jamming the screwdriver into the back.

Greg quickly looked down into his coffee, pushing a hand across his mouth to smother the smile.

"Right," he said. "The plan, then."

"Your third man." Sherlock wiggled the screwdriver until a wire began to come loose. He pulled a small set of clippers from his belt and trimmed it. "You're certain he won't be recognised by the security services? Our success depends on it."

Greg hesitated. "He - definitely will be. Just not in the way you think."

Sherlock glanced up in concern. His brow creased. "Who is it?"

They met the next day at the back of the number 74 to Putney.

"This is getting ridiculous," Greg said, collapsing next to Sherlock, who was hunched up in an oversized tracksuit and a baseball cap. The bus set off with a lurch. "Manager of Speedy's has been looking for you, by the way. Needs your help. Yesterday they had some random electrician show up. He broke their telly, screwed it back to the wall and then left. He wonders if you can come and look for clues."

"The trail has likely gone cold by now." Sherlock sniffed. "These things happen."

He eyed the only passenger near them - a businesswoman in a sharp suit, four seats in front.

As she pressed the bell and got up to leave, he relaxed somewhat.

"Did you speak to your contact?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Greg. "Went round for a drink last night."

"Were you watched?"

"Maybe on the way there and back, but he's got crazy security on his house. Posh place out in St John's Wood. Once I was past the gates, nobody could've heard a thing."

"And what did he say?"

Greg's heart heaved. "He's game. Says he'll do it."

He watched Sherlock's hands tighten on his knees. "Excellent," he breathed. "Then we're a little closer, Lestrade. Did you ascertain a day?"
"Yeah. He said he can do tomorrow, if we want. 'Just say the word'."

"Marvellous. And he's fully aware of the plan?"

"Yep. He's got it down."

"But he's also prepared to adapt if necessary?"

"He's up for it, Sherlock. He's fine. I've told him just to go for it and don't look back."

Sherlock's eyes gleamed. "Then everything is ready."

"Are we certain Mycroft's gonna be there tomorrow?"

"No. But we must take that risk. We have no way of finding out without alerting Mycroft's masters to our intentions."

"Right." Greg bit down into his lip, feeling his heart thump against the front of his chest. This was happening. Nearly a month, and things were moving. "What if something goes wrong?"

"In the time-honoured tradition, Lestrade, we cross that bridge when it appears." Sherlock glanced at him, one eyebrow raised. "If your involvement is suspected - if the security services attempt to confront you in some way, and I am not there - you will be safest in a public place. A place where there are people clutching camera phones. Make a great deal of noise and contact the authorities. These agencies can only move when nobody's watching them."

Christ.

Just take me back. Take me back to St Barts. Take me away from all this.

On his second thought, Greg's heart tightened.

Let me get him out of it, first.

"Think I'll just barricade myself into Baker Street for the rest of my life," he muttered. "So... 'act natural' tonight, is it? Keep calm and carry on?"

"Just so. Tell our third man that kick off tomorrow is twelve noon. Lunchtime - likely to be the most distracting hour of the day - lots of people entering and exiting the building. 'Work with the grain', they say."

"Right. I'll tell him."

"Good." Sherlock looked at him sideways beneath the baseball cap. "You slept better last night."

"Ehh - a bit." Greg pulled at his cuff, glancing down. "Just relieved to feel like we're doing something, to be honest."

Sherlock huffed. "Your heroism will be the end of you, Lestrade."

Greg felt his mouth crease in a smile.

"Yeah?" he said. "So will yours. We make a good pair."

Sherlock's eyes glittered.
"What caused you to love my brother?" he asked, and leant across to press the bell. "I simply have to know."

Greg smiled, watching him swing his way up to his feet.

"He makes me feel like I matter," he said. "Like there's only one of me."

Sherlock raised an eyebrow, holding onto a pole as the bus began to slow. "And the matter is truly that simple?" he said.

Greg felt his heart grow. "You know it's good when it's simple," he said.

Sherlock processed this. "Interesting." He turned away. "I look forward to Mycroft's answer."

"Can I help with dinner?" Greg asked, glancing up from Top Gear as John appeared in the lounge with a cup of tea for him. "Feel like I'm just sitting here while you wait on me, mate. At least let me earn my keep."

"Already handled," John said, with a smile. "You can help me shift the furniture, though - just pull it all back a bit, make a space here."

"Alright..." Greg got off the sofa, confused as he helped slide the armchairs and the coffee table out of the way. "Why're we...?"

"Tradition," John said, still smiling. "Housemates did it at university. Did it once with Sherlock, and he loved it. Now we have to do it every time." He knelt down and reached into a cupboard, removing a roll-up picnic blanket. "He'll be back any minute."

Greg watched, none the wiser, as John unfolded the picnic blanket and spread it across the carpet. There came the clunk of the front door downstairs.

"Speak of the devil..."

As John retrieved a stack of plates from the kitchen, Sherlock appeared in his coat.

He was carrying two carrier bags full of Chinese takeaway containers.

"Guys - " Greg turned to John. "Are you serious?"

John sat himself down on the picnic blanket, patting a spare corner. "C'mon," he said. "Reward for looking after yourself. You're doing well."

"At least let me pay for it, John..."

"How many times," John asked, grinning, as Sherlock brought the bags over to the blanket and put them down, "have you pulled us out of the shit? More than I can think of, anyway. Come sit down."

Heart in his mouth, Greg settled himself on the blanket next to John. He watched as Sherlock removed his coat, tossed it across his armchair and sank down with grace onto the blanket, his long legs folding neatly beneath him. He helped John to open up the plastic containers, dispensing their contents with care onto plates.
Mycroft's hands. Careful, clever hands.

"Think I've eaten more in two days than I have in two weeks," Greg admitted, giving John a guilty glance.

John smiled. He nudged a plate towards Greg.

"Life's short," he said. "Have a spring roll."

As he reached for one, Greg wondered how many hours he'd spent trying to teach that to Mycroft. Gather ye rosebuds while ye may. Reassuring him it was alright to ask for kisses, comfort, pleasure. Coaxing him down to the beach, onto a massage bed, into the pool. Every tiny step of the way, that flash in those anxious grey eyes - the instinctive belief that he wasn't allowed it, purely because he wanted it.

He wondered what had happened to make Mycroft feel like that.

He wondered if they'd really be able to change it in a matter of minutes.

'Life's short. Have a spring roll.'

If they made it out of this insanity, Greg thought, as Sherlock handed him a bowl of fried rice, he was going to get those words tattooed somewhere. He'd look at them every single day in the mirror.

He'd make Mycroft look at them, too.
At noon, they dropped from three receptionists to two in the main foyer. This was Thames House, headquarters of the British intelligence service, but it was no different to anywhere else. Things got quiet for lunch; nobody in their right mind scheduled a meeting for twelve o'clock. The pace would pick up again at one, when the afternoon's work began in earnest - but for now, very little was happening.

Then the glass front doors opened wide, and Ethan Sterling strode in.

Nicole - halfway through a weary recital of her boyfriend's latest thoughtless idiocy - did not notice. Lauren did.

She reached across beneath the reception desk in total silence, slid her hand around Nicole's knee and gripped so hard her nails dug into her stocking.

"Ouch! What are you - ?"

Nicole followed her colleague's pale stare across the foyer - and there he was, deep blue suit and a gleaming smile, grey coat tossed over his arm, that rufflable hair, a jaw that made hers drop.

"Oh! God - is that - ?"

"Jesus. No, it - it can't be - "

He eased his way over across the foyer, pausing to give a smile and a genial hello to an analyst heading out on her lunch. The woman walked into a pillar turning back to stare at him.

"Oh my god - Nic - it's him. It actually is him."

"It can't be," Nicole breathed. "What - what would he be doing - "

Ethan Sterling was now looking right at them, grinning, strolling this way.

Beneath the desk, they took each other's hands and gripped, hard.

As he reached them, both women inhaled as one. He smelled like he'd just stepped out of a fragrance advert.

"Good afternoon, ladies," he murmured, leaning low. "I'm sorry to bother you... can I take up a moment of your time?"

"N-Not at all," Nicole squeaked.

"How can we help?" Lauren asked, and he gave her a look of the deepest gratitude.

"You're so kind. I've come for lunch with an old friend of mine - said to head on up when I got here... only, I can't quite remember..." He bit his lip, glancing between them. "Mycroft's on floor eight, right? Mycroft Holmes."

"Floor nine," Nicole said brightly. "He changed offices in August. Would you like me to - ?" She reached for the phone.
Ethan Sterling reached out, laying his hand fondly on her arm - letting it linger.

Her chest heaved.

"Don't trouble yourself," he murmured, and dropped them a wink they could share. "He knows I'm coming. Thank you, ladies. I'm in your debt."

He then slipped past the desk, and joined the flow of people moving towards the lift.

The receptionists turned to stare at each other.

"Oh - my - god."

"He touched you! Oh god - let me touch you where he touched you - "

"Oh my god."

"Should we have signed him in?"

"God - we didn't even give him a visitor badge! How will he get through the - "

"Did you see him wink?"

"Oh my god. I can't actually breathe."

As the lift doors closed, Ethan took a discreet glance at the people in his vicinity. Lanyards - security IDs. Different colours. It looked like most of them worked here, purple lanyards, bringing back lunch to eat at their desks.

His lack of ID would be noticed sooner or later.

He'd just have to blag it. If he was lucky, he'd be overlooked for long enough - one more tree in the forest. The lift was already on its way to floor nine. The first major obstacle was down, and here came the sprint to the next.

As Ethan caught the eye of the portly bald gentleman beside him, the man blinked at him in startled recognition.

Ethan soothed him with a wink. "Hi, how are you?"

Flushing desperately, the man turned to look straight ahead.

By the time they reached floor nine, he'd winked at four more people. It seemed to be doing the job.

As the lift doors opened, and the small clutch of people remaining spilled out, he spotted his second obstacle. There were a pair of double doors ahead; they opened with an ID card pressed against a scanner. A small queue had formed as people waited their turn to go through.

Sliding a smooth step to the right, he leant down to the ear of the young lady who'd been frantically texting her mother since floor three.

"Excuse me," he purred, and she dropped her phone with a squeak. "May I be a nuisance?"
She scrabbled to pick up her phone before it was trodden on, and stood up flushed and blushing. "Y-You're - are you - ?"

He flashed her a grin. "What gave me away?"

"Oh my god." The young lady beamed, clutching her phone. "I loved you in Back to Eden. And Jessica's Daughter. And I loved you in Memories of Manhattan."

Ethan scanned quickly through his memory. There'd been a lot of dreadful rom-coms over the years. "Was that the one where I got naked in the pool?"

Her cheeks pinked. "Erm, I think so."

He winked at her. "I liked that one, too."

"Oh my god." She quivered, tightening her grip on her phone. "Erm, would you - m-maybe for a photo?"

"I would love that," he murmured, swept her fondly to one side, and took seven separate selfies while waiting for the queue to disappear at the security door.

When the final person had gone through, he gave her another cosy smile.

"Hey," he said. "Help me out. I've not been to see Mycroft for lunch since he was down on floor eight. By any miracle, d'you know where his new office is?"

"Oh - of course!" she chirped. "Sure, I'll show you!"

He followed her smoothly to the scanner, sliding onto her left-hand side as she extended her security ID to her right. The scanner flashed; the doors opened.

The two of them breezed through.

*And that's why I've got a BAFTA.*

"You're a friend of Mycroft Holmes?" she said, as she led him glowing with pride through what looked like an admin space, ranks of desks and people busy on computers. Phones were ringing; people were eating sandwiches and chatting.

"Oh, Mycroft and I go *way* back," he told her, grinning. "But don't you dare ask when we met, okay? You were probably still at school. All I'll say is it was this millennium."

Her delighted laughter pulled eyes towards them across the room. A ripple of astonished double-takes followed. An older lady nearby spat her tea across her keyboard; an assistant returning files to a shelf let them slide from her arms to the floor, her jaw slumping in amazement.

Some of the looks of surprise had something else behind them - the question, *why.*

Subtly increasing his pace, Ethan urged his guide to hurry along a little. She quickened beside him in her heels, asking him if he lived here in London, and turned him through a door into a corridor.

He answered her on auto-pilot, relieved to be away from so many eyes. Shock value would only get him so far before it became an obstacle of its own.

He just had to hope it got him far enough.
Towards the end of the corridor, halfway through a breezy story about growing up out in Wimbledon, a door ahead of them swung open. The woman who emerged was red-haired, sharp cheekbones and a sharp grey pant suit with a laptop under her arm. She glanced at them, gave his escort a mild smile of greeting - and then spotted Ethan.

Her eyes widened at once.

"Oh...!"

"Hi Amanda!" Ethan's new friend trilled, beaming from ear to ear. "I'm just taking Ethan through to Mycroft. You okay?"

The red-haired woman's jaw sagged. "You're - taking - "

Ethan flashed her a grin. "Hi, how are you?"

Her brain rebooted. She blinked, glanced at his chest and discovered no security ID - and something in her eyes flattened. "Through to Mr Holmes?" she said, concerned.

"Old friend," Ethan said, giving her a wink. "Dropping by for lunch. Just this way, is he?"

Red Head's expression shuttered.

Uh oh.

"Is he not meeting you downstairs?" she asked, giving Ethan a look of considerable doubt. "We don't take visitors in for lunch. Beth, this is Thames House. You can't just let - "

"Amanda... he's Mycroft's friend." Beth lowered her voice, her eyes widening. "I'm pretty sure Mycroft can have whoever the hell he wants in here."

"You're a friend of Mr Holmes?" Red Head said, and the concern in her stare was only growing. "You - are Ethan Sterling, aren't you? The actor?"

Heart beating hard, Ethan gave her a rakish grin.

"Last time I checked," he purred, and placed a hand on his guide's forearm. C'mon, sweetheart. Let's go. Places to be. I'm taking up way too much of your time, Beth. You'll want to get your lunch. Just through here, right?"

"Oh my god, no, it's no trouble," Beth said brightly, and responded to his gentle pull. She turned away from Red Head, beaming, and led him along to the furthest door. "Mycroft's buried away at the back with the other consultants - quieter offices so they can work - come on, I'll show you."

As they left, he could feel Red Head staring after them.

He placed a hand on Beth's back to sweep her along faster, asking where she'd found herself such a gorgeous dress.

Another corridor, another set of doors - another internal reception, manned by a guard who looked up from his desk as they appeared, quickly hiding his Muller yoghurt under a stack of papers.

"Hi Graham!" Beth trilled. "Just heading through!"

"Sure, Beth," he said, then spotted Ethan. His face opened. "Holy shit - "
Ethan cocked him a finger gun - "Hi, how are you?" - and swept Beth on through the door.

Another corridor, long and featureless, lined with identical doors. Jesus Christ, how much further? This place was a maze. Any second now there'd be a minotaur to fight. Ethan could hear his heart banging in his ears, feel the risk increasing with every step they took. Keeping up chirpy conversation was getting harder. He had to keep her on side - he wouldn't have made it this far without her - but every pair of eyes they passed was being drawn towards her happy chatting.

They entered another large central workspace, floor-to-ceiling windows and desks as far as the eye could see. The urge to sweep her into a run was overwhelming.

"- must be crazy, just to see your face going past on the side of a bus though. I mean, does that ever get normal? Do you ever just wake up and think, 'oh my god'? I can't imagine that. That must be amazing."

She was leading him past all the desks, heading towards yet another ID checkpoint - another set of doors.

They were manned by a guard. Shit. Shit.

"Oh! There's Mycroft's assistant! There's Anthea." Beth's voice rang across the space, waving. "Anthea!"

A woman in a pale grey skirt suit, with pretty soft brown curls, glanced around from the analyst she was speaking to. Spotting them coming towards her, a look of concern flashed across her features.

She then found Ethan's face.

And her mouth opened.

Before Ethan could reach her, there came a shout from behind.

"Security! Stop! Stop that man!"

Oh - oh Jesus, no -

Turning round in alarm, Ethan saw them. Four guards, followed at speed by Red Head, were hurrying across the workspace after them.

"That man is not authorised to be here!" she shouted, her voice carrying clear across the rows of desks. Oh, shit - shit, shit. "Stop him!"

The guard at the security doors scrambled out from behind his desk.

In panic Ethan turned towards Mycroft's assistant. She was thirty feet away and staring at him in alarm, pale, her eyes wide.

"I need to see Mycroft!" he shouted at her. "Anthea - I need to speak to - "

The first guard got hold of him. Ethan wrenched free from his grip and tried to back away.

"Anthea! Anthea, I only need a minute to - let me go! Do you know who the hell I am? Get your hands off me!"

As arms flung around his neck from behind, Ethan buckled in two. He twisted and shouted louder.
"Anthea! Anthea! Get off me - get the hell off me - Anthea! I need to speak to - "

As a third guard joined the fray, wrestling the desperate man to the ground, Anthea felt her heart hammering against her ribs. He continued to shout.

Ethan Sterling.

He'd been in St Barts.

Lestrade had met him - sent Mr Holmes a photograph. She'd seen the messages. Mycroft's desperate jealousy.

And now he was here, shouting - demanding to -

Oh, god -

Lestrade - is this -

She stepped forward, unnerved, trying to think. He wasn't meant to be here. This was the beating heart of the nation's security. She couldn't possibly now argue that he should not only be permitted to stay, but be taken to speak to a senior agent.

But she had to.

This was Lestrade, and she had to.

Before she could speak, the fourth guard appeared at her side. He stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"We have only moments," he said. His voice was low, barely audible over Ethan Sterling's desperate fight with the others. "Is my brother safe and well?"

Anthea glanced at the guard.

Her heart leapt into her throat.

She turned her face away from him at once, back to the commotion, and spoke beneath her breath.

"Safe," she said, "but not well."

Sherlock Holmes tightened his grip upon her elbow. "Is it Lestrade?"

Anthea felt her pulse kick against her ribs. "Yes."

"Mycroft loves him?"

Oh god. "Yes. Dearly. Desperately."

Sherlock didn't pause. "Lestrade loves him, too." As Ethan Sterling kicked and fought, now shouting about his rights as a private citizen and seizing nearby stationery to throw, Sherlock lowered his voice. "Tell me candidly. Is there any possibility for their relationship to continue? Any possibility whatsoever."
Anthea breathed in.

"Yes," she said. "It would not be easy for Lestrade."

"What do you mean?"

"The process is intrusive. Difficult. A degree of commitment would be required."

"But it is possible?"

"Yes." Anthea wet her dry lips, watching as Sterling wrestled himself free from his captors and took off between the desks. They pursued him, shouting. "Will Lestrade wish to?"

Mr Holmes's brother paused beside her. "Most likely."

"But not certainly?"

"I cannot speak to the longevity of his love," Sherlock murmured. "Only to its intensity and urgency."

Anthea's heart contracted.

"No-one can speak to that," she said. "We let it begin, all the same." She bit the side of her cheek. "I will find a way. Tell Lestrade we will reach him. Tell him to watch."

"I shall." Sherlock Holmes released her arm. In a quick motion, he pressed something into her palm - something flat, curved and smooth. "Tell my brother he is loved."

Without another word, he straightened up and walked away. He joined the pursuit of Ethan Sterling now drawing the attention of the entire floor, and he was gone.

Shaking, Anthea looked down into her hand.

As she entered their office, Mr Holmes looked up from his desk phone. He was pale and unsettled, standing over his desk with a look of intense agitation.

"There you are," he said, and hung up at once. "What on earth is going on? I'm told we've had a security breach. The entire floor has been put into lockdown. What is happening?"

In silence, she approached his desk. Her high heels echoed softly on the floor.

She reached out without a word - and laid upon his diary a purple-banded seashell.

Mr Holmes gazed down at it.

Swallowing, Anthea withdrew her hand.

"He says you are loved, Mr Holmes." Her throat tightened. "If you hadn't concluded that already."

For almost a minute, Mycroft did not speak.

"He..." he whispered, at last.
She shook her head, fighting to keep her voice steady. "Ethan Sterling, sir."

"... Ethan Sterling?"

"A distraction, Mr Holmes. Rather masterfully done. Mr Sterling is now in conversation with the security team." She paused, her heart pounding. "Your brother's presence in the building has gone unnoticed. I suspect he has already left."

Mycroft's shoulders shook. "My brother?"

"Yes, sir. Sterling's interception by security provided cover for Sherlock to speak to me."

She watched him take a second just to breathe, his fingers tensing desperately upon his desk.

"And what did Sherlock say?" he demanded.

Anthea held her nerve. "He asked me if there was a way, Mr Holmes."

"A way?"

"A way that you might be permitted to have Lestrade."

The noise that he stifled was the beginning of a whimper. "What did you say?"

"I told him the truth, sir - that while the process is difficult, it is possible. I asked him if he believed Lestrade would wish to."

Mr Holmes covered his face. He drove his hands into his hair.

"What did he say?" he begged, and she felt her heart twist itself in half.

"Without knowledge of the process," she said, "certainty is hard to give. But as to the urgency and intensity of Lestrade's feelings for you - "

Mr Holmes swayed. He turned, reeled against the nearest wall and pressed his forehead to it, breathing hard, his hands still covering his face.

"Swear to me," he gasped. "Swear to me, upon your life - "

Anthea lost her final shred of patience.

She strode to a nearby filing cabinet, wrenched it open, reached to the very back and retrieved an unmarked file. She opened it, seizing his fountain pen from the desk as she passed.

Spreading the file flat against the wall, she said,

"Sign it." She forced the pen into his hand. "Sign it, for god's sake."

Mr Holmes looked up, grey, staring at the document now pinned against his wall. The details were all there. She'd filled them in herself. *Initial Authorisation for Registration of Intimate Partner.*

All it required were two signatures.

His eyes flooded with stressed tears at the sight. He shuddered, his breath breaking.

"He - h-he - "
"He just masterminded a one-man assault on the British security services to reach you. What more does he have to do to reassure you, Mr Holmes?"

Mycroft's expression tightened. He stared at the form, struggling to breathe. His hand shook around the pen.

She watched him finally break.

"Oh - oh, god. Oh god, I want him."

As he uncapped the pen, reaching for the form, Anthea's heart wrenched at its seams. She watched him burn his name there in blue ink, his hand shaking with every letter. As the ink gleamed in the office light, his eyes were shining too.

As soon as his pen nib left the paper, she whisked it away from him.

"There," she said. "Now sit."

Mycroft dropped at once into his chair. He slumped, putting his head into his hands just to shake.

"Sit and breathe," she said, "while this dries - and I will explain to you the course of action we will now take. I appreciate this is unprecedented for you and you require guidance."

He didn't say a word, breathing hard into his palms.

"Lestrade will be informed of the process," she said. "When he understands what will be involved, he will sign this form. Copies will be made. Many copies. It will be taken to Human Resources, and Lestrade will then be protected as your partner pending registration. He will breeze through the bloody process, and on the day he is authorised, Mr Holmes, you will admit to me that you are quite simply the most hopeless man who ever drew breath."

He took his head from his hands, staring at her red-eyed.

"How do I inform him of the process?" he said, searching her face. "I'm forbidden from communicating with him."

"Mr Holmes, in a twenty year career, how many laws have you temporarily suspended or altered for the sake of the British government?"

His gaze ached. "Many," he said, "when there's good reason to do so."

Anthea felt her heart take light.

"There's good reason now," she said. "I suggest that rules therefore be broken - for the sake of the British government. Which is you."

Mycroft placed his fingers across the bridge of his nose, inhaling hard. As he rubbed, she watched his other hand reach out.

His fingers found the shell.

They gathered it into his palm, and curled around it tight.

"I will need a burner phone." He exhaled, now thinking fast. "We will need to organise a chain."

"A short one. We can't take risks."
"Agreed." He leant forwards in his chair, elbows on the desk, fingertips moving to his temple. He began to rub in slow circles. "I need to think. To prepare. Please bring black coffee."

His brow furrowed.

"And bring some sort of - chocolate caramel - I don't care. Bring me something I am not allowed." He gripped the seashell, hard. "Damn it, Anthea. Bring me two."
"Christ almighty." Greg lifted his head from his hands, breathing hard. "And what did you say?"

"I asked if my brother loves you." Sherlock's eyes flickered to Ethan Sterling, sitting beside Greg in the McDonalds of Liverpool Street station. "She said yes. 'Dearly'," he added. "'Desperately'."

Ethan's face opened in a grin. He punched Greg on the shoulder and threw an arm around him, laughing as Greg shook and curled into himself once more.

"Then what?" Greg begged into his hands.

"I indicated that you feel the same."

"Then what?"

"I asked her to tell me candidly if there is a possibility for your relationship to continue."

Greg looked up from his hands, his heart dropping into his stomach. "What did she say?"

Sherlock's blank expression gave nothing away.

"She said yes. That it would not be easy, but it would be possible."

"Oh - Jesus - "

"She mentioned a 'process'. I had no time to garner further details - she described it as 'intrusive' - and while I have a number of theories, it would be presumptive for me to speculate. She asked if you would be amenable to continuing the relationship - "

"Fuck! Fuck, yes!"

"Mm. Transpires my answer was conservative. Regardless, she told me she would find a way. She requests that you... 'watch'."

"'Watch'?" Greg's heart was thudding. "What does that mean?"

"I believe she wishes you to be vigilant for attempts to communicate with you."

"Holy shit..." Greg let his arms drop to the table, his head falling upon them. "Holy shit. Holy shit, we actually did it."

"I imagine she will now have conveyed the message to my brother."

"Did you give her the - "

"Yes," Sherlock said, calmly. "I ensured that she had it."

"Holy shit," Greg mumbled again. He turned his head to peer up at Ethan, who grinned back down at him. "I can't believe you got that fucking far. Did they actually believe you were researching a film role?"

"Are you ready for this?" Ethan asked, as he took a few fries from the paper bag torn open between them. "I didn't have to. They had me there for about ten minutes - they were talking about calling the
Greg's eyes widened. "He - Mycroft vouched for - ?"

"Yep," said Ethan. "She took me straight out to a taxi. Wished me an enjoyable afternoon." He smiled a little, reaching for more fries. "She's... quite a woman."

*Christ.* Greg glanced at Sherlock, whose eyebrow arched.

"Evidently," Sherlock said, "my brother gleaned Mr Sterling's part in our subterfuge."

Greg bit his lip, pulling it between his teeth. "D'you think his bosses are gonna know it was me? Sending Ethan in?"

"They'll be fools if they don't suspect it," Sherlock replied, cool. "Given that the three of us are now on CCTV in a McDonalds together, we have certainly confirmed it."

"Jesus." Greg searched his eyes. "Am I gonna have to be careful?"

"Exceedingly," Sherlock said.

"So - I have to give Mycroft chance to reach me, but can't give MI5 chance to do the same? Bloody hell."

"For what it's worth," Sherlock said, "Mycroft will recognise your predicament. I suspect he will act with speed to ensure your safety."

Greg's heart squeezed. "So... what do I do?"

Sherlock's nose wrinkled.

"Stay close to Baker Street, at least until tomorrow. We need to keep a watch on you."

"Yep. Fine. No complaints from me."

"We might be well advised to travel there shortly," Sherlock said. "The sooner we can locate you behind a locked door, the better."

At the entrance to the tube station, they said goodbye to Ethan.

He dragged Greg in for a hug, and they thumped each other on the back.

"Thank you, mate. I mean it. Don't know how to thank you enough."

"Don't mention it," Ethan grinned. "Best fun I've had in ages. Let me know how it goes with your guy, alright? I want you both in St Barts for Christmas."

He then seized hold of Sherlock, who let out a startled squeak and stiffened in his arms.

"You're coming too, Sherlock, yeah? We'll get you some sunshine. Bring your fella along. He can blog all about it."
Sherlock blinked rapidly. "John is - not my fella."

"A few cocktails in him, and he might be." Ethan let Sherlock go with a wink. "Look after Greg, yeah? He's one of the good guys."

He hailed a passing taxi, gave them a last wave through the open door, and then a minute later was gone into the traffic.

Smiling, Greg pushed his hands into his pockets. "Shall we?"

Sherlock, one eyebrow still arched, gave a sniff.

"Mm," he said. "I think we should."

After the day's dramatic beginnings, the afternoon that followed was almost ominously quiet. Greg couldn't help but feel like he was waiting. He'd acted now; he'd played his hand. What came next depended on who got to him first.

He tried to keep himself settled, watching a celebrity special of *Money for Nothing* with John, then helping Mrs Hudson clean out her kitchen cupboards. It was all just passing the time, though.

John had been worried when they got home.

"Where've you two been?" he asked, glancing between them with a frown. "Tried calling you both... no answer."

"Our day has been eventful," Sherlock said, unwinding his scarf. "Suffice to say, I am now locking the front door. Nobody is to open it under pain of probable retribution by the British security services."

John's mouth opened.

He closed it, blinked and said,

"Right. Okay."

"I will inform Mrs Hudson of the same."

"Aha."

"Kindly check all the windows are secure please, John." Sherlock dropped himself sideways onto the sofa, laying a hand over his eyes. "Then perhaps tea."

"Right. Will do." John got up from his armchair. As he passed Greg in the door, he muttered, "Do I want to know?"

Greg bit his lip. "Probably not, mate. Best just do as he says."

"Never a dull moment," John remarked with a sigh, and jogged off up the stairs.
By six o'clock, darkness had fallen across London.

The street lights blinked on as Greg helped Sherlock put together a grilled chicken salad for dinner. "Why am I nervous?" he muttered, distributing a handful of halved grapes onto each plate.

Sherlock huffed beside him, chopping grilled chicken into strips. "Because you have a semblance of a brain in your skull, Lestrade."

"Just hope I've not caused your brother a load of grief... s'all. Starting to worry."

"If that was truly your intention," Sherlock remarked, and reached for mayonnaise, "I fear you should have acted on it long before now."

"That particular horse has bolted, huh?"

"Indeed." Sherlock handed him the loosened mayonnaise jar. "None for me, thank you. Plenty for John."

"D'you think they're still listening in on us?" Greg asked, glancing at the kitchen door.

Sherlock hummed.

"If they are," he said, calmly, "they should know that John Watson sleeps with a Sig Sauer P226R, and that I have always wanted to hide a body. I think I'd be rather good at it. Pass the croutons, please."

After dinner, Greg washed up. He watched Zombieland with John while Sherlock attended to his scrapbooks of crime, humming, happily clipping articles out of the latest London papers. At eight o'clock Greg went for a shower. He nearly gave himself a cardiac arrest when he knocked over a bottle of shampoo with a bang.

At nine, John sat him down in front of The Hotel Inspector with a large mug of horlicks. Greg held the mug to his chest in both hands, letting its warmth start to settle him. It was strange and comforting to sit here in his dressing gown and pyjamas, listening to Sherlock play the violin upstairs. It felt like he'd been living here for months.

"Thanks, John..."

"Not at all." John dropped back in his own armchair, getting comfortable. "Listen. Whatever he's got you worried about, Greg... don't lose any sleep over it. Chances are - "

The doorbell rang through the house.

The sound of the violin came to an abrupt halt upstairs. Greg glanced across at John, who looked back at him in quiet concern. Silence stretched between them.
Sherlock's footsteps crossed the floor above, light and swift. They heard him descend the stairs, then he nudged open the door of the lounge with a faint creak. "John?"

John put his mug aside, breathing in. "Yep?"

"May I have your assistance for a moment?"

*Christ. Shit.* Greg put his mug aside, twisting on the couch to look round at Sherlock.

"Shall I - erm - "

"Sit," Sherlock said with a flat smile, as John moved quickly to his side. "Enjoy your horlicks."

He closed the door with a snap, and the two of them headed downstairs.

Greg reached for the remote, muting the TV in an attempt to hear something - anything - of what was going on below. Nothing seemed to move within the house. There was no noise, no sign of a raised voice. Only his heart could be heard within the silence.

After a minute, there came the sound of footsteps returning up the stairs. Greg turned around on the sofa, panicking quietly.

The door opened.

It was John. He led into the room an older gentleman in a driver's uniform, peaked cap and leather gloves, who stood in the light of their evening lamps with an expression of quiet dignity.

Greg got to his feet, unnerved.

Sliding into the room behind them, Sherlock said, "'Taxi for Lestrade'."

*Jesus.*

The driver lifted his chin, gently.

"Inspector," he said. "I've been sent by an associate of yours. He requests your opinion on a private matter."

Greg's heart clenched.

He'd been summoned by those words before. Over a month ago, those words had taken him to the Diogenes Club - to Mycroft - scotch by the fire, and the offer of a lifetime.

Tentatively coming closer, he studied the driver's face. Before he could ask Sherlock, *trustworthy or not?*, his eye caught on the gleam of two small badges in the lamplight, fastened to the driver's lapel.

The first, two cherries joined by the stalk; the other, the suit of spades.

His mouth broke into a grin at once. His heart swept upwards through his chest.

"Yes?" Sherlock said, studying his reaction.

Greg took a second to be certain, even as his pulse began to race. "Yeah. Yeah, I - I think so."

"Do you want someone to go with you?" John asked, with care.

Greg hesitated. They'd not come this far to make a stupid mistake. He couldn't stop looking at the
badges.

"Maybe," he said. "Just - just in case."

The driver nodded calmly. "Quite understandable, sir. Though I must insist you come at once. The matter is urgent."

"R-Right." Greg glanced at Sherlock, anxious. "Will you - ?"

"Yes." Sherlock turned to John. "If we haven't returned within half an hour, contact Scotland Yard directly. Tell them it is DI Lestrade. Give them the registration number of the car and tell them he is in great danger."

John paled but nodded. "Fine."

Inclining his head, the driver said, "Kindly follow me, sirs."

"W-Wait - I'm - " Greg glanced down at his pyjamas and dressing gown, his feet in their faded Arsenal slippers. " - not really dressed for..."

"I'm sorry, sir. We need to go."

"Right." Greg inhaled, bracing himself. "Jesus. Okay, let's... go, then."

The waiting car had blacked out windows. As the driver pulled open the back door for Greg, and stood aside to let him enter, Greg almost hoped to find it occupied. The back seat was empty though, full of only shadows. He shuffled along it in the darkness, and was surprised to hear the quiet thump of a small object dropping to the floor.

He bent down, searching for it beneath the passenger seat.

His fingers closed around a mobile phone.

As Sherlock slid in next to him, and the door shut with a clunk, Greg showed him the handset. "Oi."

Sherlock reached across at once. Greg handed it to him, his fingers shaking. In the dim light Sherlock studied the phone, turning it over and over, examining the edges in minute detail.

"Unused until today," he remarked at last. "Brand new. A 'burner' phone, I imagine. One purpose only."

Jesus.

The driver got into the front, pulled the door shut, and without a word he started the engine. The doors locked automatically around them.

They set off into the darkness.

As they left Baker Street behind, Greg glanced nervously at Sherlock. "Should I - ?"

Sherlock nodded.
Greg tapped the screen with care, and watched it light up in the blackness.

21:03
London - 4°C - Passing Clouds
One Unread Voicemail

Swallowing, Greg pressed the home button.

An entry screen for a passcode appeared; his heart fell.

"It's locked. It needs a passcode." He looked at Sherlock, his pulse picking up. "What's the code?"
Sherlock raised an eyebrow. "It seems to have been assumed that you would know."

Greg took a second to breathe.

"So - so it's - something I could guess?" He couldn't think. He didn't even know Mycroft's birthday. "He always unlocked his phone with his fingerprint. I didn't know his passcode."

"This isn't Mycroft's phone, Lestrade. It's been coded so it can't be accessed by an outsider. Think - numbers - important numbers which have been mentioned to you. Any and all that come to mind."

Greg's head raced.

"I - knew the pin code for his credit card - maybe it's that?"

"Try," Sherlock said.

Carefully, hand shaking, Greg input the four digits - 0, 4, 9, 6 - and hit enter with his thumb.

The phone buzzed angrily in his hand.

PASSCODE INCORRECT.

"Okay... that's one idea down."

"Other numbers. Any numbers, Lestrade."

The night with first date questions came to mind. There'd been a list with nearly two hundred; he could still remember Mycroft's immediate first choice.

"It's - only two digits," he said.

"Preface it with zeroes," said Sherlock. "Try."

Quietly Greg input: 0, 0, 2, 8.

Once more the phone buzzed in his hand. PASSCODE INCORRECT.

Greg's heart sank.

"Why two perfect numbers?" Sherlock asked, frowning.
Greg looked up at him quickly. "What d'you mean?"

"The two you've chosen are both perfect numbers. Integers equal to the sum of their factors."

Greg's brain sparked and fused. "Wait - what is - "

Sherlock visibly repressed a sigh.

"Six is the smallest perfect number," he said. "Discounting itself, it is divisible only by one, two and three - and when these numbers are added, the total is itself six. The second perfect number, twenty-eight, is divisible by one, two, four, seven, fourteen - "

Greg held up a hand, screwing his eyes shut.

"What are some more perfect numbers?" he said. "After twenty-eight."

"Four-hundred-and-ninety-six is the third," Sherlock said. "Then, eight-thousand, one-hundred-and-twenty-eight. After that - "

Greg held up his hand again.

He kept it there as he keyed in the number - 8, 1, 2, 8.

As they both stared down at the phone, he hit enter.

PASSCODE INCORRECT.

"God almighty," Greg whispered, covering his face. "We'll be here all night. Is it too much to hope that it's one-two-three-four?"

"Are you quite certain you and my brother were intimate, Lestrade?"

"Christ. Yes, I'm certain..." Inhaling stiffly, Greg stared down at the keypad and tried to focus. "We didn't talk that much about numbers, funnily enough... we had better things to do..."

"Is there no other number that Mycroft mentioned?" Sherlock said, his voice low. "Not a single one?"

Greg's brain whirled.

The only thing he could think of was 'less than three'.

Christ. Worth a shot... otherwise it's game over, and go home...

Wincing, he keyed the digits in - 0, 0, 0, 1.

"Lestrade," Sherlock sighed, as a tap of enter revealed PASSCODE INCORRECT. "If that is genuinely your only idea for unlocking the thing, we're going to be here for some time."

Greg ignored him, pressing the digits once more. 0, 0, 0, 2. Enter.

As the screen flooded with icons, Greg's heart soared upwards through the roof. He tapped on the call log at once, flashing quickly through tabs to reach the voicemail screen.

As it opened, he glanced anxiously at Sherlock. "I - I'd better listen to..."

Sherlock nodded, lapsing at once into quiet. "I suggest that you do."
Greg pressed the call icon, shaking, and lifted the phone to his ear.

An automated female voice crackled from the speaker.

"This is the voicemail inbox for phone number 0 - 7 - 3 - "

As she rolled through it, Greg shut his eyes tight. He forced himself to breathe, rubbing the side of the phone with his thumb.

" - 2. You have - ONE - new message. Would you like to listen to your messages? Please press - ONE - now."

Greg took the phone from his ear, hit one, and sat forward in his seat to try and hide the shaking in his hands. He rested his elbow on his knees, hugging himself one-armed as the car swayed and bumped around him.

"ONE - new message," she declared.

Silence came - deafening, desperate silence. Greg listened to it, his heart pounding, trying to zone out the traffic and the London nightlife audible outside the car.

Then he heard a familiar breath drawn - and a voice said,

"Greg, it's - i-it's me."

Greg drove his fingers into his hair, twisting to stop himself from making a sound. The pain cut through the nauseating wave of distress; it forced him to focus.

Sherlock's hand appeared on his back.

"You're quite safe," Mycroft's voice said, and the words felt like arms around him. "The car is armoured, and the driver will look after you. He's been instructed to keep you on major roads until you've - h-had time to listen."

His voice strained.

"I wish I could be there," he said. "To explain to you in person. To apologise."

Greg gripped his hair harder, shaking.

"Greg, what you - orchestrated today... to reach me, I... I never would have - "

I'd do it a hundred times. A thousand times.

"- a-and in the light of that, I... feel that, at last, I should reach for you. In spite of a great deal of fear, and my - r-rather intense conviction that no man in his right mind would listen with any seriousness to what I'm about to tell you."

He heard Mycroft take a breath - take a drink, then the clink of a glass on a surface, and Greg smiled through his tears.

"Greg, I - have the length of a voicemail to convince you to - to... and I cannot express to you how ill-equipped I am to do that." Greg heard his throat muscles work. "But I am prepared to try. For you. To... a-ask you, for what I want."
Mycroft exhaled. Greg exhaled with him, gripping the back of his neck, trying to get his heart to slow down.

Sherlock rubbed between his shoulders in rhythm, gentle.

"I am l-lost without you," Mycroft breathed, his voice breaking.

Greg's heart lurched. "Fuck - "

"I c-cannot sleep. I care for nothing. I can't lay my eyes upon a thing without thinking of you - w-what we had - what you gave to me. I asked you to come with me to St Barts in the hope that by doing so, I could stop thinking of you... now I realise I... I was a fool, Greg."

Warmth softened his voice.

"I could perhaps be termed the most hopeless man who ever drew breath," he murmured. Greg's laugh escaped him as a sob. "I - won't tell you I'm sorry. You were kind to me in a way no-one else has ever been. There are - wounds in my past that - perhaps one day, I could lie in your arms and share... and show them to you, and hope you will wrap them in your kindness..."

Mycroft swallowed, drinking.

"But in order to do that," he said, and Greg heard him fortifying himself, sitting upright, drawing strength and calm into his veins with a breath, "I must first be candid with you. I must present to you the truth, and the decision going forwards will then be yours. For better or worse, I place it in your hands."

Greg bit into his lip, shaking. "Get on with it, posh."

Mycroft took another drink. "Perhaps I should just get on with it, Greg... or Rogers will have to drive you around all night..."

Greg heard him sit back in a chair, and he could imagine Mycroft as if he were right here - closing his eyes, laying a hand across them, bracing himself.

"For an agent of my seniority," he said, "the cost and logistics of protecting an intimate partner are - f-frankly staggering. The potential damage that could be caused by kidnap, blackmail... by security leaks... the security services have a natural interest in avoiding those eventualities, but also in avoiding those costs. The simplest solution is that higher-level agents remained unattached."

Mycroft inhaled, slowly.

"And so," he said, as Greg's heart tightened, "unauthorised relationships are suppressed with fervour... and the process to authorise one is - gruelling, Greg. Intrusive. Exhaustive. It functions as a deterrent. Background checks are conducted. The registration panel who in theory facilitate the process are in fact there to attempt to stop it - to see it cancelled before completion. Once authorised, a... degree of commitment in the relationship is assumed. I've never heard of one being dissolved."

Mycroft huffed, softly.

"Then, perhaps any relationship that endures the process is strong enough to endure whatever else life brings..."

Christ. You should have told me.
"Greg, I... I'm sure you've realised where this might be leading," Mycroft said in his ear, and Greg wrapped his fingers around the back of his neck, breathing hard. "I don't expect you for a moment to say yes."

"Tragic bastard," Greg whispered, wiping at his tears.

"But if by some utter miracle, you have listened to this and not yet hurled yourself from the car... G-Greg, I... I would - if you..."

Oh, fuck. Fuck - don't make me listen to you cry -

" - y-you are wonderful. For f-four days, my life was - perfect - and you were e-everything - and today you sent operatives into military intelligence headquarters to reach me, and I - I can't - d-deny myself any longer - "

The breath left Mycroft in a rush; Greg could almost feel it on his shoulder.

"I love you," Mycroft whispered.

"Fuck."

"I love you. I want you. I want you here with me, Greg - here beside me - h-here in my arms. In four days you changed me enough to do this. To try. To tell you. What you could accomplish in the rest of my days, I - I can't begin to imagine, but... dear god, Greg, if there is any chance of that..."

"Fuck. Fuck - I I-love you too - I love you - "

" - then I will take the chance," Mycroft's voice said, and the car slowed to a halt. Greg looked up from his hands, desperate, his eyes full of tears. They'd stopped outside an all-night café, almost painfully bright in the darkness. "And if you don't want me, then... s-such is life, Greg. And nothing has changed. But if you return my feelings - if you have a reason to undergo that ordeal - th-then perhaps we might make each other happy."

Sherlock was scanning their surroundings intently, studying every shop front, every bar and every face passing by.

"I've left means of communication inside," Mycroft said, his voice breaking, and Greg lunged for the door handle. "If you're willing to start the process - "

"Lestrade!" Sherlock's voice called from a thousand miles away. He scrambled after Greg along the seat, hurrying out of the car after him.

Greg raced for the doors in his slippers, shouldering it open without a thought.

" - then I will check tomorrow morning," Mycroft finished, exhaling. "Seven AM. Please leave me your answer. If it's goodbye, Greg - then goodbye. If - if it's 'yes'..."

The bored waitress glanced up from her phone as they hurried into the café, Greg in pyjamas and a dressing gown, Sherlock at his heels. Her face quirked in surprise; she said something that Greg didn't hear. He was listening to Mycroft.

"I love you, darling. Whether you can return it or not. You changed my life, Greg. For that, I will always love you."
Sherlock had spotted something. He was striding towards the back of the café, pulling Greg by the arm.

Mycroft's voice cracked.

"Thank you, darling," he whispered.

There was a pause.

"End of message," the automated voice announced. "Would you like to replay the message? Press - ONE - now. Would you like to delete the message? Press - TWO - now. If you you like to save the message..."

Greg lowered the phone, his heart beating in his mouth. Sherlock was dragging him towards a local noticeboard - and amongst the flyers and the leaflets and the posters for local classes, Greg had already spotted it.

There was a postcard tucked beneath an advert for A Level tutoring.

It was Shell Beach at night. The restaurant was visible at one end of the shore, lit up with lanterns and as bright as the moon above the sea. They'd eaten there. They'd been there, less than a month ago.

Greg reached for it at once. He dislodged the pin, pulled it free and turned it over.

On the back, neat in blue ink, there was written: "G - "

The rest was blank for his answer.

Greg's fingers trembled.

Unbreathing, he glanced at Sherlock; Sherlock looked back at him.

A quiet smile spread across Sherlock's face.

"Fuck," Greg whispered, and then realised he was grinning.

Sherlock's eyes glittered with mirth. "Indeed."
Rain had fallen in the night. For an hour now, the sky had slowly lightened over London. It was a pale and soft orange dawn, full of mist and peace.

As they drove, Mycroft quietly circled the fastening of his glove with a thumb.

For once, he wasn't using this time to work. He'd left his notebook in his pocket, unable to bear the sight of it this morning. He watched the city's buildings passing by beyond the window, occasionally catching his own pale reflection in the glass. Beside him, Anthea was attending to her e-mails. She'd made no attempt to break his silence, and no attempt to reassure him. There was nothing to be said at this stage.

He'd never felt so nauseous in his life.

There were people around - street cleaners, road workers; little streams of early commuters; people clutching travel mugs, people waiting in quiet huddles at bus stops. Usually Mycroft would have paid them little interest. Today, he couldn't stop looking at them. He gazed at them in silence through the window, wondering quiet things about them - who they were, what had brought them here - what their days were like - what sequence of tiny decisions had shaped their lives around them like it had. He wondered what portion of their circumstances had been formed by choice, and how much had simply tumbled into place.

He wondered if they'd ever lived a morning like this: where everything would either change or set in stone forever.

As they reached the street of the café, panic rolled up from his stomach. He stiffened, breathing in, and gripped the seat beside him.

"I shall do it," she murmured, and quietly closed her laptop. "You needn't leave the car."

Mycroft's heart heaved.

"I will check." He didn't look at her; he couldn't. "If there is a message, it is for me to read. I wish you to stay here."

She returned her laptop to its case. "Yes, Mr Holmes."

Mycroft curled his fingers into his palm, gathering his focus gently onto his breathing. The traffic crawled on.

As they finally drew to a stop outside the café, he took a moment just to close his eyes - then reached for the door.

He stepped out onto the pavement, hooking his umbrella over his arm. The air was mild. The day was calm and clean and cool, just beginning. He couldn't bear that this quiet and gentle morning might be a day of endings, but the choice no longer laid within his dominion. He had done what he could.

He let himself into the café, telling himself this would all in time become a memory. All he needed to do was proceed.

The establishment was busy - blue collar workers in high visibility jackets and boots, eating cooked
breakfasts over large mugs of coffee. Closing the door, Mycroft felt the pull of searching glances upon his suit, his coat, the paleness of his expression. He ignored every face, attempting to project disinterest with every iota of his being, and kept his head high as he moved towards the back of the café.

The noticeboard was tucked away behind the counter. Approaching it, numb and afraid, Mycroft thanked his prior judgement for this choice of place. If he was about to have his heart finally damaged beyond use, at least it would not be visible from the street. Anthea wouldn't witness it. He could return to her without a word, order the car to drive on to Thames House, and they'd never speak of this again.

And he would carry on, somehow.

_Somehow._

The postcard remained there, slightly shifted from its position.

*Removed. Repinned.*

He'd been here.

He'd walked over to this board, taken it down and left his answer - and these were the final seconds of the life Mycroft had spent forty-six years building. It was about to end, one way or another.

*At least there will be peace.* It was what he thought he'd wanted, all those weeks ago. He wasn't sure what peace was anymore. He didn't think it existed in the form he'd once believed in.

*And now I learn if it is true... if wanting is enough.*

Mycroft reached up with a gloved hand. Shaking, he removed the pin.

*Here we were,* he thought, taking the postcard down. He gazed at the picture. _Here you held me, sat with me in my silence. Encouraged me to want the things I want._

Mycroft closed his eyes.

*Oh, god.*

*If it hurts, let me break. Let me break and never feel again. Let me learn.*

He turned the postcard over in his hands, his eyes still closed, sick with worry.

*Be kind,* he begged in silence. _Be kind to me. Please. Tell me gently._

_Tell me you will hold onto the memories._

_Tell me you were happy, for a time._

Mycroft breathed. He couldn't stand here forever, dying. _Here I end what I started._

He opened his eyes.

There were no words upon the postcard - just a symbol, drawn in red.

As he saw it, Mycroft's heart ripped itself apart.
Mycroft covered his mouth, fighting not to make sound. Tears blazed in his eyes at once.

And a voice from the table beside him said,

"Did you really have to ask me, posh?"

Mycroft turned.

At the sight of those brown eyes, that lopsided smile, and the face of the man he loved, Mycroft broke apart.

The words left him as a whimper.

"You shouldn't be here - "

Greg shoved back his chair.

He hauled his arms around Mycroft, dragged him close and buried his fingers in Mycroft's hair - and for several minutes, Mycroft couldn't breathe. He could only hide his tears against Greg's shoulder, shaking, struggling not to sob as Greg stroked his hair and breathed for him.

"Shhh... shhh, darlin'... shhh..."

Nuzzling at Mycroft's jaw, Greg's chest expanded.

*Oh god, you are here. You are here and you are real and you are mine.*

"Got you, now... you're okay... all alright. M'here, gorgeous."

Mycroft wept in absolute silence, tightening his fingers in the back of Greg's coat. *Oh god. Oh, mine.*

"Gonna be okay," Greg whispered in his ear, quietly easing their weight from side to side - rocking Mycroft, soothing him. "It's all fine now, sweetheart. I'm right here."

Words ripped their way from Mycroft's throat. He gasped them in Greg's ear, begging.

"Do you mean it? Please. Please tell me that you mean it."

"'Course I mean it," Greg whispered, and Mycroft felt his heart collapse all over again. Greg's arms only tightened around him. "I want to be with you. I want you. I want you so much. Get me registered, darlin' - make it official. I'll do whatever it takes."

"Oh - oh, fuck - "

"I know, love... I know..." He could feel Greg smiling against his cheek, swaying with him, holding him so tight both their arms were aching. "I know you get yourself worked up... but m'here. M'here now, and it's all okay."

Mycroft's heart ached at his ribs. "Y-You - you will have to be interviewed, Greg - "

"Fine. Tell me where to be and when."
"Oh, god - you - y-you will have to m-move into my -"

"Fine."

"Your j-job - Greg, you might have to -"

"Fine. Fuck my job."

"Greg -"

"Listen to me," Greg hushed, and Mycroft shuttered into silence at once. "I'm sick of my life. I'm ready to risk a new one. There's one thing I'd bring with me, and it's you, Mycroft."

Mycroft felt his knees threaten to give way. "Oh, Jesus - Greg -"

Greg held him up with one arm, reaching quickly with the other for a chair. "Hey," he hushed. "Hey, c'mere... sit down..."

Mycroft sank into the chair trembling, still holding onto Greg's coat. Greg pulled another seat over and sat with him, stroking up his arms, deep brown eyes full of protective concern as they watched him.

"You should've told me," Greg murmured, softly. "You know that? You should've told me while we were there... Christ, I've been so worried about you..."

Mycroft leant forwards into his arms, desperate to be held.

"I - I never thought - n-never thought you would - ever - ever -"

"Listen... shhh, darlin'... listen... this is just the first time I tell you this, alright?" Greg's fingers wrapped around the back of his neck, stroking as he spoke. "You're going to hear it again, and again and again... all we have to do is get through this process."

He stroked his nose against Mycroft's jaw.

"I'm in love with you," he breathed. Mycroft clung onto him, shaking with a wave of fresh tears. "You're amazing. You're gorgeous and you're clever and you're funny and you're fascinating - you're beautiful - you're in love with me. You want to be with me. That's all I need in the world, you know that? Someone who makes me feel like I matter."

Mycroft convulsed.

Greg squeezed him slowly, rubbing his shoulder with a hand.

"That's all I need, love," he whispered. "And we're going to be together. For good. No more of this MI5 bollocks, alright? No more torturing yourself to please the sort of arseholes who drag you off a beach like a wanted criminal. No more of that. You're mine now. You're Mycroft Holmes, and you're mine, and anyone who thinks you owe them a single fucking thing can answer to me."

Mycroft couldn't breathe. He could only cry, forming a single sound.

"Greg -"

"Shhh, beautiful... just hold onto me..." Greg nuzzled into his neck. "Hold onto your Greg. He's got you. It's all over now. All the worst is done."
Mycroft burrowed into his shoulder, never wanting to move again.

"I l-love you," he whispered, and felt his partner's arms tighten.

"I love you, too." Greg exhaled, placing a gentle kiss against his jaw. "What do I need to do to register? Where do I need to go?"

Mycroft shook, nervously pulling back enough to reach inside his coat.

As he extracted the folded form, Greg reached for it and opened it up.

"What's this?" he asked, as Mycroft fought to unlock his jaw enough to speak more than a few words.

"It's - i-initial authorisation. Consent to the process. I-If you sign it, it will all begin - a-and you will be protected for the duration - my - p-partner, pending registration. You will be on record and they cannot hurt you."

Greg spread the document out on the table beside them. He shunted his chair quietly closer and reached inside Mycroft's coat, searching his inner pockets. Mycroft quivered.

"W-What are you...?"

"Know you've got a pen in here somewhere," Greg murmured. He found one, kissed Mycroft's temple and slid it free, uncapping it with a click and a smile. He looked down at the document.

"Where am I signing?"

"You - you should read it, before you - "

"I'll read it when I've signed it. When we're safe," Greg wrapped his arm around Mycroft's waist, pulling him close. "Just up here with our names, right?"

"Oh - god - "

Mycroft watched in tears as Greg signed his name smoothly and quickly across the line.

"Anywhere else?" he murmured. "Is that enough?"

Mycroft dragged his arms around Greg, shaking.

Greg kissed the top of his head and held onto him tight.

"Breathe, My... breathe for me. All done now. All sorted." He brushed back Mycroft's front curl, kissing it gently. "There. That's it. Yours, now. Signed."

Mine, now.

Sighed.

Shaking, Mycroft lifted his head.

He pressed his lips to Greg's, and closed his eyes.

Greg's fingers brushed through his hair. He held Mycroft close, kissing him, stubble stroking across his chin, his mouth soft and slow. He tasted of smoke and coffee and forever. Mycroft shook, pushing closer to him, and felt an arm curl protectively around his waist beneath his coat.
Oh, god. I love you.

You love me, too.

After a quiet eternity, familiar high heels came strolling their way.

As Anthea reached them, she took the signed form from the table and folded it at once inside her coat, laying three fresh ones down in its place.


As Greg grinned against his mouth, Mycroft felt his heart pull. They came apart, and he gave Greg a look of flushed fondness.

"My assistant," he explained, embarrassed, "Anthea. Anthea, this is Gregory."

"Charmed," Anthea said. "Signatures, please. From both of you."

"Three back-up copies?" Greg said, smiling, as she arranged the forms in order for him. He glanced at Mycroft. "Having one framed for the downstairs loo, are we?"

We.

"You haven't met Ilka Fielding," Anthea told him. "Three back-ups is what I'd term the bare minimum."

As they signed them, quietly sharing the pen back and forth, Greg's arm remained around Mycroft's shoulders. He'd never felt quite so safe in his existence. Anthea ordered coffee and breakfast for the three of them while she waited, then pulled a chair up to their table. She folded all three additional forms away into her coat, and addressed Greg with a calm efficiency that made Mycroft's heart squeeze.

"Human Resources are likely to stretch the registration process as much as they can," she told him. "The maximum time frame to conduct the interviews is a fortnight. They will almost certainly utilise the full two weeks in an effort to deter you from proceeding with the process."

Greg's arm drew quietly around Mycroft's waist, guiding him to settle into his side. Mycroft shivered, resting there as Greg placed a kiss upon his temple. "What're they going to do to try and put me off?"

he asked Anthea, resolved and calm.

"You're likely to find your personal history - including intimate details - examined in some scrutiny," she warned him. "I've already conducted my own thorough checks into you, inspector, and I can assure you that nothing in your history is anywhere near enough to decline the application. You will be authorised. Regardless, Human Resources will attempt to unsettle you with their knowledge of your private life. I suggest you make your peace with any skeletons in your closet."

Greg huffed, amused. Mycroft could feel his pulse beating softly beneath his shirt.

"So they'll bring stuff up," Greg said, "but it won't actually make any difference?"

"Precisely." Anthea sat back in her chair, crossing one stocking-clad leg over the other. "The point of the process is supposed to ensure you are not a security threat to Mr Holmes... in fact, it is to frighten you into withdrawing."
"Is there anything to actually be frightened of?" Greg said, glancing down at Mycroft, who reached at once for his hand.

"No," he murmured. He laced their fingers tightly. "Not at all. After registration, your private life will be afforded exactly the same protection and security as mine. Whatever they find will be guarded by law."

"Right." Greg's eyes warmed, watching him smile. "So I just hold my ground, answer the questions...?"

"Yes." Mycroft's heart seemed to glow. *Dear lord, I can't believe it.* His voice shook as he spoke. "And in two weeks, it will be over."

Greg brushed back a little of his hair. "Will you be there for the interviews?"

Mycroft felt his stomach twist. "No. I - shan't be permitted to be present. I will be able to watch the interviews from another room, but not intervene at all."

"Fair enough." Greg smiled, humour softening his gaze. He was beautiful. "Glad you'll be watching, at least. Know you're with me."

_Oh god, always._

_Everyday._

 Their food arrived. Conversation paused as the plates were laid down. As the waiter left, flashing a hopeful smile at Anthea, she ignored him completely and reached for her coffee.

"Your access to each other will be restricted during the process," she said, glancing between them. "As you aren't yet authorised as an intimate relationship, it might be unwise to suggest intimacy is already blossoming in abundance. I appreciate this will be unwelcome news."

Mycroft glanced at Greg, watching him pick up a piece of toast with a raised eyebrow.

"Am I allowed to escort him on a pleasant evening stroll with a chaperone?" Greg enquired, his eyes bright with the sarcasm.

Mycroft had never adored him so much. "Phone conversations would not attract objection," he said, tentatively. "They - would almost certainly be monitored, but..."

Greg's nose wrinkled a little. He put his toast down, chewing, then kissed Mycroft's forehead.

"Fine," he said. "If that's what we have for two weeks, it's more than we had before."

"Now that the process has been initialised," Anthea said, as she added a little yoghurt to a bowl of granola, "it can only be stopped by the two of you. You're undergoing registration as a partner, inspector, and Human Resources will be the first to insist that it is indeed registration - not a suitability check. I suggest you remind them of that loudly and often."

"Will do. When is all this going to start?"

"The time frame of two weeks begins when the Head of Human Resources receives the initial authorisation," Anthea said, "which will be immediately after this meeting."

'Meeting'. Mycroft couldn't fight a smile, settling closer into Greg's side.
"You'll likely be called to a first interview within forty-eight hours," Anthea said. "It could be at any
time. Mr Holmes, will you kindly have some breakfast please? I noted you had none at the house."

Greg huffed.

"And there's the first thing that'll be changing around here." He reached across the table for a pain au
chocolat, tearing a piece from the end. "Where do I go for these interviews?"

"They will collect you," Anthea said. Greg raised an eyebrow at her, with a look of concern.
"There's no need to be afraid. They cannot harm you once your name is in the system. Ilka Fielding
will be forced to work by regulations, and you'll be in no danger."

Greg's expression eased.

"Right." He held the pastry close to Mycroft's mouth, glancing down. "Breakfast," he said. "You've
lost weight. Not okay. Not my Mycroft."

God almighty.

Mycroft took the pastry gently from his fingers. He couldn't bring himself to care about the smile
Anthea was trying and failing to suppress, nor the café full of builders behind them.

He'd never been someone's Mycroft.

He'd never heard anything so wonderful in his life.

"Have you started smoking?" Greg asked quietly, watching him eat. "S'in your hair, darlin'."

Mycroft's heart gripped a little. "Yes."

"It's alright, love. You've been stressed. I have, too. We'll get you off them again," Greg pulled off
another piece of pastry for him, holding it for him to eat. "When they pull me in for interview - "

"Contact me," Mycroft said, chewing. He reached inside his coat at once, and withdrew a business
card marked with his new details. "I will be there."

Greg took the card, shifted to retrieve his phone from his pocket, and opened up his contacts one-
handed.

"Then, two weeks from now..." he said, as he typed.

Mycroft's heart stirred. "My security team will arrange your protection. They'll request any additional
funds and resources and personnel from Human Resources, and it will be provided. They - will
almost certainly insist that you and I occupy the same residence..."

"Good." Greg reached for another pain au chocolat. "I'll give notice to my landlord this afternoon."

Mycroft felt his pulse kick. "Greg..."

"Mm? What? I hate it there. You know I do. You've not even seen it. Trust me, it's a dive."

"Greg - "

"You can 'Greg' me all you want, posh. This is happening. I've signed the serious form. Your years
of fretting and fussing are over."
He tore up the second pastry, and held a piece for Mycroft to eat.

"Anthea and I are sorting you out now," he said. "Aren't we, Anthea?"

"Indeed Greg."

"See? First name terms already." Greg watched him chew his pastry, smiling. "You are no longer a tragic bastard, sweetheart. You are the semi-registered intimate partner of Gregory Noel Lestrade, signed and sealed, and two weeks from now we're going to Ikea to buy stuff for the kitchen."

_Sweet lord._

"Greg," Mycroft whispered, overcome. "Greg... I..."

Greg grinned, brushed the pastry flakes from his fingertips, then gently cupped Mycroft's face.

"This is where it starts," he said. "Right here, posh. All the worst's behind you. I promise."

As their lips met, Anthea attended to her granola.

"Might we have more pain au chocolat, please?" she asked a passing waiter. "Thank you."

As Mycroft swept through the doors of Human Resources, he felt nearly twice his height. Anthea strode at his side, perfectly matched to his stride, and the two of them proceeded towards the glass-doored office at the back.

"Mr Holmes?" she said, as he handed her his umbrella and withdrew a copy of the registration form from inside his waistcoat.

"Yes?"

"I am very pleased for you, sir."

Mycroft's heart swelled. "Thank you," he said, knocked on the door, and without waiting swept inside.

Ilka Fielding looked up from her laptop. She paused, seeing both of them. Her icy blue eyes lingered on Mycroft.

"Can I be of some help?" she asked.

Holding her eyes, Mycroft unfolded the form.

He tossed it onto her laptop without a word.

She held his gaze for a moment, unmoved - then glanced down, picked the form up and studied it.

Mycroft watched the very moment that her eyes registered the presence of two signatures. He let it burn itself proudly into his soul forever, the moment he had wanted something and claimed it.

Ilka's face flattened.
Mycroft's heart took wing.

"I hate to burden Human Resources," he said, and she looked up at him in poorly-concealed anger. "I know you're eternally busy, tending to the welfare of those who serve the nation - but I now require you to register my partner and assist in his security details. I'm very keen that he has the highest levels of protection we can offer him. My gratitude in advance, Ilka."

Ilka said nothing for some time. Her jaw worked as she scanned the form for errors, desperate.

There were none.

Mycroft had ensured it.

"What wonderful news," she intoned at last, and fixed him with her arctic glare. "I'm sure you're very happy, Mycroft."

Mycroft smiled, feeling his heart leap.

"I am," he said. "Supremely happy."

"Rather a change of heart you've had, regarding this individual. You assured me you had no interest in him."

"A bolt of lightning," Mycroft said. "Clarity so often is. Of course, now that I've initialised the registration, and Greg has expressed his explicit consent - I've emailed a scan to your entire department, by the way, as well as to our direct superiors - any prior contact between Greg and I becomes rather a moot point."

Ilka passed her tongue in silence across her teeth.

"So it does. Well, I'll be glad to begin the process."

"How kind," Mycroft said. "Soon, if you would. I'm toying with the idea of two weeks in New York while the house is redecorated. It's always rather charming there in early March."

Ilka's eyes hardened.

"I imagine so," she said. "I'm looking forward to meeting the man who has captured your heart, Mycroft."

It took every ounce of Mycroft's resolve not to smirk. "He's looking forward to meeting you, too."

He turned on his heel. Anthea held the door for him, and without another word they left the office. They were alone together in the lift before she spoke.

"Mr Holmes?" she said at his shoulder, facing straight ahead.

Mycroft felt his chest rise. "Mm?"

"I am incredibly pleased for you, sir."

"Thank you, Anthea." The doors opened with a swish. "So am I."
As the six o'clock news came to an end, Greg's back pocket began to rumble.

He shuffled on the couch to reach his phone, worked it free and glanced down at the screen.

*Mycroft (New) Calling...*

Grinning, he answered it. "Hi, posh..."

Mycroft audibly shivered.

"Hello." Greg could hear muffled traffic; Mycroft was heading home from work. "I - wondered how you are. How the rest of your day was."

"Wondered if I'd changed my mind yet. Greg stretched out on the sofa with a smile, fanning his toes inside his socks.

"I'm great. Still at John and Sherlock's... thought I'd maybe start clearing out my flat tomorrow. Get rid of all the crap I won't need."

Wonder softened Mycroft's voice.

"Greg..." He hesitated. "I'm - aware this is moving quickly. I hope that's not a problem for you."

Greg laid his free hand upon his stomach, toying with a button on his shirt. "Where are we going for dinner?" he asked. "First night they let us."

Mycroft's breath caught. "Dinner?"

"Never got my introduction to Japanese food. I was looking forward to it." Greg smiled, biting into his lip. "You okay?"

Mycroft exhaled in a rush. "R-Rather still in shock, I think... delighted shock."

"Yeah? It'll feel real soon. Just need a few days to get your head around it..." Glowing, Greg closed his eyes. "Are we being monitored right now?"

"My - communications likely remain under surveillance," Mycroft said, with care. "A thankless task, I imagine."

"Alright." Greg softened his voice. "D'you want me to rein it in a bit, sweetheart? Spare your blushes?"

He heard his lover shiver again.

After a moment Mycroft said, "Japanese food?"

Greg grinned, rubbing the side of his neck. "Mhm. Celebrate."

"I'm certain that can be arranged." The gentle disbelief in Mycroft's voice was too perfect, too
wonderful. "I hear good things about Zuma, in Knightsbridge... the food is said to be exceptional."

Knightsbridge.

Christ.

"So long as you're there." Greg tipped his head back into the cushion, closing his eyes for a moment. "S'all I could want. Sit and talk. Know you'll be there next to me in the morning."

Mycroft inhaled, overwhelmed. "Greg..."

"I can't wait to be with you. You know that?"

"God almighty... Greg..."

Gazing across the room, Greg's eyes trailed the knick-knacks on the mantelpiece. "Hope you say my name like that years from now. I really do."

Mycroft's voice broke. "I-I am dreaming..."

"No, love... you're awake." Greg's chest rose slowly beneath his hand. "M'here. Just a taxi ride away."

"Dear god." Mycroft took a moment to speak. "Where - are you at the moment?"

"Just in the lounge... lazing about."

"Describe to me?" Mycroft paused. "I want to see you. In my mind."

Greg grinned, gazing up at the windows. Sunset was softening the light that laid across them. Its peachy glow reminded him of morning in St Barts.

"M'lying on the sofa," he said, softly. "The pair of them are out at the supermarket... only me here. I was thinking about putting the kettle on. Exciting life I lead."

"What are you wearing?"


Mycroft was quiet for a moment. Greg could hear him imagining it, thinking.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"Held in traffic... Westminster." Mycroft paused. "Might I garner your opinion on something?"

"Sure, posh." Greg brushed his fingers back through his hair. "Shoot."

"I'm... contemplating a change of residence," Mycroft said. "I know you're unfamiliar with the current one, but I thought - a new stage of my life... perhaps warrants new surroundings. Somewhere more contemporary."

Greg felt his heart drum as he listened. "Yeah? Is your current place not?"

Mycroft made a small noise.

"H-Hardly. My family's home. Rather cavernous and dark, even in the summer months. I was... thinking perhaps an apartment. More central."
For us.

For you and me to live in.

Holy shit.

Greg squeezed the phone, eyes closing with happiness. "Somewhere handy for work for you, darlin'?"

"Y-Yes." Mycroft hesitated. "Would that... suit...?"

Greg wasn't sure he'd ever stop smiling. "Happy to fit around you. Whatever you need... I mean it. Anywhere in the world'll be better than my place right now." His stomach squirmed. "Kinda like the idea of somewhere new together."

"God almighty, Greg... what are we doing?"

"Taking happiness by the balls, gorgeous. Having all of it. Holding on tight."

Mycroft's startled laugh lit his heart like a star.

"I suppose life is to be lived," he remarked. He paused, fondly. "'Gather ye rosebuds'."

"'YOLO'," Greg murmured, and delighted in the soft sound it caused. He stroked at the corner of his neck. "I wish I could - y'know - contribute. Money. If you're wanting me for financial gain, you've picked the wrong man..."

"Put money from your mind," Mycroft said, quietly. "I'm quite capable of supporting us. It isn't an issue, Greg."

Greg felt his heart squeeze. He pulled his lower lip between his teeth.

"If my dad could see me now," he said, glancing at the windows again. "Spent his life trying to shape me into a proper breadwinner... now I'm going to be a kept man."

"I - hope you feel comfortably so."

"S'fine. You go out and win the bread." Greg smiled, rubbing slowly beneath his shirt collar. "Then come home to me, and I'll make you feel human again."

"Greg..." Mycroft breathed out, lost. "Greg, I... I didn't think I could - e-ever feel - "

Fuck... fuck, if you were here...

"Feel it, love," Greg whispered. "You're safe now."

"I - t-treasure you." Mycroft's voice thickened. "Truly. You are perfect to me."

"Two weeks from this moment," Greg said, "we'll be out having dinner. Just you and me, wherever the hell you like."

Mycroft's voice cut, overcome.

"Then you can take me home," Greg murmured, "wherever the hell that is, and keep me there. For good. Whatever the hell you want, for the rest of your life, I'll get you it. The world's treated you like crap so far. No anymore. Not on my watch."
The sound of the door downstairs pulled Greg's attention briefly from the phone.

"Think your brother's home, My," he said, softly. "I was gonna offer to cook dinner. You okay if I let you go for a while?"

"O-Of course," Mycroft breathed. "Yes, I - I quite understand. Traffic seems to be moving at last."

As footsteps came up the stairs, Greg watched the open door with a smile.

"Ring me when you're settling down for bed," he said. "Want to say goodnight."

"Oh, god..." Mycroft breathed in, calming himself. "Yes. Yes, I will."

"Great..." As a man appeared on the stairs - a stranger in a dark suit, removing sunglasses - Greg felt his heart tense. "My, you still there?"

Mycroft caught the sudden tension in his voice. "Yes. Is everything alright?"

The stranger strode to the open doorway, pocketing his sunglasses.

"Mr Lestrade," he said. It wasn't a question.

Greg waited, saying nothing.

"Come with me." The stranger waited, lifting his chin. "We need to speak to you."

"Greg - " Mycroft's voice sharpened in his ear. "Greg, what's happening?"

Greg sat up slowly on the sofa, keeping his eyes on the guy who'd never heard of a doorbell.

"Looks like we're on." He raised an eyebrow, addressing Mr Sunglasses. "Where are we going, mate?"

"You need to come immediately."

Greg rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I get that. Where are we going?"

The guy shifted with a frown. "That isn't your concern. Now follow me."

"That's - ... what the fuck? If I'm going there, pal, it's exactly my concern." Through the phone held to his ear, he could hear Mycroft speaking at speed to Anthea. He tried to tune it out. "Look, these are your options. You can tell me where we're going, and I'll get up and come along - or you can jog on, mate. And you can tell them I didn't come because you were an awkward twat. Let me know when you've picked."

The man's face worked. "Vincent Street," he muttered.

Greg turned his head to the phone, interrupting the urgent conversation. "Baby, does 'Vincent Street' mean something to you?"

"Christ almighty... yes." Mycroft raised his voice, addressing his driver. "Vincent Street, now. Quickly." He returned to Greg. "I'm on my way."

"Right."

"Don't allow them to intimidate you, Greg. They will try."
Greg snorted. "I hope the rest try harder," he said, eyeing his new friend as he got up from the couch. "This bell-end was doing alright until he took the sunglasses off. Right, mate. Let's go. I hope you've got travel sweets, 'cause I'm fussy."

Vincent Street was in Westminster - a straight and narrow road lined with vaguely ugly checkerboard blocks of tall buildings, leafless trees and parked cars in every available space. There was a suspiciously ordinary feel about it. Greg frowned to himself as they pulled to a stop outside a porticoed entrance with a red door, glancing at the name carved into the stone. *Princess Mary House.* It looked like a thousand other buildings in London.

His new friend got out of the passenger seat up front, walked round to the back and opened the door.

"Out here," he said.

Greg gave him a furrowed frown through the door. As he slid out, he held the guy's eyes - and didn't keep the annoyance off his face.

"What is this place?" he asked.

Mr Sunglasses gave a snort, shut the door, and led him down to the red door.

*Fine.* Slipping his hands into his pockets, Greg followed him inside.

The empty and dingy hallway led to an empty and dingy lift; overhead striplights provided the only light. Their stark white glare picked out every feature and flaw in the agent's skin, every speck of dust on his suit, every pore in his nose. While the space was clean, it was lifeless.

The mechanical clunk of the lift seemed to echo for an unsettling distance beneath them.

*Scare tactics,* Greg told himself, wrapping his thumbs through his belt loops. *Meant to make me feel isolated. Mycroft's on his way.*

The lift descended for some time.

At last the doors opened. Another suit was waiting there, just as miserable and po-faced as the first; he escorted them along another dark and featureless corridor. Every door they passed was impossible to tell from any other, and each one was emblazoned with a severe warning against unauthorised access.

Greg regarded them coolly, keeping his hands in his pockets.

His guard of honour finally picked a door to put him through, opened it up and ushered him inside.

The small space was dominated by a large grey table, reflected in the opposite wall - a floor-to-ceiling mirror. At one edge of the table, there sat a single empty chair. Three chairs faced it, unoccupied for now. There was a plastic cup of water ready for him.

At the sight of the set-up, Greg let out a bark of laughter.

The two suits shared a quick glance.
"You lot know I'm a policeman, don't you?" he said. "Christ."

He sighed, sauntered over to the single chair and sat himself down, grinning into the one-way mirror.

"Is this all to make me feel at home?" he said. "Guys, you shouldn't have. I'm touched."

One of the suits frowned at him from the doorway, unmoved.

"Remain here," he told Greg. "You will be spoken to shortly."

Greg chuckled, folding his arms and leaning back in the chair. "Waiting for the duty solicitor for me, are you?"

The man rolled his eyes and left, shutting the door firmly.

Greg grinned, sliding his phone out of his back pocket.

He took a winking selfie and sent it to Mycroft.

Traffic on Horseferry Road slowed their progress. When they finally reached Vincent Street, Mycroft leapt from the car before it had even come to a stop.

He blew through the entrance of the building with his jaw clenched, and immediately encountered two security personnel.

"Mr Holmes," one said, stony-faced. "You've been requested to remain away from - "

Mycroft resisted the urge to grab him by the lapels and use him to bludgeon the other.

"I am Mycroft Holmes," he spat, advancing on them both in a fury. "I hereby reject your request. Now get yourselves out of my way."

The security officer visibly ran his tongue across his teeth.

"Sir, if you're planning to interfere in the proceedings - "

"God give me patience." Mycroft shoved his way past, storming towards the lift as Anthea came racing into the building behind him. "Impede my assistant," he warned them in a shout, "and I will have the pair of you on a boat to the Arctic Circle before you can say Nordaustlandet."

The lift descended at a painful crawl.

Mycroft gripped the handle of his umbrella, whitening his knuckles on it in silence. Anthea stood beside him in the gloom, her face impassive. He could feel her attempting to radiate calm - and he was irritated to discover it was working.

"This is unnecessary terrorisation," he said at last, sharp. "Bringing him here for the initial interview."

"Unnecessary," Anthea murmured, "but entirely predictable."

Mycroft said nothing, fixing his eyes on the passing floor numbers as they lit up one-by-one. He
could feel anger burning just beneath the surface of his skin.

"They feel the need to use cheap transparent tricks, Mr Holmes," Anthea said, as the lift finally bumped to a stop. "Take comfort in that."

Mycroft said nothing.

As the lift doors opened, the nervous figure of Ilka Fielding’s assistant appeared.

"Mr Holmes," he said quickly - and as Mycroft stepped out of the lift, he clutched his tablet and backed away. "You've been requested to - "

"Which room are they using?"

The young man paled. "S-Six, sir. But you're not to intervene under any circumstances."

"I am not here to intervene," Mycroft said, coldly. "I am here to watch. Stand aside."

As he stepped out of the way, something uneasy flickered across the young man's face.

"Y-You might not wish to, sir."

Mycroft paused. He turned to glare down at the young man from his full height, unimpressed. "And precisely why not?" he enquired.

The young man hesitated, wide-eyed, holding his tablet to his chest as if it were bulletproof.

"S-Sorry, Mr Holmes." He bowed his head, buckling under Mycroft's glare. "Room six. Shall I escort you?"

Mycroft took a moment to tell himself that this, too, was a cheap and transparent trick. He was going to watch what was said. If something false were intimated to Greg, he could then correct it; if untrue claims were made, he could challenge them.

He would not be deterred by some quivering child pretending they had something to worry about.

"I believe you should," he said, his voice low. The young man nodded, turned, and quickly led the way along the corridor.

The room to which they were admitted was kept in darkness for the one-way mirror. It showed the adjacent interview room, brightly lit and sterile. At the sight of Greg, sitting alone and scrolling boredly through his phone, Mycroft's heart contracted in his chest.

Anthea laid a hand upon his arm. She didn't say a word, taking her place beside the mirror in silence.

Mycroft stood next to her, watching, wishing to heaven he could give some sign. I'm here. I'm only feet away.

I am here with you.

There was nothing to do now but watch and hope.

The minutes began to pass. They were keeping Greg waiting to unsettle him; it wasn't working. He was quite comfortable in the space, occupying himself with his phone and ignoring his glass of water. After almost five minutes of pounding silence, he sighed and put his feet up on the table.
"Whenever you're ready," he told the mirror, raising an eyebrow. He searched it, and without knowing, his eyes locked into Mycroft's for a moment. Mycroft's heart gave a jolt. "Might as well get this show on the road, guys." The corner of his mouth upturned. "We've all got homes to go to."

The double-meaning was not lost on Mycroft. He gripped his umbrella, smiling, and felt Anthea stir beside him in the dark.

Across the room, the door finally opened.

Three people entered the stark space. At a glance, Mycroft concluded that two of them were here only as visual reinforcement - a man and woman from the upper levels of Human Resources, both in business dress, looking entirely silent and sober.

Ilka Fielding, the last to enter, carried a folder beneath her arm.

"Mr Lestrade," she said, sleekly. "Please excuse the delay. Thank you for meeting us."

She extended a hand to him.

Mycroft watched, his heart beating hard, as Greg removed his feet from the table.

He took Ilka Fielding's hand, grasped it, and gave her a smile.

"It's Inspector Lestrade, princess," he said. "Nice to meet you."

Beside Mycroft, Anthea visibly grew an inch in height.

Mycroft resisted the urge to take her hand.

In the interview room, Ilka Fielding was giving Greg a look that suggested she'd never hated someone quite so much on first sight. It flattened into a smile as she took her seat across the table from him, flanked either side by her colleagues.

"Do you understand why we've asked you here?" she said, as the man to her left flipped open a jotter and began to write at speed in shorthand.

Greg watched him for a moment, one eyebrow raised. "I do."

"Would you be kind enough to put it into your own words for us, inspector?" Ilka asked, smiling. "I'm eager to make sure you've understood the magnitude of the process you're embarking on."

Mycroft's eyes fixed on Greg, willing his heart to slow down.

Greg - thank God - had clearly gleaned that a certain wariness would be wise here. He took a moment to put together an answer for her, then said,

"I'm registering as the partner of Mycroft Holmes," he said. "I take it that you're Human Resources."

"Before registration can proceed," Ilka said, "we'll need to complete a number of security checks. I'm sure you understand these things are done to ensure Mycroft's security. He occupies a position of some seniority, and his welfare is foremost in our minds."

"In all our minds," Greg said, with a tight smile.

Ilka returned the expression.
"How wonderful to hear," she said. "How long have you known Mycroft Holmes?"

Mycroft watched Greg consider the question. "Nine years now? Might be getting on towards ten."

Ilka's face remained expressionless. "An association of some longevity," she noted.

"Casual acquaintances, for most of it."

"In what capacity did you meet?" Ilka asked.

Greg's mouth curved.

"He kidnapped me to a multi-storey car park in Deptford," he said, "and asked me to spy on his brother for money."

Mycroft quietly covered his eyes. He could somehow still see the pained glance Anthea gave him.

"Fascinating," Ilka said. "Did you accept?"

"Told him I'd keep an eye on Sherlock for him," Greg replied, "and let him know if he's ever in major trouble... but not for money."

"How much money were you offered?"

Greg winced.

"Several grand," he said. "I don't remember. Wasn't interested."

"And the only service requested of you was the provision of information, was it?"

Greg's brow tightened. "What're you suggesting?"

Ilka opened her folder, searching through the various documents inside it.

"At what point did your relationship become sexual?" she asked, as if out of curiosity.

Greg huffed. "Still not sure what you're suggesting."

"I'm merely trying to establish a timeline of your relationship together, inspector. It helps us to be able to approach the situation clearly."

Greg leant back in his chair, crossing his arms as he regarded her. Mycroft felt his stomach tighten.

"You know we were in St Barts together a month ago," Greg said, simply. "Have a guess when it got sexual."

Ilka raised an eyebrow.

"You're saying you hadn't been intimate with Mycroft prior to the four nights you spent on Saint Barthélemy with him?"

"No," said Greg, with a frown. "Does it matter? We're registering now. All this is irrelevant."

Beside him in the darkness, Anthea inclined her head to Mycroft's ear.

"What is she - "
Mycroft held up a hand. *Silence.*

He stared at Ilka's expressionless face, thinking hard.

"Pending a few small security issues, inspector, we're obviously happy to proceed with the registration - but an unauthorised intimate relationship of longevity would naturally be cause for concern. All manner of security leaks might have occurred. I'm sure you can see that."

Greg's face tightened. "Longevity? Four nights."

"Not ten years?" Ilka checked.

Mycroft's heart was beating strangely. He didn't know why.

"No," said Greg, startled. "Of course not." Brow creasing, he added, "You've probably got access to Mycroft's e-mails, haven't you? Just read them. You'll see we only ever talked about Sherlock until this year. Everything between us happened in St Barts, and now we want to register. Case closed."

Mycroft's fists curled. *Good. Excellent.*

Ilka tilted her head. "Four nights is a suspiciously short span of time to decide you're ready for such a commitment."

Greg huffed. "Almost like your system is specially designed to prevent that happening, isn't it?" he said. "Sorry, princess. Four nights was enough."

Mycroft saw anger flash across her eyes at 'princess'.

She visibly took a moment to let it settle, then reached for her file and turned over the top-most document. She slid it across the table to Greg.

"Is this you?" she asked.

It was a surveillance photograph, printed twelve by ten. Greg leant forward to see it, frowning. So did Mycroft.

As he recognised the steps of The Dorchester, his heart threw itself into his throat.

"No - " He slammed a hand against the mirror in panic. "No, no!"

He reeled around for the door.

Anthea grabbed him before he'd taken a step. "Mr Holmes - you're *expressly forbidden from* - "

" - no - no, for the love of - "

"Mr Holmes, he *will not care!* For god's sake, *stop!*

A strange muffled bang and a shout echoed from behind the one-way mirror.

Greg's head turned towards the sound.
The ensuing silence kicked his pulse up a notch.

"Inspector?" the blonde bitch prompted, gently, and nudged the photograph a little closer to him.

Guarded, Greg took another look.

It was long lens, taken from a car outside a posh hotel somewhere in London. Squinting at the livery, he discovered it was The Dorchester. A narrow-hipped young man in skinny jeans and a leather jacket was striding up the steps, frowning down the street.

There was a date and time stamped at the bottom - over a year ago.

Greg frowned, casting her a look of scorn. "'Course it's not me. Look at him. Half my age and half my size."

"No?" she said, watching him closely. "You weren't called by Mycroft to The Dorchester on that date?"

*What the fuck?*

"No," Greg said, darkening. "No, that's not me."

She reached into her file, slowly withdrew another photo, and laid it down for him to see. The same hotel steps, a different man - and Greg knew a male prostitute when he saw one.

His stomach contracted, cold.

"Two years ago," Ilka murmured, watching him. Her eyes felt like needles against his face. "That one *is* you, isn't it?"

Greg shook his head in silence.

Another photo was laid down - another escort, another date. It became two long rows of photos, displayed with care across the table, one after the other, a string of sex workers going back ten years, anonymous young men called to hotels late in the evening.

The earliest was two days after he'd met Mycroft.

"Which of these are you?" Ilka murmured.

Greg looked into her eyes.

There was pity there for him - some illusion of it, at least. Delight and sorrow and encouragement curled in her pale blue gaze, coaxing him to let it hurt.

He could hear the muffle of raised voices behind the mirror.

Breathing in, he sat up in his chair.

"None of them are me." He reached for his glass of water, drinking to ease the sudden dryness in his throat. As he put it down, he added, "But I get the feeling you knew that."

He looked up at her again. She was studying him like a predator watching an injured animal, waiting for him to collapse.

Greg held her gaze.
"What you don't realise," he said, and the man writing shorthand paused, glancing up, "is that I've wasted years of my life doing what we're doing now... just with me on the other side of the table. I know the tricks. I know how to unsettle people. I know how to hint that you're on their side, so they'll do what you want. Scary place, scary people. Who wouldn't want a friend right now? I've been there. I've done this. So I can see what you're hoping for here."

He bit his lip.

"Honestly, I can. And I know you're trying..."

Leaning forwards in his chair, he scooped his hands around a decade of sex workers and slid them together into a pile.

"I didn't need a reason to be here," he said, gathering them up. He neatened the edges as he spoke. "Making Mycroft happy is enough. The day he wakes up next to me, my life's gonna have purpose again. You don't know what that means to me. You can't. But if I needed a reason to get through this in one piece? You've just given me the best I could have asked for."

He tossed the pile across the table, dumping them in front of her.

He looked her in the eye.

"So that you bastards," he said, and sat back down, "don't get to take another photo like these ever again." He flashed her a smile. "What's your next question, princess? I've got dinner to get on with."

Her face didn't move.

Without a sound, she reached into her file.

"Breathe."

Anthea rubbed between his shoulders, hard, forcing him to focus on it.

"Breathe."

Mycroft held onto the wall. He was so close to vomiting he couldn't speak.

"He doesn't care," she said, and Mycroft wretched, pressing his forehead against the concrete so hard it hurt. "He doesn't care in the least, Mr Holmes. Breathe."

The room was spinning. He couldn't hear anything but his own pulse, pounding in his ears, and the quiet murmur of her voice.

It meant that a moment later, her concerned tone cut straight to his heart.

"Sir -"

Mycroft lifted his head from his hands, gazing through the mirror in despair.

Ilka Fielding was sliding a set of printed pages across the table.
"- dated over the last three years," she said, coolly. "Are these your bank statements, inspector? Please check them thoroughly."

Greg wasn't moving in his seat. The colour was draining from his face.

Ilka raised an eyebrow. "Please answer, inspector. We're more than prepared to sit here all night."

Mycroft watched, his heart hammering, as Greg took a long breath. He addressed the floor.

"Mycroft - I'm sorry - "

"Are these your bank statements?" Ilka pressed, and Greg covered his face with his hands.

"Yes," he said into them.

Mycroft reached for Anthea's elbow, gripping it. "What - "

She shushed him, watching closely.

Neither of them breathed as Ilka sat back in her chair, surveying Greg with the greatest of interest.

"You seem to have a very poor handle on your personal finances, inspector," she said.

Greg's jaw visibly set. "Divorce does that. Ask my ex-wife about it."

"We will." Ilka tilted her head. "This amount of debt worries us."

Greg said nothing, visibly shaking.

Ilka's forehead creased. "Has Mycroft offered to pay you to enter into an intimate relationship with him?"

As Mycroft's knees gave way, a chair appeared behind him. Anthea pulled him down into it. She gripped his shoulders and held him in place.

"Christ almighty." Greg's voice sharpened through the mirror. "No. No, he hasn't."

"He seems to have funded your time in St Barts rather generously." Ilka produced another document from the file, glancing over it with interest before casting it across the table to Greg. "A private villa in January is something of an extravagance for a 'casual acquaintance', as you can see... was this offered to you as a trial, ahead of a permanent financial arrangement? Or did you make the suggestion to Mycroft? I imagine the solution advertised itself to you rather loudly, once you'd realised his finances are in a far healthier state than yours."

"He doesn't know how much I'm in debt," Greg bit out, turning white, "so he wouldn't offer. And he didn't. And it's not about that."

"You can see why we suspect it's convenient for you."

"This isn't about money!"

"Has he previously paid you for sex?" she went on, calmly. "This incident ten years ago in Deptford, for instance?"

"No."
"You'll appreciate that, to the security services," she said, "and to those concerned with Mycroft's welfare, when a prostitute spends four nights being treated to luxury at his expense, then suddenly decides that a serious commitment is - "

Greg stood up, furious.

"I am not a prostitute," he barked. "I've never taken money for sex. Not from him. Not from anyone. I don't care that he's paid for it, and I know why he did it, but he's not paid me."

"You'll appreciate though, inspector, that Mycroft would quite rightly have some concern as to your intentions... if, of course, you'd made him aware of precisely how much debt you've accrued." Ilka smiled, regretfully. "I can see why you hid it, Greg."

"I didn't hide it!"

"You said he wasn't aware of the amount?"

"We had four days together! We had better things to do! We weren't talking about how much my ex-wife and her lawyer screwed me for - "

"But you'll agree with me, Greg, won't you, that Mycroft has every reason to be concerned by - "

"Ask him!" Greg raged across the desk. "Get him in here! Show him the fucking statements! Ask him what he thinks!"

Mycroft tried to stand.

Anthea forced him back down. "Sir - "

"Mycroft is being kept safely away from you," Ilka murmured, "until we can be certain as to your intentions... and frankly, we have significant concerns. Sit down please, inspector."

Greg stayed standing. He looked ready to fly for her.

"Sit down please, inspector," she repeated - and her eyebrow lifted with a flicker. "Unless you'd now like to leave... and we can arrange to have you returned to your flat."

Anthea's fingers dug into Mycroft's shoulders as he shook.

Greg stared across the table at Ilka, pale. He didn't move for some time.

He then reached for his chair without a sound, pulled it back to the table, and sat down.

Mycroft put his face into his hands.

As Anthea began to rub between his shoulders once more, he mumbled, "Were you aware?"

"No, sir." She hesitated. "Is it an issue?"

Mycroft closed his eyes. "No."

It was past nine before the blonde bitch flipped shut her file.
"I think that will suffice for today," she said. The three of them got up from their chairs as suddenly as they'd arrived. "Thank you for your time, inspector. A shock, I imagine, to realise what exactly is involved in these matters..."

Greg said nothing, quietly tightening his hold on his elbows. He'd never needed arms around him so badly.

"Someone will show you out," she said, reached inside her jacket and removed a clean rectangle of white card. "If you need to contact me for any reason - if you'd like to speak to me in confidence..."

She placed it down on the table, slipping it across with one finger.

"Do feel free," she said. "You'll have questions about the rest of the process, I'm sure. I'll be very happy to reassure you."

Without another word, they left.

In the silence that followed, Greg turned his face up toward the lights. He closed his eyes and breathed.

A minute later, the door opened. It was his friend in the suit from earlier - still stony-faced, still ugly.

"Come on," the agent grunted.

Weary, Greg pushed back his chair. He didn't have the strength for a retort. He followed the guy numbly from the room and back along the corridor with its endless restricted doors, then into the lift.

As they stepped out onto Vincent Street, the night sky was pitch black above them.

Greg noticed with concern the lack of a waiting car.

"Err - is there - " He turned around to the suit still standing in the door. "Am I being - "

The suit frowned. "No."

Greg's heart reeled.

"I've not got my wallet," he said. "I've not got a coat. You just ordered me out of the house, dickhead. It's an hour's walk. How am I meant to - "

The man rolled his eyes. He slammed the door, and was gone.

Greg stared at it for a moment, his heart sinking.

"Right," he muttered, and reached into his pocket for his phone.

Three Missed Calls from Mycroft (New)

Shaking, Greg held the phone to his ear.

It was answered before he'd even heard it ring.

"A car is on its way," Mycroft said. His voice broke. "I'm sorry - Greg - I'm so sorry - "
Greg drove a shaking hand through his hair. "What the hell are you sorry for?"

"I - I was - l-lonely - and I - needed... y-you can't imagine the guilt I... I-I'm sorry - "

Jesus. Greg had almost forgotten.

"Doesn't matter," he said, feeling his heart strain. "It's - I don't care. I don't care what you did to feel okay." He shut his eyes, tight. "M'sorry I didn't tell you, My. The debt. I just - fuck - I-I've been paying it off - s-she ruined me - she dragged it on so long, I - "

"For god's sake - Greg, it doesn't matter - "

"I'm n-not interested in your money. I don't care. I don't want that. I never did. I'm not - I'm n-not some - "

"You're not." Mycroft's voice shook. "You're not. Not at all. And I'm not - a-attempting to buy you, Greg - I'll look after you - but I-I would never - "

Greg leant against the front wall of the building, pulling his arms around himself against the cold.

"Who the fuck was that bitch?" he asked, shaking. "Who is she?"

"Ilka Fielding." Mycroft was in tears. Greg could hear them - stressed, exhausted tears. "Head of Human Resources."

Greg let the name flood through him. Bitch. Vicious bitch.

"I'm s-sorry." Heat suddenly burned in his eyes, too. "I'd want you if you were nobody. I'd want you if you were broke like me. I promise. Want you like you were at New Year. Just - t-talking - lying on the sofa with me - I don't care about your money."

"I love you," Mycroft's voice cracked. "When I took you to St Barts, I - I w-wanted to be with you in comfort. To treat you well. I wasn't trying to - inveigle you into some sort of - "

"Christ. Christ, that utter cow."

Greg breathed in, hard. "Hey... l-let's stop this. She got into our heads. She put stuff there that's not true. I don't care how much money you've got."

The rush of Mycroft's breath softened his own. "I do not care about your debt."

"I don't care you - h-had to see people, darlin'." Greg shut his eyes. "How else were you gonna...? M'sorry. M'so fucking sorry."

"I - I h-hate myself for - "

"Don't." Greg's heart ached. "You didn't hurt anyone, did you? Don't hate yourself. Hate your job. Hate them. Hate them for making you do that, then kicking you in the face with it when it suits them. How long have they kept those photos, just in case they need to - Christ - "

"G-God almighty." Mycroft sounded on the verge of collapse. "I am sorry."

"Stop saying sorry to me. You've got nothing to be sorry for." Greg curled his hand tight around the phone. "My?"

"Mm?"

"I - f-fucked a lot of people when I was young. Travelling. If they bring it up - "
"I don't care," Mycroft whispered. "I'm glad. Glad one of us had the chance."

"J-Jesus." Greg gripped a handful of his hair, breathing in. "I'm sorry."

"If I'm not permitted to be sorry," Mycroft said, "then neither are you."

"O-Okay... we'll - take that as a rule, then." Greg let his head rest back against the front of the building. The night air brushed across his throat. "Mycroft?"

"I'm here. I'm here, sweetheart."

_Sweetheart_.

"Managed it," Greg said. "First one."

Mycroft exhaled with a shudder. "You did. You were _wonderful_, Greg. You were perfect."

"Did I say anything I shouldn't?"

"No. Not at all. Tell them everything, darling. Everything they ask. You are not a security concern - not at all - she simply wants to frighten you from me."

"She won't." Greg felt his throat grip around the words. "S-She won't, posh."

"The relationship we'll share is no concern of hers. I have the right to choose you."

_Oh, fuck._ "Choose me. Please. Please make it me."

"It's you." Mycroft's voice tightened. "Oh Christ, Greg - it's you."

Greg's heart thudded, echoing with it. "We'll be okay," he said. "We'll get through. I know what to expect now... it'll be easier from now."

At the sound of an approaching car, he opened his tired eyes.

A black Jaguar was easing along the road towards him.

"I - think the car's here, darlin..."

"Yes, it should have just reached you..." Mycroft's voice softened. "May I - keep you on the phone until you've reached my brother again? I n-need to hear your voice. I need to know you are alright."

_Fuck._ "Don't go. Stay with me a while."

"I will. I will stay with you, Greg."

The car cruised to a stop. The driver got out, opened up the backseat and stood aside.

"Inspector? I'm here to take you home, sir."

Greg's bones ached.

"Thank you," he said. He stepped forward, climbing gratefully inside the warmth of the car. "Th-thanks - "

As he sank back into the seat, Mycroft's voice wrapped itself around him.
"Rest, darling... you're safe now. You'll be at Baker Street soon." He could almost feel Mycroft kiss his head. "And you are one day closer to me."
Phone in hand, Anthea hurried up the second staircase through the darkness. Her dressing robe swept the stairs behind her; the old timbers of the corridor creaked beneath her feet.

Normally, she would rather die than enter his bedroom unbidden - especially just shy of three o'clock in the morning - but there was no time for propriety.

Throwing the door wide, she said loudly, "Mr Holmes?"

He was awake almost at once, jerking from his sleep. He sat upright within the shadows of the four-poster. "Yes?"

"Thames House, sir. Now."

She heard him reel with it. "Now?"

"Three AM, sir." She held up his coat. "Now."

They'd commenced the interview before Mycroft could get there. As he entered the viewing area with a bang of the door, Ilka Fielding's assistant jolted awake in the chair in which he'd slumped, his eyes flying wide.

"Mr Holmes -"

Mycroft bore down on the boy in a fury.

"Three o'clock in the morning?" he raged, and only Anthea's swift intervention prevented him from seizing the wretch by the throat. "To prevent me from being present?"

Anthea stepped between them, pressed both hands on Mycroft's chest and pushed him back.

"Sir," she said, her eyes flashing. "How do you suppose we knew this was happening at all?"

Such was the force of Mycroft's anger that it took him several seconds to realise.

He then glanced over her shoulder into the eyes of the frightened young man, who shrank back from his gaze and paled.

Mycroft's fists curled. With effort, he swallowed his anger.

"You will be suitably rewarded," he told the boy, his voice hard.

Ilka's assistant shook, breathing in. "I - want to leave Human Resources. Please. I can't - cope with -"

"Continue to be useful," Mycroft said, "and a place will perhaps be found."

"R-Right."
"Now out."

Anthea lowered her eyes. "Thank you, Harry."

The boy left without a word, as white as a sheet. As the door shut behind him, Mycroft approached the viewing mirror and drew his coat more tightly across his chest.

Greg was exhausted, curled in his chair in a hastily-grabbed jacket and sleepwear. His hair was on end. He was listening to a pristine Ilka Fielding as if he couldn't quite be certain he was conscious, his eyes heavy with broken sleep.

Mycroft's heart pulled.

"I am here," he whispered. He wanted to place his hands upon the glass. "I'm here."

" - travelling in your early twenties, if we may... there's a number of things we'd appreciate your clarification on."

Greg huffed, rubbing a hand beneath his eyes.

"S'this about all the people I fucking?" he said, his voice gravelled. He added, tartly, "Twenty years ago."

"Would you rather we not ask?"

"No, princess... go on. M'all ears." Greg pulled his feet into the chair with him, heaving a yawn. "Warning you, though. F'you want a list, you should've brought me when I'm awake."

"Two down," his voice murmured in Mycroft's ear. The sun was finally rising over London; the car was returning him to Baker Street to sleep. "Didn't seem as bad this time... kinda helps, being too tired to care."

"I am so proud of you." Mycroft wanted to hold him, stroke his hair, lay him down somewhere quiet and warm. "You did beautifully, Greg."

"Mmh. Let's hope they do the rest at three AM..." Greg's yawn tugged at his heart. "Posh?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"Take me back to St Barts one day."

"Sleep in the sand with me. Swim in the sea with me. Take me to dinner."

Mycroft's heart swelled. "I love you," he whispered.

He could hear Greg's smile. "I love you, too."
"Your marriage seems to have been rather brief."

*Here we go.* Greg folded his arms, holding Ilka Fielding's gaze with a fixed smile. "Are you married, out of interest?"

She consulted her file.

"From official records," she said, as if she hadn't heard him, "it seems that you filed for divorce in under three years... something of a whirlwind commitment, was it?"

Greg pressed his tongue into his cheek. "We all make mistakes."

She gave him an unimpressed look. "How reassuring for Mr Holmes," she remarked.

"Is Mr Holmes planning to cheat on me twice in three years?"

"Twice?" Ilka turned a page in her file. "Your wife had *three* lovers, from her phone records."

Christ almighty.

"Sorry," Greg said, feigning confusion. "Just to check - am I registering to marry her again? Or is this about me and Mycroft?"

Ilka studied him, her lips thin. "Your behaviour in a previous committed relationship is relevant to Mycroft's interests, Greg. It gives us some indication of how you'll treat him."

Greg smiled a little.

"Sounds like you're confused, to be honest. You're Human Resources. Not his mother. The man can make his own decisions, and he's decided on me."

Her jaw tightened.

As she started to respond, her eyes hard, Greg drowned her out.

" - difference between 'having security concerns'," he told her, loudly, "and *being invasive in the hope you'll creep me out*. Sadly for you I'm bright enough to spot the difference. Yes, I was married. Yes, it blew up. No, this isn't relevant in any way at all."

Ilka's gaze flickered. "Are you a violent man?"

Greg suppressed his initial sarcastic answer.

"No," he said calmly.

"Curious." Ilka pulled a printed sheet from her file, passing it across the table to him. "Will you kindly read the following text message aloud for me?"

Bracing, Greg took the paper and scanned his eyes across it. As he realised what he was seeing, he rolled his eyes and put it back down.

"Please read it, Greg," she murmured. "For the tape."

Greg inhaled, glancing back down at the printed text. "Spoken in anger."

"And now to be read aloud, please."
Biting his tongue, Greg supposed they should get this over with. "Text her one more time and I'll cave your fucking skull in."

"To whom was that sent?"

"Someone who turned out to be sleeping with her," Greg said, coolly, "and whose fucking skull I didn't cave in."

"You wished to, though?"

"Not enough," Greg said, scowling, "clearly. Or I would have done."

"You would use violence if sufficiently provoked, then?"

Greg stared at her. "Show me one person in this world who wouldn't. That's what 'sufficiently' means."

Ilka checked her file, an idle stroke of her long, pale fingertips.

"Your ex-wife believes you have a crippling inability to communicate," she put to him.

"Of course she does," said Greg, flatly. "She's my ex-wife. If she thought I was great at communicating, how would we have ended up divorced?"

Ilka's eyebrows lifted. "You're still emotionally attached to her, then?"

"Jesus actual Christ," Greg breathed, losing the will to live. "Has anyone ever told you you're bloody unbearable? Who hurt you, can I ask? What happened to you, to make you get off on doing this to people?"

Ilka shared a bewildered glance with the woman beside her, who shrugged - then returned her stare to Greg.

"What do you mean?" she asked him.

"Just... God, you're loving every minute of this. I can see it in your eyes. It's not right."

"We're fulfilling our responsibility to Mycroft, Greg. To a man you claim to hold some affection for. Your truculent attitude towards us is unsettling." Ilka shook her head, her brow furrowing. "I'm baffled as to why you would believe this is somehow personal. Do you usually take any manner of questioning as an attack against you?"

God.

It's not personal, is it?

You're just like this. You're just good at it, so you do it.

"No," Greg said, holding her gaze. "Just think you're being very harsh."

"We are being thorough," Ilka corrected him, coldly. "Or would you rather we be slapdash with Mycroft's safety?"

"Hmm. Moving on, then." Ilka's colleague recommenced his quick shorthand; she glanced at his notes. "We've established that you're still emotionally attached to your ex-wife. In the light of this, I suggest - "

"I'm not emotionally attached to her," Greg said, forcing himself to breathe. "That's why I'm registering to be with Mycroft. He's the only person I want to be with."

"Strange. You seem to have spent a significant portion of this interview discussing her. You've hardly mentioned Mycroft."

"At your prompting. And what I was trying to tell you is that evidence from an ex-wife is going to be biased to hell, isn't it? So just pull it all out of your file, princess, throw it in the bin, and let's talk about something else."

Ilka remained motionless, her face a featureless mask of nothing.

"You seem a little agitated," she remarked. "Your broken marriage is clearly a sore point for you."

Greg smiled without humour.

"You're a sore point for me," he corrected. "My ex-wife is my ex for a lot of reasons - all of them good. Can we talk about Mycroft now?"

"Forgive me, Greg. It merely suggests a certain lack of appreciation for commitment." She gave an elegant half-shrug. "We're trying to convince ourselves you understand the gravity of the arrangement you're proposing to enter. You aren't helping us in that regard."

"Bring Mycroft in here," said Greg, folding his arms. "I'll show you gravity."

"Mm. I'm sure you think you understand... whether you do is another matter." Ilka Fielding cast another glance at her colleague, who obliged her with a look of worry. "So far, your childish attitude indicates that we'll be dissolving this commitment within a year or two..."

Greg smiled, slowly. He shook his head.

"When you're making me fight this hard," he said, "d'you think I'll ever let him go?" He leant back in his chair, biting his lip. "Try something new, Ilka. You're having no luck here."

Her eyes flashed with anger.

"I did not invite you to use my name," she said, her voice low.

Greg clucked his tongue. "Didn't invite you to mine either, princess. But it looks like we're friends now. I can't wait for the office Christmas party. Will one of you go get me a coffee? I'm parched."

"Tomorrow morning?"

"Mm..." Greg pulled the blanket to his chin in the darkness, gazing sleepily at the glow of his phone. "Bit uneasy about it, if I'm honest."

Mycroft's voice came as soft as if it were stroking his cheek. "Tell me why."
Greg stirred on the couch, closing his eyes as he put it into words.

"It was hard to care before St Barts," he admitted. "Hard to care when you were gone... don't know how I'm going to make myself care now. I've - got more on my mind. Better things."

"A return to work might be grounding for you," Mycroft offered. "Something to take your thoughts away from registration for a while."

Greg huffed gently. "Going back feels like a waste of time, frankly."

Mycroft understood. Greg could feel it in his quiet. "You really are unhappy there, aren't you?"

"I think I really am." Greg sighed, biting his cheek. "Tired old pen pusher now. Wheeled out to do the TV appeasements, otherwise chained to my desk. Should've stayed as a sergeant... I've got Donovan snapping at my heels, thinking she'll do a better job... can't wait to let her."

"I'm distressed that you were threatened with disciplinary action," Mycroft murmured, "rather than offered professional support. It seems a very poor show from your superiors."

"Nnh... chief super's job is to make sure we're hitting targets. That's all. He gets chewed at if we don't." Greg rubbed a hand over the side of his neck, quietly rubbing at a tense spot. "S'all management is, really. Doesn't matter what you work as. It's just one big chain of irrelevant people, chewing at each other to make the ground troops work harder for less money."

"Very socialist of you, darling."

Greg grinned. "Meant to get more right wing as we get older, aren't we?" he said. "Looks like I'm sliding the wrong way."

"Thank heavens." Greg could hear the smile kindling in his lover's voice. "Take me with you."


Mycroft's soft sigh eased through him like it was his own.

"I hope that work is as tolerable as possible, dear heart," he murmured. "Take it as inspiration for a future bestseller. Our plucky hero encounters bureaucratic strife in the course of his mystery-solving duties. Will he overcome his trials?"

Greg muffled his laughter, not wanting to wake Sherlock and John. He turned onto his front and stretched beneath the blanket, grinning down at the phone.

"Wish you were here," he said. "Miss you. Really badly. Just... having you in my arms."

"Everything is going well," Mycroft murmured. Greg heard the quiet shifting of sheets; he was getting into bed. "All we need is patience... the days are passing."

"Mhm. All be a memory some day."

"It will."

"Can I ring you tomorrow after work?"

"Of course." Mycroft's voice softened. "I'd like you to. I look forward to hearing how it went."

"Kay..." Greg gazed at his phone, feeling his heart drum against his ribs. "Goodnight, posh. Sweet
Greg used the drive to work to cheerlead himself into positivity. He put an upbeat station on the radio, sang along with Jess Glynne and promised himself a fancy sandwich from the canteen for lunch. It was Monday; this was a clean slate. It would be fine.

Heads turned as he entered the division. He tuned out the looks of surprise and let himself into his office, switching on his computer.

As the e-mails came rolling in, he went to make himself a coffee.

Sally had arrived by the time he got back. She was taking off her coat as he passed. Her face registered neither surprise nor relief; her absent-minded greeting suggested they'd only seen each other yesterday. He returned it, politely, and got on with work.

A few minutes later, she showed her face.

"How are things?" she asked, leaning all too casually in his doorway.

"Fine," he said. Deciding to be nice, he gave her a smile. "Feeling better. Got some proper sleep."

"You look better," she offered. She folded her arms. "Anything I can help with?"

"You can always give me a general update, if you're free - fill me in on what I've missed - what's been advanced. Sound good?"

"Yeah. Sure." She glanced over her shoulder. "I'll get my files."

"Great." See. All professional. All fine. "Thanks, Donovan. Make yourself a coffee first."

She settled at his desk five minutes later, opening up her notes on their current investigations.

"Biggest update is the Barker case," she said. "The kid found out in Peckham. We've had forensics all over the only entrance to the yard, and we've had a match with - "

The office door opened.

As Greg glanced up, and found a familiar figure waiting there with sunglasses hooked at the lapel of his suit, his heart fell through the floor.

He said nothing, praying this wasn't what he thought.

Mr Sunglasses raised an eyebrow. "You're needed," he said.

Next to Greg, Sally had gone as stiff as a cat.

"I'm at work," he intoned.

The man shrugged. "I'll tell 'em you've changed your mind, if you want."
Greg's blood ran a little cold. "That's the assumption they'll make, is it?"

Sally turned her head warily towards him. "What's going on?"

Mr Sunglasses crossed his hands in front of his body, shifting his weight.

"They'll assume what they assume," he told Greg, vaguely. "I was just told to fetch you. You don't have to come."

*Christ.*

Greg drew a long breath. He pushed back his chair, retrieved his phone from the drawer and stood up.

"Where are you going?" Sally said, her voice hardening.

Greg pulled his coat from the back of the door. "I won't be long."

"*Where* are you *going?*" she said, and got to her feet.

Greg looked at her, his heart already beating hard in his throat.

"If anyone calls," he said, "tell them I'm dealing with a family emergency. Alright? I'll be back by lunchtime."

Sally glanced at the man in his suit in utter disbelief. "A *family emergency?*" she said.

Greg's stomach clenched. "Look, you - you wouldn't understand. But it's important. Just this once, please, can you -"

"Jesus Christ," she breathed, tipping quickly into anger. "You've only been here five minutes! And now you're -"

*Shit. Shit - fine.* Greg held the door open for her.

"Step out please, Donovan. Gotta lock this."

Sally's face set. She picked up the files, and pushed past him without looking at him, striding in the direction of the chief superintendent's door.

*Christ almighty.*

Greg locked his office, pocketed his keys, and followed Mr Sunglasses from the building.

"How many times have you slept with your sergeant?"

Greg resisted the urge to cover his face with his hands.

"None," he said.

Ilka's mouth tightened. "That seems to contradict what we've heard."
"Bloody hell. Right. Go on. What've you supposedly heard? And from who, most importantly?"

"A colleague of yours told us that the two of you have been engaging in an on-off sexual affair for some time."

"Which colleague?"

"We're not at liberty to reveal our informants," Ilka purred, lifting her cup of green tea to her mouth. "It's true, then."

"No, it's not true. That's called 'work gossip'. It's everywhere, and it's rubbish. You'll probably find someone at Scotland Yard that tells you I'm fucking the pot plants."

She placed her tea cup down with care. "And Mycroft's brother?"

"Sherlock?" Greg studied her face, guarded. "What about him?"

"How long have you been sleeping with him?"

"Christ. You've never met Sherlock Holmes, have you?"

"Presumably Mycroft is unaware of your affair."

"Mycroft knows I'm not sleeping with his brother," Greg said, wearily. "Everybody knows I'm not sleeping with his brother. I've never laid a hand on Sherlock."

"You seem awfully concerned with his welfare," she remarked, coolly.

Greg stared at her for a long, angry moment.

"Human love is completely alien to you, isn't it?" he said. "You just don't get it. You don't see why your employees would do something like that, unless it's purposely to cause you inconvenience. What happened to you as a kid? Did your parents sell you to the circus or something?"

Ilka Fielding raised an eyebrow. "You're saying that you're in love with Mycroft's brother?"

"No. For Christ's sake. I'm interested in one person and it's Mycroft."

"And... Ethan Sterling, of course."

Greg breathed in. "I'm not interested in Ethan Sterling."

"Really?" Ilka checked another page in her file. "You've contacted him quite a number of times. Phone calls. Text messages."

Greg bit the side of his tongue. "He's a friend."

"Suddenly you've advanced from 'not interested' to 'a friend'... rather obvious you're concealing the fullness of things..." She withdrew a photograph from the file and cast it across the table. "You entered Sterling’s residence fairly early on the evening pictured, and you didn't leave it until late. Were you engaging in sex?"

"I'm not actually shagging half of London, as it happens. Can we just take it as my final answer that I'm interested in Mycroft, and nobody else?"

"Why?" she murmured, watching him closely. "Does this line of questioning make you
uncomfortable?"

Greg turned his face to the ceiling for a moment, willing himself strength.

"No," he said. "It's just boring the arse off me - and I'm meant to be at work."

Ilka gave him a look of confusion. "Work?"

"Yes," Greg said, through his teeth. "Scotland Yard. Now. Which you know, because you had me fetched from there."

Her apparent confusion deepened.

"Hmm. I thought the situation would have been obvious to you, Greg... apparently not. You're even more unprepared for this process than we thought."

"What situation?" Greg said, quietly gripping his elbows. He couldn't remember crossing his arms.

Ilka Fielding frowned.

"That you will be leaving your role in the police force," she said, calmly. "It's unfeasible for you to continue in such a position. A senior civil servant's partner can't spend his time engaging with known and suspected criminals. Frankly I'm alarmed that you thought you could."

Greg held her gaze. "There's - no way at all I can - "

She laughed. It was a ringing, delighted laugh - the sort of laugh that usually rang out over canapes and champagne, amused by some anecdote the CEO had just told.

"For goodness's sake... have you thought the implications of this decision through in any depth?" she asked him, as her colleagues joined her with weary smiles. "I hope Mycroft is as distressed by your thoughtlessness as I am."

Greg said nothing for a moment, watching the woman on Ilka's right slowly shake her head in disappointment.

"When do I have to - "

Ilka scoffed and interrupted. "Obviously you should have done so already."

Greg pushed back his chair.

"Sit down," she intoned, suddenly sharp. "We are not finished."

Greg swallowed the thickness in his throat; he sat down.

He didn't even reach his office. As soon as he stepped into the division, a small crowd of people turned towards him from the reception desk - among them, the chief superintendent.

He shoved them all aside and strode towards Greg, furious.

Before he could speak, Greg hauled in a breath.
"I quit," he said, freezing the superintendent in his tracks. "I'm done. That's it. I'm finished here."

The superintendent's expression flashed with shock. "You - "

"Quit," said Greg. "Post me my P45. Password to my computer is 'arsenal'."

He fished in his pockets for work ID and keys.

"Here," he said, pushing them into the superintendent's shocked hands. "I don't want a leaver's interview. Actually, you know what? Let's do it quickly now: I hate it here. You're a crap boss. You care about statistics more than victims and there's no support for staff. I thought I'd make a difference in the police. All I do is get told which crimes shouldn't be included in this month's figures as crimes, so that your numbers show it's going down."

They were staring at him, open-mouthed. Greg had never seen the superintendent's face so slack.

"Donovan deserves my job," he said, his heart hardening. "Give it to her. She'll hate it even more than I did. Under my reason for leaving, put 'getting married'. He's called Mycroft. I spent a week with him in the Caribbean and now I'm going to become an author. Maybe a masseuse. We've not settled on the details yet. It was great working with some of you."

He backed out of the division without another word.

Security were waiting on the ground floor to escort him from the premises.

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"Are you alright?"

Greg was sitting on a bench in Hyde Park. The open air was cold; it was calming his thoughts.

"Bit shocked," he admitted. He looked down at the pigeons who'd gathered near to him in hope of food. "W-Wish I could see you. Just for a minute. Just - see your face."

Mycroft's voice gentled. "I'm so sorry, Greg."

"Stupid thing is I wanted it to happen. Just - sudden. You know?" Greg drew a breath. "Everything's so sudden."

A note of nervousness crept into Mycroft's voice.

"Greg, I... I wish I could - I'm sorry to - "

Greg closed his eyes. "Be easier if I could see you," he mumbled. He pulled quietly at the cuff of his coat. "I've gone all in here, haven't I?"

"Is that alright?"

Greg pulled himself to smile.

"Got to blow it all to hell before you can start brand new." He hesitated, looking down at his feet. "Is it okay that I'm getting scared?"
"Of course." Mycroft's voice ached. "Of course it's okay."

There was a long pause.

"I... I'm not sure if - now is the time to... but I h-have news."

"News?" Greg rubbed the side of the phone with his thumb. "What news, love?"

"I've - possibly found a suitable apartment... Westminster. It's spacious, but not extravagant. The styling is very contemporary. Views across St James's Park..." Mycroft hesitated. "The kitchen is very well-equipped."

A smile rose on Greg's face. "Yeah? Have you seen it?"

"I had a viewing today."

"What's our bedroom like?"

Mycroft's breath stalled. "Beautiful," he said. "Soft greys. En suite... underfloor heating, and a bath..."

"A big bath?"

"Y-Yes."

Greg closed his eyes against their rising heat, smiling still. "Are we insane, Mycroft?"

Mycroft's murmur rose the hairs on the back of his neck. "'Gather ye rosebuds', darling."

Greg breathed it in.

"All be worth it, when I hold you." His throat gripped. "When I can kiss you again."

"All worth it..." Mycroft exhaled softly. "Let me send some things to Baker Street - for your spirits. Will you be there this evening?"

"'Things'?" Greg smiled, hesitating. "What're you sending me?"

Sherlock watched with unvoiced amusement as Greg unpacked the box onto the kitchen counter - Scottish steaks, red wine and cherry pavlova.

"An unusual way to celebrate unemployment," he noted.

Greg gave him a quiet smile.

"Celebrating freedom," he said, and looked down into the box. There was a small envelope, lying on top of what looked like folded white cotton. "Hang on."

He picked up the envelope - marked with 'G'; an elegant blue swirl - and then the fabric. He had it in his hands before he realised.

It was a white dress shirt.
Sherlock frowned.

"Not your size," he remarked. "Recently worn. Why would -"

Greg gazed down at the shirt in his hands, feeling his heart thud to itself in the silence.

He took a moment to speak.

"I'll cook up the steaks for us, Sherlock." He hesitated. "D'you mind if I use your room for a minute first?"

Sherlock had realised. Greg saw it written in his face.

He nodded without speaking.

Greg took himself quietly up the stairs. He closed the door of Sherlock's room and sat down at the end of the bed, careful not to disturb the covers.

With the shirt in his lap, he split the envelope open with his thumb.

His fingers shook as he unfolded the card.

"Love reckons hours for months, and days for years; and every little absence is an age." - John Dryden

Sleep well sweetheart.

Without a sound, Greg gathered Mycroft's shirt to his face and breathed.
As Mycroft strode towards the viewing room, with Anthea moving swiftly at his heels, a flash of dark clothing and white blonde hair emerged from a doorway up ahead.

It was day ten.

Ilka Fielding shot him a look of startled annoyance over her shoulder. "I understood you had a cabinet meeting this morning."

Mycroft held her eyes.

"Which is how I knew you would arrange his interview for this time," he said, coldly. "I was able to reschedule the meeting."

Ilka's gaze shuttered. "How fortuitous."

"'Fortuitous' suggests an element of happy chance," Mycroft told her. "The word you're searching for is 'insightful'. I told you I would witness every interview and I will."

He interrupted her attempt to respond.

"Your suggestion to Greg yesterday that our partnership would have a negative impact upon my professional reputation is not only homophobic but wholly inaccurate. I've ensured that Greg knows this - and if you make such a suggestion to him again, you will answer to the Foreign Secretary."

Ilka's eyes narrowed. "Are you threatening me, Mycroft?"

"Yes." Mycroft utilised his height advantage to look down on her from above, anger sharpening his expression. "Nor do I do it idly."

She stared back at him, unmoved.

"I'm not certain this continued phone contact between the two of you has been appropriate," she said. "It seems to be giving you an opportunity to coach him through the - "

"If it is merely registration," Mycroft breathed, "then what is there possibly to coach him on?"

She said nothing for a moment, her eyes small and full of irritation.

"I don't think you realise the scale of work involved in this process. For a staff member of your seniority, the security checks required are - "

"Not a favour," Mycroft said, his eyes flashing. "Not a kindness. They are a basic human right. Or are you suggesting I've been relieved of that right? Am I not perfectly permitted by the terms of my employment to register a partner?"

Ilka ran her tongue across her teeth.

"Of course you are," she said. "We want the best for you, Mycroft. It's merely distressing that you don't appreciate the efforts we're undertaking on your behalf."

Bile rose in the back of Mycroft's mouth.
"You expect appreciation for the basic fulfilment of your duties?" he said. "Then you entered the wrong profession. We are the security services. We serve the British nation. I sanction every decision ever made by our country's government. And you expect me to shower you in appreciation for countersigning a few forms, and amending my security budget?"

He leant close to her, glaring across a distance of only inches.

"Which will be substantial, I fear. To warn you in advance, I don't expect Greg to face a single threat as long as he lives - and nor will I permit his personal freedoms to be restricted by a single iota. I imagine those two requirements won't come cheap."

He stepped away from her, coldly.

"Thank goodness Human Resources are so committed to my welfare," he said, and pushed open the door of the viewing room.

As they watched, Anthea worked at his side without a word. The quiet rattle of her typing was barely audible over the proceedings.

Mycroft didn't take his eyes from Greg.

"You seem to be drinking rather a lot recently."

Greg rubbed two fingers slowly between his eyes. "Do I?"

"Are you consuming what you'd term a normal amount?"

"I don't know. No?" Greg breathed in, glancing across the room. "Hard to relax, knowing I might get dragged out of the house at any moment."

"You drink to relax, then?"

"Why else do people drink?"

"Rather an unhealthy coping mechanism, wouldn't you say?" Ilka sat back in her chair, surveying Greg as she turned a pen. "Current guidelines suggest fourteen units a week. Would you say you're within that?"

Greg's face tightened. "Yes?" he tried.

"You're not."

"How - do you know?"

"Unless you're emptying the bottles into the sink then putting them out."

"Right." Greg shook his head at her, dazed. "I'm sorry? I don't know what you want me to say. How much am I allowed to drink and still be with Mycroft?"

"We'd rather you drink within recommended guidelines," Ilka said, frowning. "Fourteen units."
"What's that equivalent to?"

"Six glasses of wine a week."


Anthea spoke from the quiet space behind Mycroft. Her voice stirred his thoughts.

"He's tiring," she said.

Mycroft's mouth tightened.

"He is." He watched Greg reach for water, drinking it with his eyes down as Ilka Fielding listed the health consequences of long-term alcohol abuse. "He told me last night."

The memories were painful - a voice he couldn't reach, a pain he couldn't soothe.

"He's... weary."

There was silence for a moment. "Including this day," Anthea said, "there are only five remaining. Then this will be over."

Mycroft's heart strained.

"He's seen every corner of his life turned out for inspection," he murmured. "He's been forced from his career. He's been forced from his home. He's had his every secret thrown at him for explanation..."

Mycroft curled his fingers around the seashell in his pocket, tracing its ridges with his thumb.

"She hasn't yet mentioned his family."

"I'm - afraid I noticed that as well, sir."

Voicing the concern sharpened its grip on Mycroft's heart. "I suspect she's waiting until he's weak," he said. "She started by attempting to shock him. It didn't work. He's fought her all this time. But after ten days, she... perhaps has a greater capacity to wound him. And he is less capable of protecting himself."

"His commitment to you is only strengthening, Mr Holmes. She thinks she's wearing him down. She is binding him to you."

Mycroft didn't respond.

As Ilka produced a page of Greg's medical records, and began inquiring about the circumstances of an HIV test conducted in 1997, he watched Greg reach into his pocket and wrap his hand around something there.

Mycroft gripped the seashell in his pocket, tightly.
Greg's fingers did the same.

"Is he close to his family, Mr Holmes?" he heard Anthea ask from the darkness.

Mycroft drew air quietly into his lungs.

"Ties of love," he murmured. "Ties of pain."

Anthea processed this. "She can only question him for four more days, sir. Then he's beyond her reach." She resumed typing. "I've cleaned your diary of face-to-face appointments in the two weeks after. I imagine you'll wish to work at home for much of the time."

Our new home.

Furnish it together. Let him make it his own. Settle him.

Sleep late each day.

A thought occurred.

"Which driver is returning him to Baker Street?" Mycroft asked, inclining his head.

She checked. "Albert Collins, sir."

"I need you to acquire some items for the car," Mycroft said, and she pulled a notebook from inside her jacket. "I need them acquired swiftly."

As Greg climbed numbly into the backseat of the car, the driver glanced over one shoulder.

"The file's for you, sir," he said. "Would you like music?"

"No thanks, Bertie..." Sometimes, when he left, Greg wanted noise and rhythm to crowd her voice out of his head. Sometimes there was no room left for anything at all, and the only comfort was silence. "Thanks for coming to get me."

"Not at all, sir." Bertie turned back to the road, and started the engine.

Quietly Greg turned to the green file waiting for him on the seat.

He opened it, finding a note in a handwriting he now recognised well.

He smiled in spite of his exhaustion, reading the note and hearing the voice in his mind.

Thoughts to soothe a weary soul. Let them occupy you if you wish, or simply rest.

I'm a phone call away.

Turning through the rest of the file, Greg found a homeware catalogue for a high-end London
department store. It was clipped with a note.

_For our home. Circle it and it is yours._

Greg's heart ached. Next, there was a brochure for a travel company who seemed to specialise in custom-designed holidays, prices available on request.

_For summer. Choose a place and I will take you there._

Finally, Greg found a menu for a Japanese restaurant on Raphael Street in Knightsbridge.

His eyes filled as he read the note.

_Booked. A private table for two. Our first evening belonging to each other._

_In four days nobody will distress you ever again. Nobody will ever question you. I will pull planets out of orbit to make you happy._

_For every minute that you endure I will give you weeks of perfect joy._

_I am so proud of you._

Mycroft awoke only moments before his phone began to ring. As it did, he glanced at the bedside clock - twenty minutes past midnight.

He reached for the phone, saw Greg's name and answered it at once.

"I'm here," he said.

Greg's voice broke.

"I-I'm sorry - I'm really sorry - you - you said if I needed you - "

"I'm here," Mycroft murmured again, pushing back the covers as he sat up. "Have they summoned you?"

"N-No. No, I - I just..." Distress strained Greg's breathing. "K-Keep thinking I hear the door downstairs. Can't sleep. Don't dare shut my eyes. If I'd murdered someone, they could only question me for twenty-four hours without charge. It's been eleven days. I can't sleep."

"Where are you?" Mycroft said, heart pounding, and heard the fretful shift of blankets.
"S-Sofa. Just lying here."

"I'm here, Greg. I'm with you. Close your eyes."

"S-Sorry - "

"Shhh... shhh, darling. It's quite alright. Lay your phone where you can hear me."

"Don't go - "

"I won't," Mycroft murmured, barely able to breathe. He had a conference call with a contact in Beijing at six AM. Anthea would be briefing him at five. "Not until you're sleeping. Not until you're alright. I shan't go."

"F-Feel like I'm falling apart. Just - m-miss you. I miss everything. I don't want to be watched anymore."

Mycroft's heart twisted with pain. "You won't be," he whispered. "Three days... three days, sweetheart, then - "

"I'm so tired - "

"Darling... I-I'm so sorry..." God help me. All your colour, your bravery. All your passion. Drained from you. Oh god, I can't bear it...

"Why do you work for them?" Greg pleaded suddenly, and Mycroft's mouth opened in silence. He gazed down at his bedsheets without a sound. "I just... i-if you were in finance or something - fuck - nobody would do this. We could just have dated, just - just taken our time, just easy - just you and me. Why do you put up with this?"

With a flash of distress, Mycroft recalled the face of his father twenty years ago - the first glimmer of approval he'd seen since his forced separation from the gardener's boy.

He could still see the old man sitting in the drawing room, The Telegraph open on his knee, a glass of port half-finished on the side table. He could still hear the soft and surprised grunt. 'Into government? Plenty of prospects.' A slow sip of port, rewarding his son with the honour of brief eye contact. 'I will inform your mother.'

In the darkness of his bedroom, the corners of Mycroft's mouth flattened.

"Human Resources operate as something of a law unto themselves," he said, quietly. "It isn't always this way."

"How long has she been in control?"

"Several years now."

"Then someone approves." Greg's tone was blunt. His distress was forming a harder layer of anger, molten rock beneath a cooling surface. It would make him feel safe, if only for a short while. Mycroft steeled himself, gripping the phone without a sound. "Somebody's fine with how she does things," Greg went on. "Somebody likes the results she gets. The money she saves them. You're happy with that? Happy you work somewhere that she gets a slap on the back and an attagirl?"

"Not in any way."
"Christ." There was silence for a second. "We could've found you a new job in eleven days."

"Greg - "

"D'you know what private companies would give, to have someone as smart as you?"

"I - work for the good of the British people, Greg. I serve the - "

"Jesus, even if you were just consulting... letting people come to you..."

"Greg, my - duty to my country - "

"Yeah?" He could almost see Greg bite his lip. "Your country treats the man who loves you like this."

Mycroft's heart sped.

"Ilka Fielding," he said with care, "treats the man I love like this. The security services as a whole - "

"Was your country keeping you warm at night, out of interest? Before I showed up. M'not sure it was."

"You're - weary. Her intention is to do this. To tire you. To make you question why you're continuing to - "

"I love you."

The words came as a surprise.

Mycroft stalled, thrown by them; he heard Greg breathe.

"That's why," Greg said. "Why m'continuing. I want to be with you. I've - never felt about someone like you. Want to make you happy, like you deserve." His voice changed as he swallowed. "Just... seems like one solution was taken as obvious. The one where I have to prove something. You didn't even think about anything else."

Mycroft didn't speak. He felt the words ring in the silence around him, and didn't know how to respond.

"Would you give up your job for me?" Greg said. "If I asked."

God help me.

"My career is our security," Mycroft responded after some time, stiffer than he meant to. "It - means I'll be able to treat you well. To provide for you."

Greg heard the answer all too clearly.

"Gave up mine for you," he mumbled.

Mycroft closed his eyes. "Greg... this - isn't a matter of 'proving' - "

"Thanks for soothing me to sleep," Greg said, and before Mycroft could say another word, the line cut.

Mycroft dropped the phone into the tangled sheets.
"You seem tired this morning."

Greg gazed at his glass of water - the curved reflections of the desk, the ceiling, the mirrored wall to his right. Mycroft would be behind it, watching.

Greg hadn't seen his face in twelve days.

"Not sleeping great," he murmured, reaching up to itch the stubble around his chin.

He'd gotten so used to her voice now that it seemed to come from inside his skull. "Why?" she asked him.

_Fuck you off the face of the planet._ "Jesus. I wonder."

"Is this becoming too much for you?"

Greg gritted his jaw. "No."

"If you're coping so poorly with registration, Greg..."

"I'm fine." Greg sat up in the hard metal chair, breathing in, feeling his muscles ache. "Look at me. Bright as a daisy. Ask me some more awful bloody questions."

"You understand that this process functions as a way for you to be certain of your decision?" she murmured. "The life of a senior official's partner involves upheaval and security checks as a matter of course... these eleven days have been a preface, Greg. Handing so much control of your life to a partner is of course unsettling, but we'd rather you - "

"Twelve days."

She paused. "Mm?"

Greg swallowed. He stared at her.

"It's been twelve days," he said. "This is day twelve. There's today, tomorrow, then one more day - and then you don't get to - "

"Greg, this is... day eleven. I'm afraid you've miscounted."

"Two days ago, I remember you saying it was now day ten. Two days ago. This is day twelve."

"I - said that to you yesterday, Greg..." Ilka Fielding frowned, tilting her head towards her note-taker - who began to write at speed. "Have you suffered from memory lapses before?"

Greg said nothing, watching the man's pen rush silently back and forth across the page - shorthand squiggles that meant nothing; marks that could mean anything.

"Would you like to step outside for a moment?" she offered, gently.

She'd never offered him that before.
Sensing a trap, Greg shut his eyes. He shifted in the painful metal chair. "No, m'fine. Keep on."

"I - asked you a question. I asked you about your memory. Do you have memory problems?"

"No. Jesus. Just carry on."

"You seem to be getting a little angry."

"I've been angry for - eleven days. However many days it's been. I don't care. I'm angry because this whole bloody process is - "

Her eyes contracted. "Did Mycroft not prepare you properly?"

"We weren't allowed to talk," Greg spat at her. "How was he supposed to - "

"You were perfectly permitted to talk, Greg. You simply weren't permitted to have an intimate relationship with him."

"That's a lie," Greg said, bristling. "You changed his phone number. You took it off him. You took him away. You dragged him off a beach in a bloody speedboat and your goons beat me up, and now you're telling me - "

"At no point in this process have you been forbidden from speaking," Ilka said, calmly. "If there's been a lack of contact between you, that has been Mycroft's decision."

Greg's heart reeled with exhausted distress.

"That's a lie," he whispered.

"I assure you it isn't. I'm sorry if Mycroft failed to inform you of the intensive nature of the process."

She paused, laying her pen aside. "Might I ask how you envisioned your life following registration? I'm concerned that you've been given a false impression."

Greg didn't speak for some time.

He didn't dare show her the thoughts inside his head. Those soft, comforting dreams looked more and more like cartoons with every passing day - restaurant tables, candles, Mycroft's hand curled gently in his own; evenings settled together in silence on a couch, watching a film while Mycroft worked; a life where the sight of bills didn't make him nauseous, where he knew he was making a difference to someone just by waking up every morning.

He didn't want her to see them. She'd shred them, turn them into nothing.

She'd show them for what they are.

God. No, I can't - can't start thinking -

Greg shut his eyes.

"Just him," he mumbled. Fuck. He kept his eyes shut, pleading with the heat to go away. "Just want to be with him. I've told you over and over. I've told him over and over. I don't want any of this. I just want him."

"When you say - 'any of this'...?"

Greg breathed in.
"You," he said. "This." He gestured at the room, the concrete, the mirror, the guard who stood blocking the door. "All of this."

Ilka's forehead tightened.

"This is Mycroft's world," she said, her voice gentle. "This is the world of the security services, Greg. If a few interviews have disturbed you so deeply, in such a short space of time..."

Greg felt his shoulders shake.

He swallowed it, and looked up into her eyes.

"Mycroft," he breathed. Pain blistered through his chest, and he let her see it, staring at her. "Mycroft."

She watched him, frowning. "What do you mean?"

Greg shook his head, their eyes still locked. He felt the tears start to form. "Mycroft."

"Can't leave him with you," Greg whispered, his throat tightening. "Deserves better. He doesn't believe he does." He felt his chest heave with the truth of it. "I'll prove it to him."

Ilka Fielding processed this, her gaze quiet.

"Does he realise you're suffering for him?" she asked. "Does he appreciate what you've given up?"

Greg's jaw worked. "You listen to our phone calls."

"Yes," she said, gently. "To make sure this choice is right."

She reached out, laying her fingertips on the arm of the note-taker beside her.

"A life as the partner of a senior official isn't for everyone. For those who value their freedom, and their privacy... there are perhaps better choices in life..."

She watched him, her voice as gentle as a falling feather.

"You shouldn't fear any retribution," she murmured, "if you now want to make a decision for your own welfare. Mycroft would be prevented from reaching you. We could even assist you in relocation, if you were concerned... the world has many countries in it."

Greg said nothing, not moving.

"I appreciate that you terminated your employment in order to register," she went on, regarding him with care and regret. "While it isn't standard practice, we'd be prepared to provide you with a small amount of compensation... financial support, to help you to find your feet again. I'm sure your excellent record with the police will serve you well. As it happens, we have connections with a number of overseas police forces. Some of them have very generous incentive programmes for migrating officers and former officers."

She smiled, her eyes soft.
"If you weren't told what to expect," she said, "then you're not at fault, Greg. It's far better to realise it now than end up living a life you regret."

For a long time, Greg was silent. He let his eyes settle in his water glass, in the warped curve of the room all around them, the mirror and the water reflecting themselves over and over into infinity.

At last, he breathed in.

"When I'm with him," he said, "everything's alright."

He looked up into her gaze.

"Everything," he said. "D'you know what that's like? To just look at someone, and know you make them feel safe? Like they can open up. Tell you what they want. Tell you what hurts, knowing it'll hurt less just because they told you."

His heart contracted quietly.

"Of course you don't."

She said nothing, watching him speak without a flicker of emotion in her face.

"You're Human Resources," he said. "S'your job to turn humans into resources. You're good at it."

She opened her mouth to speak.

"No," he breathed. "Don't. Don't talk to me. You just sit there for a while, and think about if they'll put it on your grave." He held her gaze. "How much money you saved them," he said. "How efficient you were."

Nothing crossed her face.

Greg took the silence as her answer.

"Come see mine someday," he said. He let the tears fill his eyes, too tired and too proud to hold them anymore. "See what's written on it. Won't be 'took the money and ran'.”

Greg's phone began to ring moments after Ilka left the room.

It continued to ring as he waited in the silence for his escort, and kept going as Mr Sunglasses led him back to the lift. It was ringing as he stepped out onto the street, and ringing as he spotted the waiting car. The driver was standing ready beside the open door.

Greg swallowed, giving Bertie an awkward look.

"Just - gimme a minute?" he said, working his phone from inside his coat.

Bertie nodded. "Of course, sir." He stepped inside the car, turned on the radio, and closed the door.

As Greg answered the phone, he took a long breath.

"She says we're allowed to talk," he said, ignoring the stream of regret and distress that began at
once. Mycroft faltered into silence, listening. "She didn't specify on the phone. Get yourself to Speedy's now and make me feel like I matter. I don't want gifts. I don't want your shirt. I don't want catalogues and promises. I want you."

Before a word could be said, he hung up. He dropped his phone into his pocket, reached for the car door and got inside.

"Turn the music up, will you Bertie?"

Bertie reached for the radio. "Yessir."

She turned over the photographs one-by-one - three faces, all smiling; two school portraits, one crib full of stuffed animals.

Greg watched her turn them in silence.

"Can you identify these people?" she asked, as she returned to her seat.

Greg looked into their eyes - dark brown, just like his. The genes were strong. People thought he was their dad when he took them out.

"Those are my nieces," he said.

"Will you miss them?" Ilka asked.

"No," said Greg.

Her startled blink was the most wonderful thing he'd ever seen.

"Because my partner says I can see them as often as I want," he told her. "And you'll be expanding my security protection around them, too. Because that's your job."

It felt so good to smile that he wanted to laugh.

"It's Mycroft's job to protect the nation," he said. "And it's your job to protect him - which includes protecting me, and anyone who might be a route to me - and it's my job to remind him at least twice a week that you people are lying bastards if you're given half a chance."

He lifted an eyebrow.

"D'you want to see the video of their last nativity play?" he asked, pleasantly. "Got it on my phone... suppose you've already had a watch though, haven't you? Chloe was the Star of Bethlehem, if you wondered. Izzy was the back half of the donkey. You know how it is with twins. One of them's always a problem."

His eyes gleamed, watching hers harden with anger.

"By the way... it's now day thirteen, princess. Looks like you were wrong yesterday. Don't beat yourself up, alright? We all make mistakes."
"Really?"
"Mm. Really."

*Fuck me up.* "So the place is yours now?" said Greg. "You can just - "

"We," Mycroft murmured, "can just. And we can do so tomorrow."

It was a few minutes after one AM. Greg was standing in the gloomy kitchen of Baker Street, making himself a coffee with the phone tucked against his ear.

"One more day," he said. His heart swelled. "Then we're moving in together."

"One more day." Mycroft's voice was as soft as a blanket. "At midnight tonight, the registration window closes. You'll be authorised."

"D'you reckon she's given up now?"

"She'll likely take one last shot at you - but, given how poorly she managed to unsettle you earlier, I doubt you'll even feel it against your armour." Mycroft's smile was audible; it felt like warmth curling through Greg's veins. "I am incredibly proud of you, Greg."

Greg smiled in the dark, reaching quietly for a teaspoon. "You better make good on all those tearful promises you made me in Speedy's."

"I will. God as my witness."

"I mean it. If it's like this afterwards, you're out of there. I'll forge your signature on a letter of resignation if I have to. Life's too short."

"You will not have to forge a thing," Mycroft said. "I will agree with you entirely and leave without protest."

"And you'll get them told about Fielding, right?"

"Yes. Anthea is already laying the groundwork for an official complaint."

"I took down MI5 before," Greg reminded him, stirring his coffee. "Only took me one ballsy actor. So help me, posh, I'll do it again. You're not letting the place carry on like that."

"No," Mycroft agreed. "Not at all."

"If she's put *you* through this, she's put everyone through it. Everyone at your level who's ever tried to love someone. If you've got a duty to the nation, you can start with your colleagues. They're suffering under a sadist who takes her job way too seriously."

"They are," Mycroft said. "And I will work without pause to change that."

"In two weeks," Greg added, reaching to the fridge for milk.

"Yes. In two weeks."
"Those first two weeks are mine."

"Entirely yours."

"And I'm going to spend them being told how much I matter, and how grateful you are to me for putting up with this utter horse shit."

"You are," Mycroft said, softly. "Sincerely, Greg. Every moment of your pain will be repaid."

"Good." Greg returned the milk to the fridge with a smile. He could imagine Mycroft sitting in the dark, some family estate out of London that he'd never seen - and never would. It was all about to change. "Is it bad that I'm almost looking forward to her parting shot? Kind of excited to see what she's saved all this time."

Mycroft's laugh was low, and not quite as bright as Greg's.

"Yes, I... imagine it will be something creative..." There came the quiet strike of a match, then a pause as he lit a cigarette. "You'll be given paperwork today," he said. "Anthea and I have completed all the required sections, save for your signature throughout."

"Then that's that?" Greg leant against the counter, taking a first drink of his coffee. "We made it somehow?"

"We did."

"Dinner at eight, is it?"

Humour warmed Mycroft's voice. "Not today," he said, with regret. "The authorisation will be expected by tomorrow morning at nine AM. My two weeks of semi-leave then begins."

"And I can see you properly?"


A shiver passed along Greg's spine. "God." He held his coffee to his chest, smiling. "What'll we do first? After we've binned the cigarettes, I mean. Hope you're enjoying your last one."

Mycroft chuckled, blowing out. "Anything you wish."

Greg thought about it, feeling the coffee gently burn his palms and the pads of his fingers. "Just... go somewhere alone, I think. Somewhere quiet. Hold you. Not let go of you."

Mycroft audibly shivered. "I'd like that very much."

"Yeah?" Greg took a quiet sip of coffee. "Looks like that's a date, then. Just got to get ourselves through today."

He felt Mycroft realise it properly all at once, breath catching in his throat. "Greg..."

"I know, darlin'. I can't believe it either."

"Greg, I - I've missed you - I've missed you more than I can -"

"One more day, love... then you won't ever have to miss me again." Greg reached for a packet of ginger nuts on the side, crinkling one free with a smile. "Just got to let the vicious bitch have one last bite of me."
Greg was actually glad to see Mr Sunglasses come shuffling up the stairs at ten. He was driven out to Thames House, taken up through security, and escorted not to the usual interview room but instead to a glass-doored office at the back of Human Resources.

Ilka was in there alone, making tea for two.

Greg hovered near the door. He watched with a frown as the agent in his suit left them to it, closing the door for privacy.

Ilka glanced around from the tea tray, smiling.

"Milk and one, is it?"

Greg eased his hands into his pockets. The brush of the seashell against his fingers was reassuring. "M'fine, thanks."

Her eyes sparkled. "I'll make you one anyway. Have a seat."

Warily Greg sat down at her desk, unsurprised by the lack of personal photos or reminders of home. He kept quiet as she finished making tea, then brought both cups over to her desk - green for her, milk and one for him.

As she sat down, she gave a sigh. "You're quite correct about Human Resources, Greg."

Greg waited, wondering where this was going.

"Turning humans into resources," she clarified. "I won't tell you it's a caring profession. You're given numbers and expected to improve them. Those numbers are people... you have to learn to put it aside."

"Try being a detective," said Greg.

She gave him a small smile, her eyes crinkling. "A thankless job, I imagine."

Greg paused, watching her stir her tea. "Most of them are."

"Mm. Such is the way of the world." She breathed in, looking down into her cup. "Would it startle you to hear that I like you?"

"Yes," Greg said, flatly. "Yes, it would."

"It's why I wanted a few minutes alone with you. I imagine your gallant knight will be charging up the stairs to 'save' you at any moment, but... in the short time we have..." She opened her laptop quietly, letting it load. "I wanted to do the right thing."

"The right thing"?

"You might say 'for once'," she added, with a faint smile. "For the sake of a person who is clearly very compassionate, very loyal, and very open to being pressured."

Greg's eyes narrowed. "Pressured?" he said.
"Don't tell me you've not noticed the pattern in your life, Greg." She regarded him gently, her gaze full of concern. "I might go so far as to say 'exploited'."

*Here we go.* "Right. My's exploiting me, is he?"

"Perhaps not consciously," she said. "More that he's responding to your tendency to give yourself in full to the people you care for, and he's happy to take advantage of that." She raised an eyebrow. "Would you say your wife took advantage of your forgiving nature?"

Greg said nothing, watching her.

"And your father was a police officer too, wasn't he?" She paused. "Encouraged you into his profession, I imagine. Proud when you did."

Greg frowned. "What's your point?"

"You've reached the peak of this tendency in Mycroft Holmes. Your privacy, your career... your autonomy. Your independence. All of it, offered up as a gesture of love. I imagine proving yourself through this process has only convinced you more and more that it's the right thing to do."

Greg remained in silence once more, watching her face.

Ilka reached across to her laptop, quietly loading files where he couldn't see.

"It's a noble tendency," she said. "It's... admirable, in normal life. I imagine you'll make someone a very committed and loving partner one day."

She glanced at him, lifting her tea to her lips.

"Mycroft Holmes does not live a normal life," she said.

The corner of Greg's mouth pulled. "I get that," he said, "and I'm fine with it."

Something softened her gaze.

"You're quick to defend him," she said. "I take my share of blame for that. Registration has brought out that response in you. It's intensified your natural urge to give, and set it solid."

As she placed her tea down, she took a breath.

"This is not on record," she said. "This is outside of my duties to the security services. My profession requires me to make uncomfortable choices at times, and normally I would put that aside - but this level of deception is too much for me."

"Deception?" Greg didn't move. "What've I deceived you about? You've got my whole life on file, how could I - "

"Not you," she said, quietly. "I don't doubt your honesty for a moment. I'm referring to Mycroft."

Greg's mouth flattened. "What d'you mean, 'deception'?"

Ilka glanced down into her tea once more.

"Mycroft is very capable of masking his true intentions," she said. "Especially when there's something he wants, and which he's prepared to work for."
"Get to the point," Greg said, sharp.

Ilka inhaled. "Very well," she said, and reached for the control pad of laptop. "This interview was held immediately after Mycroft's return from Saint Barthélemy. I'm now glad I made the recording."

She tapped, commencing an audio file.

Mycroft's voice raged from the laptop at once.

"It was carnal!" Greg heard him shout, and his pulse racked up at once. "Is that not clear enough to you? Must I spell it out? The man is nothing to me! I took him to the Caribbean to fuck him. To have my fill of him. In privacy. I wanted him so I had him. I haven't the slightest interest in continuing anything of the sort with him. I don't intend to associate with him whatsoever. I've had what I wanted from him."

The audio cut.

Without looking at Greg, Ilka tapped another file.

"He is nothing," Mycroft's voice said, on an outbreath. "I used him for sexual relief. I thought to combine it with my annual leave, for the sake of my privacy. To contain it. So he would understand that his presence there was to attend to my physical needs and nothing more."

Another tap.

Ilka's voice came from the laptop, calm.

"I've taken the liberty of filling in Lestrade's details... we were able to glean almost all of his personal details just from our casual checks. You'll see they're correct. There might be a few minor points you'd need to add."

Mycroft responded a moment later. "I do not care about Gregory Lestrade. I used him. I'm now finished with him. Shred the form."

The audio cut once more.

Ilka waited in the silence, watching Greg with care.

Greg felt the quiet closing in around him.

"Straight after St Barts?" he said.

Her voice softened with regret. "I offered him the chance to register you."

Greg was silent for a while longer.

He lifted his gaze from her desk, looking into her eyes.

"So - he - "

She unwrapped her hands around her tea cup. "I believe you're a solution to his physical needs," she said. "His veneer of emotional affection is... affective, certainly, but..."

She reached out, laying her fingertips gently on his arm.

"Greg," she murmured. "You're a decent man. You want to feel needed. Mycroft is - a very hard
worker, and a credit to the nation - but he's quite capable of making you believe whatever he wishes. What he's established around you is a... a long-term rent, Greg. I'm sure you're his favourite out of the various people he's used for sex over the years. You've certainly offered him more than the others have, but..." 

Gently she squeezed his arm.

"Surely you don't believe he fell so deeply in love," she said. "In just four nights."

Greg looked down at her hand on his arm - her careful touch.

"Sure I do," he said, and watched her fingers twitch. He looked up into her eyes as the door behind him blew open, his mouth curling into a smile. "I did, princess."

Mycroft lashed her away from his arm at once.

"Get your hands off him!" he spat, bearing down across Ilka's desk, his face contorting with rage. Greg smirked at Ilka beneath his lover's arm, his eyes glittering. "How dare you isolate him with you in this manner. How dare you attempt to influence him without witnesses present. You have now subjected him to fourteen days of vicious personal accusations, psychological torture and false information, and this is the most breathtakingly transparent attempt at manipulative bullying I have ever seen."

Greg wrinkled his nose, raising both eyebrows. "It really is, Ilka."

Ilka's jaw tightened. She glared at Mycroft in silence, every inch of her face tight with anger.

"The final stage of registration will be conducted in my office," Mycroft seethed, shaking with rage. "I will be present. It will be overseen by multiple witnesses of my choice. I've already informed the relevant people of this blatant attempt to subvert due process, and I will be adding it to my formal complaint against your conduct."

His knuckles had gone white on her desk. Ferocity rolled from him in waves.

"It's within your authority to build a conspicuously cruel system to keep your employees shackled to their duties and nothing else," he breathed. "But you will operate within your vicious system. You will not step outside it when you're on the point of failure. You have tried your best to retain my full focus for this organisation. In doing so you have damaged my loyalty almost past the point of repair. And you have still failed."

As Mycroft's hand laid upon his back, Greg understood. He got to his feet without a sound.

"I expect you in my office shortly," Mycroft snapped at her. "Bring a pen. You have a number of forms to sign."

He swept Greg in silence from the room, and slammed the door slammed them.

They moved through Human Resources side-by-side, Mycroft's arm curled around his waist. Many eyes turned to follow them as they passed. Mycroft was shaking, white in the face and staring straight ahead. He didn't say a word as they walked.

The lift doors finally closed with a soft and quiet swish.

Greg's back hit the wall.
Mycroft cupped his face in desperation as they kissed. He raked his fingers through Greg's hair, roughing it onto end and heaving him closer. As Greg's heart began to pound itself out of rhythm, Mycroft's arms hauled around him and held onto him, hands tightening in his clothes, gripping him, shaking against him.

"What did she say to you?" Mycroft gasped in a brief break of air, kissing Greg as if their lives depended on it.

Greg dragged him closer still.

"The biggest load of shit I've ever heard," he breathed, and pulled Mycroft back against his mouth.
Anything

The first van arrived with the sun. It pulled up in the courtyard, opened its doors, and the removal team got to work.

Mycroft watched them from his bedroom window, drinking tea in his dressing gown with a smile.

" - with those items marked as for storage. The team from Jones Lang LaSalle intend to furnish the manor before searching for a buyer, but I've been assured you can consider the matter out of your hands, sir."

"Excellent," Mycroft said, and took a sip of tea. The warmth of its steam across his face was deeply enjoyable - but then, so was every sensation today. "I don't suppose we've heard anything yet?"

"No, Mr Holmes. I have your e-mails on high alert."

"Premature of me, perhaps... quarter past seven in the morning."

"Not in the least," Anthea said, as she removed the last suit left in his wardrobe. He wouldn't be in it for long - he had a few small matters to finalise at Thames House before nine, but then the rest of the day would belong to Greg.

And everyday, after that.

"You're certain you'll be able to handle Kuznetsov without me?" Mycroft checked, as she laid the suit neatly on the bed for him.

"Of course, sir. In truth I think he's growing rather fond of me."

Mycroft smirked at her. "And why shouldn't he?" he said. "Frankly I'm astonished it's taken the man this long."

"Mr Holmes, I do believe you're in a playful mood."

"Perhaps I am," Mycroft hummed. Placing his cup in its saucer, he turned from the window to her. "Your assistance and support to me over this last fortnight has taken you far beyond the call of duty, Anthea... I'd like you to know how keenly it's appreciated."

"Not at all." She smiled, as bright as the sunlight streaming through the drapes behind her. "Will you take your breakfast at the office, or here?"

"The office, I think. The sooner we can finalise those last few details, the sooner I'm available to leave."

"Excellent, sir. I'll ensure the car is ready."

"Thank you, Anthea." As Mycroft's phone vibrated gently in his pocket, he checked it at once - not the e-mail he was hoping for, but a sight that still lifted his smile into a grin.

*good morning... <3 xxx*
He replied as he finished the last of his tea, happiness shining in every vein.

Good morning. <3 How did you sleep? M. xxx

Greg's reply came as he discarded his dressing gown across the bed. Anthea would move it to the new apartment, along with the rest of his last minute things.

amazingly... :) heard anything? I want to see you... please <3 xxx

Still awaiting official notification. The moment it reaches me I'll come to Baker Street for you. M. xxx

will you be with the car? :) <3 xxx

To take you to our new home. <3 M. xxx

I'm driving John and Sherlock mad now ;) been awake since 5..... xxx

Our life is about to begin. M. xxx

:)))))))) <3  <3 I love you posh... xxx

I love you, Bit of Rough. <3 xxx

"Anything?" Mycroft enquired, as Anthea laid a fresh cup of coffee beside his laptop.

"Not yet." She adjusted the biscuit with care. "Ten to nine."

Mycroft pressed his teeth into the side of his tongue.

"Pugnacious of her," he remarked, moving his stack of folders aside, "to leave it this late."

"Quite." Anthea gave him a mild look, as polished and professional as ever. "One might even be so
bold as to call it 'petulant'. Defeat is a hard pill to swallow."

The corners of Mycroft's mouth twitched. "At least we've had the chance to get everything in order."
he said.

"Yes, sir. I can say with total certainty that I shan't be contacting you for any reason whatsoever for
at least the rest of the day."

Mycroft reached for the coffee, lifting it to his mouth. By the time he finished this, Ilka Fielding
would have coughed up the official authorisation. He would be on his way to Baker Street soon
after.

And soon after that, he would see his partner walk through the front door of their home.

He would show Greg from room to room - each doorway, the first time they'd stepped through it
together - and if it wasn't perfect, he would find Greg a new home. He would take him to every
apartment on offer from every estate agent in London, until they found the one he wanted to be his
home.

*And I will make you happy there, each and every day.*

As Mycroft returned the empty cup to its saucer, and glanced at the clock beneath his empty email
inbox, he found it was now six minutes past nine.

"How much of a point do we permit her to make?" Anthea asked, retrieving the cup.

Mycroft's mouth flattened.

"None," he decided, reaching for his internal phone. As it began to ring in his ear, a thought
occurred. "Will you kindly re-check my pigeon hole?"

Anthea nodded and left, taking the cup away with her, her stride quick and clean.

The phone continued to ring.

As Mycroft put it down with a clatter, annoyed, the door opened once more. Anthea slipped inside.

There was a sealed white envelope in her hands.

"For god's sake," he said, rising and reaching to take it from her. "Hidden?"

"Purposely concealed beneath last month's report on the cabinet's expenditure. I'm sorry, sir. I should
have checked more thoroughly."

"You couldn't have known," Mycroft assured her, took a letter opener from his drawer and slit the
envelope open. "Is Collins ready?"

"He should be, sir. I'll just check."

"Wonderful." Mycroft dropped the letter opener, tugged the papers from inside and scanned the front
page swiftly. "Well, at least we'll have something else to frame for the downstairs -"

Catching sight of the words printed in block capitals, halfway down the page, he shuttered to a halt.

His mouth opened.
Anthea looked up from her phone.

At the sight of his expression, she stopped dead. "Sir?"

The door of Ilka Fielding's office nearly buckled from its hinges.

She glanced up from her e-mails with a genial smile.

"Hello, Mycroft. How can I - "

Mycroft threw the papers at her. She jerked with an expression of distaste as they scattered in all directions, a flutter of printed black and white.

"'Registration denied?'" he shouted.

He wanted to hurt her. He wanted to take hold of her and shake her and hit her until she didn't move anymore.

"What in god's name do you mean by - "

"It's obvious what I mean," she retorted, surveying him across her desk in irritation. "Your application to register Gregory Lestrade as an intimate partner is denied, Mycroft. It won't be processed."

"This is - unprecedented." Mycroft started to shake. "What possible reason do you - "

"He's an unacceptable choice," Ilka said, frowning. She took a sip of tea. "Difficult, inflammatory. Aggressive. He has no respect whatsoever for the organisation which you - "

"This is an outrage!" Mycroft shouted. He could hear concerned voices outside the office. Security were being summoned. "You have no valid reason to deny an application on those grounds - this has never been done - it is registration, not permission!"

"Unless we consider there to be a threat to your welfare," Ilka said, visibly biting the corner of her mouth. "In which case, I will rule on these matters exactly as I - "

"No. " Mycroft's fists balled at his sides. He was almost nauseous with anger; his every muscle wanted to strike her. It was visceral, choking, clawing. He couldn't contain it. "Reverse this decision. Now. You will authorise him this instant."

"Human Resources is the final authority in these matters." Ilka's expression hardened. "I am the final authority. And I am denying your request to - "

Mycroft's shoulders heaved. "Because he stood up to you."

His heart was tearing itself into shreds.

"Because he challenged you," he breathed. "Because he challenged you for me and won."

"For god's sake, Mycroft... this ruling isn't based on petty whims."
"Yes it is." Mycroft reeled with it, staring at her. He could feel the blood draining from his veins. "Everything in this world is based on petty whims. Everything. Nations rise and fall on petty whims."

His head was fracturing apart. The world was fragmenting with it. His ribs were breaking, cracked open by the sudden expansion of his heart, his grief and his anger, and it was not a red and raging anger - it was white, and it was clean, and it was pure.

"Every decision every human ever makes is petty," he said. "Anger. Love. All of it. Punish the people we hate. Protect the people we love. Please the people we wish would love us."

The office around her blurred. There was only her face, her eyes, fixed upon him in gleeful glittering victory.

"Even you," he told her, shaking. "You act in hope of reward. Averting the cost of his protection. Ensuring my focus stays here. You hope your superiors will be pleased with you."

His heart burned with it.

"Perhaps your parents were like mine. Perhaps you will escape that someday. I do not care. I want to be loved. I want him to love me. He had four days and he changed me forever. I want to know what he will do with a lifetime."

"This is pathetic," he heard her say over the ringing in his ears. "If you can't conduct yourself professionally, Mycroft, then - "

Mycroft's mind sharpened.

"Then?" he said.

Ilka halted, disarmed at once. "What?"

"If I cannot conduct myself professionally," he repeated, staring at her. "then?"

Her gaze flickered. "Then we will need to discuss your position."

"Let us do that," Mycroft said, and felt his heart break apart. Joy ruptured from inside its burning shards. "Fuck my position."

Her jaw dropped.

"Fuck it in the flaming wreckage of this organisation," Mycroft said, "and the thankless country it supports. And when you have finished, Ilka, I'll then invite you to fuck yourself."

Her look of wordless shock would stay with him for the rest of his days.

"I resign," Mycroft said. "Effective immediately." He wrenched the security ID from around his neck and threw it at her. "I wish Britain the very best of luck. May it treat its next servant more kindly."

"Mycroft - "

As he turned, he heard her push back her chair.

"Mycroft!" she barked.

Mycroft threw open the door.
There were security personnel waiting outside, watched by a nervous crowd of onlookers.

"Escort me from the building," he ordered, holding out his arms. "I am not authorised to be here."

They stared at him, astonished. They didn't move.

Mycroft sighed.

"For god's sake," he said, and barged his way past them. "Then I shall escort myself."

By the time he reached reception, he was shaking again. He stormed out through the front doors in a fury, panic and horror cracking their way like cannon fire through his resolve. He'd left everything in his office - everything - his phone, his coat, his life.

Anthea was waiting for him there by the car.

She strode over at once. She handed him his coat.

"I've transferred the contents of your bank accounts to the emergency one," she said, and pushed a file into his hands. "All the details are in there. Flights and passports for both of you. She will try to stop you. You need to leave. Now."

Mycroft reeled, the colour running from his face. "She -"

"I prepared for this eventuality," Anthea said, staring up at him. "She won't let you just walk away. Not an official of your rank. If you remain here she will hound you. You have no protection anymore and she will make your life a misery. Both your lives. Fielding won't rest."

She opened the car door.

"Get in," she said. "Now."

The remnants of Mycroft's heart heaved themselves into his mouth.

"Anthea -" He could barely make sound. "Anthea, I -"

Anthea moved to him, reached up, and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Goodbye, Mr Holmes." She gripped him tightly. "It has been an honour."

Shaking, Mycroft put his arms around her. His throat clenched. "You - y-you have always been -"

Anthea seized him by the back of the coat and forced him into the car. As he struggled to pull his legs inside, she took hold of the door.

"Drive, Collins!" she shouted, and threw it shut.

Christ.

Dear sweet Christ.

Collins gunned the engine. "Take hold of something, sir," he called, slamming his foot down.
Mycroft lunged for the door handle. "We're about to break some speed limits."

"Anything?"

Greg glanced down at his phone. Its empty lockscreen spread numbness through his chest.

"No, mate," he mumbled. "Nothing."

Sherlock made a quiet noise in the back of his throat. "Somewhat concerning."

"Tell me about it..." Greg shifted beside his suitcase, squinting along Baker Street in the glare of the sunlight. "Traffic?"

Sherlock was good enough to let him believe it.

"Perhaps," he told Greg, quietly. "I'm - certain the delay is justified."

Silence fell between them.

Greg gripped his phone, looking along the road again.

"Hope he's okay, that's all..." He glanced at Sherlock, feeling pathetic for it. "Hope nothing weird's happened... I - thought we'd be on the way by now. In the new flat."

Sherlock looked at him for a moment, visibly searching for words to give.

In the end, he placed his hand on Greg's back in silence. He patted, gently.

Greg's heart tugged. "Thanks, Sherlock..."

Sherlock's eye caught on something down the street. A frown tightened his features.

"I believe..."

Greg turned to look, his pulse hitching.

A black car had appeared. It was screaming this way through the traffic, horns beeping furiously in its wake. As soon as Greg laid eyes on it, he recognised the number plate.

"Jesus - Sherlock, that's him - that's your brother's car - "

"Moving at speed." Sherlock paused, reading the road with a quick darting of his eyes. "Lestrade," he said suddenly. "Come here."

"What?" As Sherlock placed both arms around him, Greg stiffened in concern. "Sherlock? What're you doing?"

"I'm giving you a hug. I feel it's warranted by the situation." Sherlock squeezed him. "From John. He squeezes. I shall tell him I delivered it in his absence."

"Why the hell're you hugging me?"
The car screeched to a halt beside the pavement. Both doors blew open, and Mycroft and the driver emerged as one. The driver dodged for Greg's suitcase, hurling it into the trunk.

Mycroft, his face set in panic, strode for Sherlock.

He locked his arms around his little brother's neck and held on. Sherlock gripped him back. They swayed together with the force of the hug, one person for a moment.

"You know all the things I would say." Mycroft tightened his grasp, shaking. "Pay heed to them. Listen to John."

"I shall." Sherlock shut his eyes, tight. "Listen to Greg."

"I shall." Mycroft shut his, too. "Care for yourself. Please. I have always wanted the best for you."

Wait -

Wait, what -

"What's going on?" Greg searched their faces as they broke apart. There was a file in Mycroft's hand. "What's - "

Sherlock spoke.

"They denied your registration," he said, and Greg felt the bottom drop from his stomach. He stared at Mycroft, his mouth opening. The truth was written there in Mycroft's face. "You need to leave at once," Sherlock said. "Repercussion is almost certain."

Greg's pulse lurched.

"Repercussion?" He turned back to Mycroft, paling. "Repercussion for what?"

He watched something shatter in Mycroft's eyes.

"I have resigned my position," he said. Greg's heart collapsed and died in his chest. "I - I've chosen - "

Greg realised.

"Me," he said.

Mycroft grew even paler. He nodded, swallowing; he dropped his eyes to the pavement.

"The security services shan't permit me to live here unimpeded," he said. "My clearance level is too high. Without my protection I - I cannot hope to remain - a-and i-if you wished to, I - "

He looked back up at Greg, his expression filling with distress.

"Though I understand if you'd rather stay. You gave up everything. For nothing. I - r-ruined your life, Greg."

Greg felt his heart heave.

"You don't know that." He reached for Mycroft's hand. "My life's just started."

"Greg - "
"Take me away." Greg knotted their fingers. "Please."

Mycroft's face flooded with longing. "This is madness."

"Yep," said Greg. "Now take me away from it."

Mycroft's fingers tightened in his hand.

With a sharp intake of breath he pulled Greg towards the car.

As they set off at speed along Baker Street, holding tightly onto each other's hands, Greg took one last look back.

Sherlock was standing beside the old black door. As Greg watched, he lifted his hand in a cheery wave. He flashed a smile, turned the handle, and let himself into the house.

He was gone.

Greg looked across at Mycroft - and found his eyes red and glossy.

He pushed closer along the seat, wrapped both arms around him, and buried his hands in his hair.

"It's okay - it's alright - it's gonna be alright, I promise - "

"I'm sorry - " Mycroft's voice cracked against his shoulder. "I'm sorry - "

"Stop it. Don't say sorry to me." Greg gripped him hard, letting the tears rise in his eyes. "Don't ever say sorry to me. Ever. I love you. I love you, and three years from now this will all be a memory."

Mycroft convulsed in his arms.

"Don't go." His panicked sob ripped at Greg's heart. "Don't go. Please. Don't ever go. I need you. I need you."

Greg gathered him close against one shoulder, stroking through his hair.

"Need me," he breathed, nuzzling at Mycroft's cheek. Holy shit. You did it, darlin'. You chose me. "Need me, love... I'm right here..."

"Anything?" Ilka stopped her pacing to glance at her assistant in the doorway, watching him swipe through screens on his tablet. "Well?"

"No, Miss Fielding." Harry gave her a look of tense apology. "No sign of him yet. We're pulling CCTV from Baker Street now."

"Pull it faster." Ilka brought her thumb to her mouth, biting at the nail as she crossed her office once more. "For god's sake. He can't simply have vanished."

Pacing her way back towards the door, she watched something cross his face - something that tugged at the corner of his mouth.

Rage flared in her chest, white hot at once.
"Do you wish to say something, Harry?" she demanded, sharp. "Is there some comment you wish to make on the situation?"

He kept his eyes down. "No, ma'am," he mumbled, still working.

"Are you certain?" she said. "I rather think there is."

She watched him grapple with it a moment more - then he looked up at her, wearily.

"It just seems - I mean - "

"Yes?"

"We could maybe have predicted Mr Holmes would..." Harry stopped, shaking the observation quietly out of his head. "I'm not sure why you're now rushing to find him. That's all." He added, with a low glance, "Ma'am."

Ilka pushed her tongue across her back teeth.

"Because he's Mycroft Holmes, Harry. He's the British government. We need to retrieve him and reason with him. That is why."

She watched the boy bite back something else.

"Speak!" she shouted at him. "Speak, Harry! You're quite clearly desperate to share!"

"If he's so important," he said, "then why did you - ?"

Ilka crossed her arms over her chest, needling her fingers against her elbow.

"I didn't realise he was so attached to the wretched man," she muttered. "To the point of such stupidity. For god's sake. This is Mycroft's attempt to bargain with us, that's all... this is histrionics. A display of defiance."

"Bargain with us?" Her assistant goggled at from the doorway, appalled. "He told you to fuck yourself!" He added, " - ma'am."

Ilka bit her tongue, casting the boy a glare.

"He'll negotiate," she said. "He'll see sense."

She breathed in, and stalked back across towards the window.

"Mycroft Holmes has belonged to the British nation for twenty years," she said, sharp. "He's not about to abandon it now."

A call went up from outside the office. "Ma'am? CCTV."

"Where?" she barked, and strode towards the door. Her assistant moved wearily aside to let her pass.

"Heading west on the A40 at speed. Two people in the backseat. Looks like they're headed for Heathrow."

As the car screeched to a stop in the terminal forecourt, Collins leapt from the driver's seat and raced around to open the boot.

"Your suitcase, sir." He handed it quickly to Greg, then turned to his employer with an outstretched hand. "Goodbye, Mr Holmes. I wish you both the very best of luck."

Mycroft took his hand, overwhelmed. They shook, firm and functional.

Greg then dragged the driver in for a hug.

"Thanks, Bertie..."

"You're welcome, sir. Please take excellent care of Mr Holmes for us."

Greg thumped him on the back. "I will. I promise."

They parted. Collins bowed to them both, and got back into the car.

As the door slammed, Mycroft realised he was watching two decades of his life drive away. From this point, they would be alone in the world. There would be no strings he could pull. There was no granted authority he could wield. They were just two men, standing outside an airport terminal with a single suitcase between them. He hadn't any clothes except those on his back. Even now, oblivious removal men would be transferring his belongings into an apartment in which he would never live. He was no longer Mr Holmes, power of the British government.

He was simply Mycroft.

He had never felt quite so insubstantial in his life.

As the car drove away, a hand rested gently on his back. It eased around his waist, protective; careful fingers brushed his side.

"Are you okay?" asked the voice at his shoulder.

Mycroft turned to look at him.

His heart thumped.

*There you are.*

Those brown eyes, ever gentle - full of patience, full of love. Mycroft had said to those eyes, *I want.* Now the two of them were standing here, and they had nothing but each other. Greg looked just like he had that night on Shell Beach, standing there in the moonlight, promising to look after Mycroft. *"You worried you're getting cosy with me, darlin'?"* Taking a shell, dividing it in half for them.

Mycroft's half was still in his desk drawer at work.

*At the place I worked. The desk of the man I was.*

As he gazed into Greg's eyes, Mycroft felt his heart threaten to rupture.
You were all I asked for, he thought, and reached overwhelmed for Greg's face. His fingers shook as he took that beautiful jaw into his hands, gazing at him. You were all I wanted. To love me, to comfort me. To care. They say you are not allowed.

The words resounded softly through his soul.

I want you to.

He felt them singing through his veins. I want, I want, I want. Greg drew him close, loving arms curling tight around his waist. As their lips, and Mycroft felt the breath disappear from his lungs. They kissed in the cool March sunlight, hearts beating hard beneath their coats, and Mycroft felt the breeze ruffle through his hair. Greg's fingers followed it, gentle. I belong to myself now. I am mine to give to you.

Greg held him safe, and rubbed his back.

As they parted, he whispered, "'Gather ye rosebuds', posh."

Mycroft felt his soul squeeze. "'YOLO', bit of rough."

His lover grinned against his mouth.

"C'mon," Greg murmured. "Let's get out of here... I think we've got somewhere to be."

I think so, too.

As they passed through the door of the terminal together, Greg grabbed hold of his hand.

With every step Mycroft sensed his life falling further and further away. Everything he'd earned, every status he'd ever achieved, was now left behind. He'd poured a lifetime of care and attention into a career that had bled him dry. Four nights of Greg Lestrade, and in the moment when it mattered, he'd put it all to the torch without a care. He was now watching his life burn around him. He could feel himself burning with it, so happy he could fly.


My life.

As they hurried through the terminal, dragging Greg's suitcase behind them, Mycroft realised with a giddy surge of joy.

His life was right here, holding his hand.

In the same moment they broke into a run together, laughing, racing for the escalator.

"Anything?"

Harry flashed through another screen on his tablet as the car jagged sideways into a bus lane.

"Yes..." he said, typing quickly. "Yes, there's - KLM Royal Dutch airlines leaving very shortly for Amsterdam, then onto Princess Juliana Airport in Saint Maarten. From there it's a short shuttle to
Saint Barthélemy. The next available flight won't be until this evening."

He glanced up at her.

"They won't want to wait that long. But - are you - sure they're going to - ?"

"Where else would they go?" Ilka drummed her fingers against the seat between them, breathing in. "Contact Heathrow. Ground that flight."

"Miss Fielding, it - may have already - "

"Contact them!" she shouted at him, loud enough for the driver to jerk the car to one side, "and tell them to ground that flight! Don't let it leave the runway!"

Her assistant, pale, scrabbled for his phone.

"If Mycroft leaves the country, the only way after him will be through MI6," she said, as he keyed in a number and pressed it quickly to his ear. "They'll need a list of reasons from here to the Caribbean, especially to chase one of our own... we need to negotiate with him while he's still on British soil or we'll lose him forever."

The call was answered. Her assistant began to talk at speed.

He spoke for several minutes, his voice tense as they continued to weave through the traffic. Ilka watched the passing cars, tapping her fingers against the seat as she waited. Agents had been sent ahead to search the terminals, but there'd been no sign of either Mycroft or Lestrade.

If they were already on the plane, that would make sense.

At last, Harry hung up.

"They're doing what they can," he said. She stared at him, listening closely. "The plane is about to leave. All the passengers are already onboard - but they're going to try to get word to the pilot."

She inhaled, digging her fingernails into the leather seat.

"If that flight leaves..." she muttered.

Her assistant said nothing. He returned to his tablet, switching through windows without comment.

It was almost ten minutes before the phone call came.

Ilka turned her head towards Harry as he answered it, her gaze sharp.

"Yes?" He listened, his expression registering no reaction. After some time he said, "I see. Thank you. Yes, if you would - until we update you - thank you."

He hung up.

"And?" Ilka demanded.

He met her eyes with something oddly like reluctance.
"Grounded," he said. "They've got it. The plane is being held on the runway."

Ilka's chest heaved.

"Excellent," she said. "Good..."

Her assistant returned to his tablet, his eyes low. "How do you plan to proceed?"

She thought quickly, pushing her tongue into her cheek.

"Ensure that Mycroft realises the severity of his actions." She watched a motorway sign for Heathrow pass, eyes narrowing. "Remind him of his duties to the British nation. Get him to reconsider... offer to waive disciplinary action."

"And Lestrade?" her assistant said, raising an eyebrow.

Ilka glowered at him.

"We'll tell him we'll try to accommodate his precious Greg," she muttered. "If it gets him off the plane without fuss, so be it."

Harry's eyebrow lifted higher. "Try to?" he checked.

Ilka swept her tongue across her canines.

"We'll deal with that when we have Mycroft in our custody again."

The cars were admitted directly onto the runway. The sight of the grounded plane - a Boeing 737 - stirred Ilka's blood as they approached.

All will be corrected.

A promise to amend the registration process, she thought - a noble-hearted review of the department's policies - perhaps even concessions made in this one special instance. Mycroft might agree to cover the costs of Lestrade's security within his own department. The loss in the man's focus would be regretful, but any obvious drop in productivity could be targeted with disciplinary measures in the fullness of time.

It was concerning that he'd gotten as far as a plane seat.

A small oversight of hers, but it would be of no consequence in the end. Mycroft would already be regretting his rash attitude. She was sure of it. The man was toffee-nosed and tedious and far too aware of his own market value, but queen and country had to count for something.

As she stepped out onto the runway, retying the belt of her coat, Ilka glanced at the agents now exiting the other car.

Perhaps a show of force, she thought.

"Retrieve them both," she told her assistant, coolly. "Inform Mycroft we're more than prepared to discuss the situation. We don't wish to see his position sacrificed on a knee-jerk reaction. Convince
him to come quietly if you can. If you can't," she added, with a glance at the security agents, "bring him anyway."

Harry listened, round-eyed and uneasy. He nodded. He spoke briefly to the security agents, then with some reluctance he led the way up the steps of the plane.

Ilka reached into her coat, withdrawing her phone. She answered a few short e-mails as she waited. *The closest I have ever come to a mistake,* she thought, and settled herself that even the near-loss of Mycroft Holmes had been handled efficiently and cleanly. Her superiors needn't even be told.

Ten minutes later, she watched the door of the plane open.

The agents slowly emerged. Her assistant emerged behind them, his head down.

Mycroft Holmes did not appear.

Ilka's face fell.

She dropped her phone into her pocket, and strode across to the steps as the blood ran from her veins.

"Where is he?" she barked at the nearest agent. "Where is Mycroft Holmes?"

"Don't know, ma'am. They're not onboard."

Ice cascaded down Ilka's back.

"What do you mean, 'they're not onboard'?" she demanded, staring from face-to-face. "This is the flight to Amsterdam! It's the only connection to bloody St Barts! Where the hell are they?"

And then she laid eyes on her assistant, who was following the agents down the steps.

He was smirking.

"Sorry, Miss Fielding," he said, and looked her in the face. "Looks like they're headed somewhere else. I suppose someone must have tipped them off."

Harry bit into his lip, his eyes dancing.

"Unfortunate," he said.

As she closed her hands around his throat, screaming, the agents hauled her off him.

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Thirty-five-thousand-feet above the North Atlantic ocean, on a Boeing 777 headed to John F. Kennedy International Airport, Mycroft Holmes nestled into his partner's side. The arm around his shoulders cuddled him closer; a gentle kiss was pressed to the top of his head.

He realised in a rush that he was breathing again. His heart was beating again. The world was rendered in colour once more.

"What'll we do when we get to New York?" Greg murmured, his voice soft and low.
Mycroft's heart ached at the thought.

"We shall find a hotel," he said. His fingers laced with Greg's, thumb stroking across his partner's palm. "We will have dinner in the restaurant together... whatever we wish to eat, with a very expensive bottle of wine."

He inhaled.

"We will then go to our suite," he murmured, "and we'll make love. As many times during the night as we wish."

He felt Greg grin against his head, gentle fingers stroking a circle on his shoulder. "After that?"

"After that..." Mycroft closed his eyes, breathing in Greg's scent. "I have a number of contacts in the States. University friends, professional associates... I'm hoping that one of them will be good enough to accommodate us for a few weeks, while I find us somewhere to live. If not, a hotel it is. We'll seek out jobs. Make a home for ourselves."

He squeezed Greg's hand, lifting his head.

"I'm... not accustomed to freedom," he said. He watched Greg's eyes shine. "You shall have to teach me."

Greg grinned, stroking a hand across his cheek.

"S'easy, darlin'," he said. "Stick with me. M'sure I'll remember how it goes."

Mycroft's mouth curved, his heart beating quick and soft. "Greg?"

"Mm, posh?" Greg kissed the tip of his nose. "How can I please you?"

Mycroft felt his smile become a grin. "Less than three."

Greg cupped his face in warm, loving hands.

"Less than three too, darlin'..." He pressed their lips together. "Always less than three," he breathed.
The lobby of The St. Regis was a masterpiece of seashell pink marble and gilded mouldings, gleaming beneath a trompe-l’oeil ceiling and a crystal chandelier. Mycroft had never seen a more welcoming sight in his life.

As the doorman admitted them he felt Greg stall a little beside him, and glanced across in time to see Greg's mouth carefully close. His brown eyes were wide at the vision of wealth and elegance into which they'd stepped.

Mycroft's heart gave a protective squeeze. He placed his arm around Greg's back.

"We're here to celebrate our freedom," he murmured, his voice soft and quiet as he guided his partner across the glorious lobby. He could see Greg trying not to glance at the affluent people all around them. "I've spent two decades waiting for this moment. In the morning I'll examine my finances and make responsible decisions as to our future. First, I would like to be indulgent together."

"C-Christ... I want that, too."

"Mm. God knows we've earned it."

As they approached the desk, a uniformed young lady looked up with a smile. Mycroft retained a gentle hand on his lover's back.

"Good afternoon. I wondered if you might accommodate us for a few nights... and I would like to reserve a table for dinner."

Ten minutes later, a porter opened the double doors to the Bentley Suite. As their private foyer appeared, along with a white-gloved butler pouring out two glasses of champagne, Greg audibly inhaled.

"Oh, fuck off..." he breathed.

Mycroft laughed aloud. "Gregory...!"

"Oh, come on!" Greg said, now laughing too. Their butler desperately attempted to mask his smile as he topped up each of their glasses. "You can't walk me into something called 'The Bentley Suite' and not expect to be told to fuck off."

As the butler handed Mycroft a glass of champagne, Mycroft gave the man an apologetic glance.

"Forgive my partner," he said, smiling. "We've had a rather long day."

"Quite alright, sir." The butler handed Greg his glass. "If I can be of any help at all to you during your stay, do let me know. The phone here in the foyer is your direct line to me."
"Thank you. Some time alone together before dinner would be wonderful. We'll need to source my partner a suit, but we'd like to rest first."

"Of course, sir. I'll be here when you need me."

As he left, Mycroft took Greg quietly by the hand.

"Come with me," he murmured. "Let's see."

They had their own lounge and dining room. The bedroom was a picture of masculine elegance, all gleaming walnut veneers and white leather, with views from the balcony doors along Fifth Avenue. It was perfectly beautiful, perfectly safe. Mycroft had paid in advance for three nights; he suspected already they would be staying longer.

As Greg lingered by the window, gazing out with his champagne glass held to his chest, a look of utter wonder crossed his face.

Mycroft stepped up close behind him. He slipped an arm around Greg's waist, and rested his chin upon Greg's shoulder.

His lover leant back into his arms.

"Are you alright?" Mycroft murmured. He felt Greg breathe, stomach rising slowly beneath Mycroft's hand.

Greg took a moment just to process it, gazing out through the glass.


The quiet hugged around them.

Mycroft understood. He nuzzled the corner of Greg's jaw, murmuring, "Just..." and watched Greg's eyes close in longing. Though roughened with the long day's stubble, his lover's skin was somehow still soft.

Mycroft had missed it desperately.

"You went through the process for me, Greg." He closed his eyes, overwhelmed with sudden peace. "You endured it... all of it."

The corners of Greg's eyes creased with a smile. "Would've been officially yours right now," he said, "if Fielding played fair. Signed and sealed..."

Mycroft felt something stir inside his heart. He stroked Greg's stomach through his shirt, watching him take a sip of champagne.

"I shouldn't have made you go through it," he said. "I should have terminated my employment the second I returned to England. I didn't realise how appallingly you would be treated... I'm sorry for what they put you through. I'm sorry I permitted it."

"Hey... s' alright, love..." Greg wrapped his arm over Mycroft's, fondly. "S'easy to think you don't deserve any better in life," he said as he returned the slow nuzzle, his voice soft. "Easy to think you shouldn't want what you want... sometimes you need someone to show you."

Mycroft's heart glowed against Greg's back.
"I want to be with you," he said. "I - want you to be here, Greg. Wherever 'here' might be."

For the first time, it didn't make him feel afraid. Nobody could dictate that he was not allowed Greg - not his employer, not his father. No-one would step into this moment and order it to end. It could continue indefinitely, one day and then the next, and he would make Greg Lestrade the happiest man who walked this planet.

As Greg's fingers wove through his, Mycroft held him tightly.

"I thought we were nearing the end, Greg... it transpires we were nearing the start."

Greg smiled, biting his lip. "Ends are over-rated," he said. "Let's just keep starting. Over and over." He turned his head, pressing his cheek to Mycroft's. "M'sorry about your job, darlin'. I know it meant a lot to you."

Mycroft stroked a quiet kiss across his neck. "I did not mean a lot to them."

He felt Greg breathe in. "You mean the world to me," he said, and Mycroft's heart swelled to twice its size.

"You are my world," he whispered. "Wherever life takes us, I will care for you. I will cherish you." He closed his eyes, murmuring around the lump in his throat. "You gave up everything for me. I will never forget."

"You gave it up for me, too." Greg's fingers curled with his own. A little guilt touched his voice. "All your duty."

Mycroft huffed softly.

"I'm realising 'duty' is a very one-sided arrangement," he said. "A noble word hiding a hollow imbalance. Care expected without reciprocation or gratitude."

As he kissed Greg's jaw, he said the words aloud for the first time.

"My parents - demanded a great deal from me. Their approval came on condition that I suppress my own needs in their honour... I called it 'duty'. I praised myself for my self-sacrifice. I believed in it so fervently that even my father's death didn't release me from his expectations."

Greg tilted his head, gently. He brushed his lips over Mycroft's cheek.

"Security services struck gold with you," he said. "You know that? You give, darlin'. You give, and you give, and you give."

Mycroft's heart ached. "I - want to give. To you."

He felt Greg grin against his cheek. "S'fine. I like giving, too - makes me happy. I like being needed... making a difference."

A shiver slipped down Mycroft's spine.

"Make a difference to me," he begged. "Give to me, Greg. I want you. I want all of you. I love you so fiercely I don't know how I'll ever express it."

"Darlin'... I love you too..." Greg flexed his fingers in Mycroft's grip, brushing, stroking and playing. "Take me places. Spoil me. I want an exciting life."
"You will. You will live a wonderful life."

"I want to see everywhere. All the world. Everything."


"Give to me," Greg whispered, shivering. "Give everything to me. I'll give it all back to you, I
swear," and as Mycroft reached down, brushing the backs of his fingers lightly over the fastening of
Greg's jeans, he twitched in Mycroft's arms. "F-Fuck - don't tease me, My - please - I've not come in
weeks - "

Mycroft brushed his tongue over the curve of Greg's ear, curling a finger around the button of his
jeans.

"I believe we can declare ourselves the winners here," he whispered, as he undid the fastening. Greg
inhaled, drained the last of his champagne in one gulp and set the glass aside. "We rather have the
best of both worlds, don't we?"

"B-Both worlds?" Greg said. His voice cut in a moan as Mycroft began to ease down his zipper,
painfully slow over the thickening of his cock.

"Mm. We've proven that we belong to each other - but in the end, there is no need. We're free to
grow our love as we wish."

Greg's breath caught, his fingers tightening on Mycroft's wrist.

"I'll never need to worry," Mycroft said, lowering the zip all the way. "I never need to fear you're
staying because a document binds you to me."

Greg shivered, biting into his lip. "You'll always know it's me. All me. Just love. All of it."

Mycroft's heart thumped.

"Greg," he whispered, and slid his fingertips beneath Greg's shirt, stroking his stomach and the
waistband of his boxers. "Darling..."

Greg swallowed, head tipping back onto Mycroft's shoulder. "My favourite sound in the world," he
managed, breath tight, "hearing you say my name like that..."

"Mm?" Mycroft eased his fingers inside Greg's boxers. The hardness there strained for his touch;
Greg's hips arched into the wrap of his fingers. "I have missed my favourite sounds. I've missed them
very much..."

Please. Fuck me in New York and take me to dinner."

Heat blossomed through Mycroft's stomach.

"I love you," he breathed, pulling Greg away from the window.

As they fell into the bed together, Greg threw him over onto his back.

"I love you too," he gasped, crawled on top of Mycroft, and kissed him until their jaws hurt.
As they took their seats, Mycroft noted a quiet twitch cross Greg’s face. He waited until the server had gone to fetch their wine, then reached across the table.

"Are you alright?" he asked, taking Greg's hand in his own.

Greg gave him a dark-eyed grin, eyes glittering. "My own fault..."

"If I've hurt you -"

"You haven't, love. Don't fret." Greg's fingers curled with Mycroft's, his gaze as warm and bright as the chandelier above their table. "I'm ten years out of practice, that's all."

Mycroft felt his heart squirm. "I was - perhaps a little -"

" - just how I wanted?" Greg said, biting into his lip. His foot brushed Mycroft's ankle beneath the table. "Did I get loud?"

Mycroft flushed. Some of it had been muffled into a pillow towards the end; the rest he would be rehearing in his dreams all his life.

"You were perfect," he murmured, and Greg's fingertips slipped beneath the cuff of his shirt, stroking his pulse point.

Greg grinned as he shifted.

"Your turn later." His eyes smouldered softly across the table. "Missed you."

Mycroft's heart expanded with his breath. "I missed you, too. Very, very much."

Greg reached a casual hand to the side of his neck, brushing against some phantom itch. The movement eased the midnight blue fabric of his shirt aside, just enough to flash the rosy pink bitemark now pride of place on his shoulder.

"Love you," Greg murmured, stroking it.

Mycroft inhaled very slowly. "I adore you."

"Can't believe they just sent me up a suit," Greg smiled, his eyes sparkling. "Suppose they wouldn't have let me into the restaurant in jeans, though..."

"It fits you beautifully." The sharp midnight blue was rather revelatory, Mycroft had to admit. Greg looked almost as good in it as he did in crumpled linen. "I'll have to acquire more clothing tomorrow... seeing as I currently possess a single outfit to my name, and it is this one."

Greg grinned, delighted. "Hit the shops?"

*With you... in New York.*

*Dear god.*

"It seems I'll have to make my peace with American tailoring," Mycroft said.

"Yeah?" Greg glanced down at himself - the shirt, the fitted jacket, the tailored trousers that had dragged people's eyes from their meals as he entered the room. "Think it's pretty sharp, to be honest."
Mycroft felt a smile pull at the corners of his mouth, pride bubbling desperately in his chest. "You look wonderful."

"Thanks, darlin'..." Greg bit his lip. "Am I still your bit of rough? Even in a posh hotel in New York?"

"Always," Mycroft said, brushing their fingers. He tipped Greg's hand gently onto the table, and traced a heart upon his palm. "I will always be grateful."

Greg grinned, watching. "I feel - free."

_I am so glad._ "What would you like to eat?"

"Christ... everything. I'm starving."

"Mm? The filet of beef looks good... there's a ten ounce option might just sate you..." Mycroft turned the menu with interest between his fingers, scanning down the list of desserts. "God help us. 'New York style cheesecake with chantilly crème'."

"When in Rome," Greg said, with a wink. "Two spoons?"

Mycroft felt his smile break into a grin. "Two portions, Greg. We are celebrating."

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Greg's hands skimmed from his thighs up to his waist; Mycroft swallowed and let his head fall back. The touch was perfectly gentle, warm fingertips grazing his skin with love. The sensation skittered with each urgent thud of his pulse. It coaxed his thoughts away from the ache between his thighs, soothing him enough to breathe around it.

"Okay, sweetheart?"

Shivering, Mycroft opened his eyes and looked down.

Greg's gaze shone up from the pillows. He was almost decadently beautiful, his bare chest honeyed in the lamplight, his grey hair soft and scruffed from almost an hour of restless foreplay.

The look of protective love was overwhelming.

"I l-love you..." Mycroft whispered.

Greg's chest rose. His fingers curled at Mycroft's waist, tender. "You're amazing," he breathed. "You know that? You're perfect to me..."

Mycroft bit down into his lip. With care, holding Greg's gaze, he began to rock his hips.

Pleasure seared at once through his blood.

_Ohh..._ Greg felt like heaven inside him, steel-hard and slick - just a little too big, just enough to feel stretched at the seams. Memories flamed through Mycroft in a rush. _Ohh, god - _

Greg's grip tightened at his waist.
"Fuck..." The whisper of longing heaved through Mycroft's senses. "Fuck, sweetheart - you're beautiful - "

Mycroft arched, breathing in, and leant back to brace his hands on Greg's thighs behind him. The curve of his own back felt good, giving himself to Greg's eyes, all his bare skin, the soft scatter of new bites trailed across his shaking body, the desperate strain of his erection as he rocked himself slowly on Greg's cock. Greg's restless hands followed the path of his eyes, stroking and touching - Mycroft's hip-bones, his sides, up over the stretch of his stomach, up to circle his nipples slowly with gentle thumbs. Mycroft dug his fingers into Greg's thighs at the soft little sting of sensation, bucking; he swallowed back his whimper.

"None of that," Greg breathed, and a hand left Mycroft's nipples to glide down his body, wrapping his cock in a snug sleeve of fingers. "Don't be quiet. Share with me, darlin'. Let me hear."

*Oh, fuck - oh - fuck -*

Greg's hand took up the rhythm of Mycroft's hips with ease, stroking and gently pulling, perfectly slow. The sheets were soft beneath Mycroft's knees; his lover's laboured breathing was familiar and comforting. He didn't want to chase his climax. He didn't want to come, not yet. He just wanted to slow-fuck, and gaze down at Greg, and let the whimpers rise up in his throat.

"That's it..." Greg shuddered beneath him, his eyes big and dark. He swiped his thumb over the head of Mycroft's cock to spread his wetness, make him slicker on every stroke. "That's it, beautiful... moan for me... make all the noise you want for me..."

It felt so good to make noise.

It felt good to fall into the pattern, pushing forward into Greg's hand then letting his weight drop down onto his cock. Stretching back, panting, Mycroft moved with just a little more force and felt Greg press into his prostate on every stroke now, nuzzling, building, over and over and slow and deep and the pleasure burned hot and tight across his back, his cock aching, his lungs straining for breath. Each gasp of air left him as sound. He wanted to fill the suite. He wanted everything in the room to know how good this felt, how deep Greg was, hear him overwhelmed with relief and love and joy as his partner moved inside him.

By the time Greg turned him onto his back, and with gentle hands parted his thighs, Mycroft was close from penetration alone.

He whimpered, trembling, and Greg caught his mouth for a kiss so hard it would bruise. Their jaws worked together, desperate; they drove their fingers through each other's hair.

As Greg nuzzled back inside him, filling him slowly to the brim, Mycroft cried out in frantic enjoyment. He twisted his fingers in the sheets, fighting the urge to writhe. His thighs shook as Greg eased inch by inch back inside his body. Deep once more, Greg's teeth closed gently on his neck. Mycroft swore, panting and whimpering, pleading with Greg to mark him.

Greg bit down, and began to move.

*Fuck. Oh, fuck. Perfect, deep - slow and hard - pinning him, filling him, filling him over and over with a hot white pleasure so intense he barely recovered from each wave before the next welled over him. He could hear himself sobbing at the feeling, crying out, begging for Greg to make him come."

"Hold onto me, sweetheart..." Greg's breath stoked across his ear, his voice soft and rough, his back now slick with sweat beneath Mycroft's hands. "Hold tight to me - "
Panting, Mycroft crossed his ankles at Greg's lower back.

"Mm hmm?" Greg began to drive inside him hard, pounding, slamming, gripping him by the hips to hold him still, hold him just there, filling him, fucking him. "Come for me, darlin'... come all over for me... fuck, sweetheart, that's it - scream it out for me - "

Mycroft's senses blitzed into one. Touch and sight and sound and scent burned out with pleasure, nothing but pleasure, and for a few desperate moments there was no skin between them anymore. There was nothing separate. They were just two hearts, shining and singing inside of one form - and in the perfect safety of his lover, Mycroft fell apart. He came so hard he could barely cope, digging his fingers into Greg's back and arching up against him, sobbing as Greg fucked him slowly through it.

As Mycroft reformed inside his own skin, he found Greg shaking against him. Greg pushed close, moaning desperately against his neck. As the motion of sex grew wet, Greg gasping and swearing and whimpering, Mycroft carded his fingers through Greg's hair.

"Come," he breathed, brushing through the sweat-damp shock of grey. "Come in me, darling... give to me..."

Greg groaned, struggling, pushing deep and panting at full pelt.

Shining, Mycroft closed his eyes. Utter joy coursed through his veins.

"Come for me," he whispered, guiding Greg to kiss him. "Oh god, that's it... come for me..."

At one AM, massage oil and fresh cherries were requested to the Bentley Suite. At ten AM, housekeeping found a notice on the door asking not to be disturbed.

The notice was still there as the sun went down.

"You are Anthea Goddard?"

Anthea raised her chin, entirely calm. "I am."

The gentleman who addressed her was deceptively ordinary in his appearance - a suit of neat grey, a closely trimmed blonde beard, half-moon glasses. He had no name that she would recognise, and no history that she or anyone else could ever find.

Although the room around them was full of people, with members of the security services from almost every department present, she filtered them all from her mind.

This discussion involved only the two of them; their audience did not matter.

"You were personal assistant to Mycroft Holmes?" he asked, watching her with his careful brown eyes.

"I was." Not a sound disturbed the silence all around them. "I now assist a number of senior agents in the fulfilment of his duties."

He glanced gently at the single sheet of notes upon his lap. "You've offered yourself as a candidate
"to replace Mycroft, in the fullness of time."

Anthea held his gaze. "I have."

He nodded, simply.

"Please describe to me the circumstances surrounding Mycroft's resignation," he said, and without faltering, Anthea related them.

"Mr Holmes was forced from his position by the hostility and disrespectful treatment he suffered at the hands of Ilka Fielding, Head of Human Resources. Her vindictive behaviour towards him commenced when he expressed his intention to register an intimate partner - Gregory Lestrade, a Scotland Yard officer of excellent character and reputation. Miss Fielding then began a very ugly campaign of cruelty against Gregory Lestrade, rather than permit the relationship to be registered. As her files show, and as testimony from her assistant has demonstrated, she relied upon the most tenuous of reasoning to subject both Mycroft and his partner to viciousness. Her behaviour brought shame upon the security services, and has now led to the loss of the country's greatest asset."

He watched her in silence as she spoke, considering her words with care.

Anthea went on.

"I believe the widespread organisational problems we've suffered since are directly due to Mycroft's resignation." There were perceptible nods from all around. "He was a keystone of the British nation. His loss was wholly avoidable, and can be assigned in its entirety to Miss Fielding's decision to hound him."

"Was Mycroft otherwise happy in his position?" the gentleman asked.

"Mr Holmes was both happy and proud. His loyalty to the nation was without question. He had the greatest respect for the security services, and on a daily basis he gave his all in support of this organisation. A single aspect of his role troubled him."

He raised an eyebrow, interested. "What aspect was this?"

"The registration process established by Ilka Fielding," Anthea replied, "by which senior officials must have intimate partners authorised. It is deeply flawed."

"Please elaborate."

"I shall. In an attempt to lessen the costs of protecting senior officials' partners and families, Miss Fielding has made this process as gruelling as possible. It functions as a deterrent."

His mouth pulled slightly.

"The security costs involved are substantial," he reminded her.

"So shall be the cost of replacing Mycroft." Anthea held his gaze, unafraid. "Human comfort and company should not be considered a luxury by any organisation, least of all one so reliant upon the loyalty of its employees. We would not insist that senior officials forego eating, sleeping, breathing - and yet we insist that they forego intimacy. This system has cost us dearly and will continue to do so."

Gripping her hands behind her back, she added,
"Our technical resources are given maintenance, upgrades and security software, regardless of the cost. It is accepted as a necessary expense. In the same way, our human resources must be given the chance to form human bonds. They are vital."

"Regardless of the cost?" he said, and there was a brightness to his eyes.

"It is a necessary cost of business," she said. "I believe that every single department has been affected by Mycroft's loss. Many hours of additional work are now needed to fill the gap that he left. This needn't have happened."

There came nods and murmurs of assent from those watching.

"Mycroft has now settled in New York with his partner," she added, and risked a glance at the many people who had gathered to witness this hearing - the country's brightest and best, men and women who had dedicated themselves to its welfare. Today it would give them something back. "The two of them are very happy. Mycroft intends to establish himself as an independent financial advisor."

"Will he advise us?" the gentleman asked, to soft sounds of amusement from the gathered officials.

Anthea retained an entirely neutral expression. "Mr Holmes has said he would be happy to. His rates are very reasonable."

There was more quiet amusement.

"If I might suggest," Anthea said, "senior officials should be personally responsible for thorough background checks of any close social contacts, intimate partners or otherwise. At the stage of a committed relationship when a home is shared, security details might be revised. Human Resources should advise on this matter, not dictate - and certainly not deny."

Though he listened without reaction, Anthea noted him underline something quietly in his papers.

"And you believe the behaviour of the Head of Human Resources was a key factor in Mycroft Holmes's decision to leave?"

"Yes," Anthea said, her ribs expanding. "A critical factor. She jettisoned any semblance of a rational approach to her duties. It was shameful to witness."

"The cost to the British nation," said a cold voice behind her, "of providing security and protection for Mycroft Holmes's latest prostitute would have been astronomical."

Anthea inhaled, slowly - then turned.

Ilka Fielding sat isolated in a chair, quite calm, one leg crossed over the other. She looked as if she were the chair of this hearing, not the subject.

"Gregory Lestrade was not a prostitute," Anthea said, her voice calm and clear. "He would have been an asset to the country, supporting one of its hardest working servants."

Ilka glared at her with unmasked dislike. "The man was a security threat," she said, sharp. "He was disruptive, difficult and disrespectful."

"And justifiably so," Anthea said, sharper. "You were vile to him."

"The point of the registration process," Ilka said, coldly, "is to ensure that prospective partners are mentally sound enough to - "
"No," Anthea said, her heart tensing. "The point of the process is to give you pleasure. To flatter your authority. Greg Lestrade loved Mr Holmes to the point of enduring every moment of your vicious 'registration', and he did it with grace and respect. You insisted he sacrifice everything, and he did. You then denied him purely out of spite. The two of them have now fled the country for the sole purpose of being together. And if you haven't the humanity to understand why they made that choice, you are unqualified to manage human resources."

Ilka opened her mouth to retort.

"Enough," their superior said, his voice hard.

Instant silence descended.

Anthea held Ilka's gaze for a moment, calm, then turned back to face him.

"Do you believe this campaign against Mycroft was personal?" he asked her.

Anthea could feel Ilka's stare on the back of her neck.

"I believe it was both personal and frighteningly impersonal," she said. "As you can see, Miss Fielding interprets any attempt to register a partner as a personal affront to her unwritten rules. Her own authority is a source of savage satisfaction to her. She is supremely unfit to head a department within the security services."

"How dare you even suggest - " Ilka began.

Before she could say another word - before Anthea could turn, or before their superior could intervene - noise erupted from the officials all around. As if it had been planned to begin in this moment, angry voices rained down from the crowd.

" - false claims to her, told her she'd never see her family again -"

" - loss of his job - loss of his home -"

" - outright lies! Utter lies! -"

" - wouldn't even allow me to speak to -"

" - making veiled and vicious threats about her past -"

" - bribed to leave me! Bribed to back out of the -"

" - gone by that evening, thinking I'm a monster -"

As Anthea gazed around the crowd, her mouth opened.

Officials who normally wouldn't risk so much as an indiscreet smile were now raging and shouting. The noise came from all directions; it was deafening. One broken-hearted story ruptured into another. Names were shouted, names of people long gone, lovers lost and driven away.

Glancing over, Anthea saw Ilka pale and shrink in her chair, alarmed by the response - then her teeth gritted. Anger flared behind the panic. She shouted back, her expression warping.

"I was doing MY DUTY!" she raged at them all. "For god's sake!"

Her superior watched the scene, his impassive brown eyes taking in the sheer volume of fury.
He then visibly inhaled, leant back in his chair, and held up a hand.

As suddenly as it had begun, the noise withered into silence. Anger vanished beneath masks in an instant. All around the room, officials resumed their seats without a sound.

The calm that fell was heavy and shocking; it did nothing to drown out the reality of what had just occurred.

The gentleman regarded Ilka over his spectacles, greatly unimpressed.

"You always have much to say to me on the subject of your efficiency," he told her. "You ensured me that costs were falling with zero detriment to morale. You misrepresented the situation."

"Costs have lowered." Ilka's jaw tightened; she held his gaze. "I did my job and I did it well."

There were angry hisses, shouts.

Ilka pointed at the crowd.

"All these people," she said, staring at her superior and shaking. "All these people at their desks, working, for the good of the country. Not sprinting off at five o'clock, racing out of the door to - "

"Mycroft is not at his desk," Anthea said.

There were calls of agreement, and calls of other names. Some she recognised as former colleagues.

She turned to face their superior, her heart beating hard. "Fielding’s methods only appear to work - and only in the short term. She has crippled the morale of the workforce. This cannot be sustained."

"I can see that," he muttered, raising an eyebrow. He glanced at Ilka - and Anthea had the impression that the woman was being given her last words.

Ilka knew it, too.

She faced him, pale and unmoved, her head high and her back straight.

"You sought me out for this organisation," she told him. "My track record told you I would cut costs, prioritise efficiency, improve productivity. You coveted me for those skills, and I used them."

Her eyes flashed.

"You now expect me to leap in front of you to take the bullet," she said. "If I do, you'll substitute me for someone who hands out employee benefits like sweets - and when you realise we're hemorrhaging money, you'll turn on them too. I am above this organisation. A pity, that you don't appreciate the good work I've done."

Cries of anger tore from the crowd.

Their superior barked, "Enough!" - and they were silenced.

He watched Ilka over his glasses for a moment, his eyes narrowed and his face hard.

"The need for senior officials to register partners is terminated immediately," he said. Anthea felt an entire roomful of people inhale as one. "We will be seeking a new Head of Human Resources."

Ilka's face flushed with anger. She said nothing, dropping her gaze to the floor.
"Escort Miss Fielding to my office," he said, inclining his head towards security agents. They stepped forwards at once to take hold of her. "I'll be conducting your debriefing immediately, Ilka. Your replacement will work alongside a new Director of Senior Official Welfare, who will liaise with all senior officials regularly to ensure that any security concerns regarding their partners and families are met. This issue is ongoing but will be resolved." He stood up from his chair. "Hearing adjourned."

In the corridor outside, as people thronged from the room in animated discussion, Anthea slipped into a window alcove for a moment with her mobile phone. Many other alcoves were occupied with senior officials doing the same; one space along, she could hear the Head of Finance stuttering into his phone.

"- i-if you'd - perhaps wish to have dinner with me this weekend... anywhere you like. I - know we've been friends for years, but I've - I've always - "

Smiling quietly, Anthea opened up her contacts.

The first text was to Mycroft. He would be waking up soon, nestled in his partner's arms in New York.

Fielding terminated. Dragged off for debriefing. Registration process suspended indefinitely. A x

Part of her wished he'd been here to see this; part of her wouldn't change his new happiness for anything.

She would keep an eye on Fielding's progress out there in the real world, and see how she fared. With the right strings pulled, it could be rather poorly.

Anthea was looking forward to it.

Biting her lip, she then scrolled on through her contacts down to 'S'. To the victor go the spoils, she supposed. Life was short; certain opportunities simply couldn't be overlooked.

Smiling, she opted for classic.

Regarding your previous kind offer... I haven't any plans for this evening. Perhaps you and I should have dinner. A x

The reply came in less than two minutes.

He picked her up at eight.
Three Years Later

Mycroft managed to wait until mid-afternoon. Knowing the flight had landed, he couldn't bear to keep working any longer. His clients would have to wait until the new year.

Then, he thought, as he closed his laptop, this late into the day on December 31st he was sure they all had more important matters to attend to.

He certainly did.

He stored his laptop in the safe, checked his phone and called a taxi, arriving in Gustavia just after three. The capital was full of sunshine, excitement and beautiful people. St Barts was in peak season for Christmas and New Year, and the docks were a hive of activity on this glorious afternoon.

Mycroft sourced himself a patch of shade in which to wait and watch the horizon, fingers drumming gently on his knee.

The villa hadn't been cheap by any means. An entirely enjoyable expense, though. This year had far exceeded his expectations. With Greg’s earnings, their income was now eminently comfortable - and came with the added joy that a fortnight in the Caribbean required no permission but their own.

"St Barts, right?" Fond arms circling his waist, gentle kisses at his jaw. "Fuck, yes... let's get it booked, gorgeous. We can work while we're there. D'you think our villa's still available?"

‘Our villa’.

It made Mycroft smile to the soul.

Then, he rarely needed a reason to smile anymore. The past three years hadn't been void of challenges, and a great deal of hard work had gone into securing their comfort - but there was something about hard work with another hard worker at your side.

'No matter what' were reassuring words indeed.

As a likely boat appeared in the distance, Mycroft felt his heart lift. The nearer it drew the more sure he became, until he couldn't bear to hang back in the shade any longer. He moved to linger by the wooden pier as the boat docked, watching the stream of passengers disembark. He checked each face that appeared, his stomach tight with anticipation. Three years... three long years...

He saw her the second she appeared.

Her assistant alighted onto the docks first, offering a hand back to steady her step. She smiled, pleased, took his arm and allowed him to help her down, her other hand resting on her stomach. She was showing every day of her twenty-four weeks, glowing in her soft white sundress.

Mycroft's feet pulled him forward at once.
As she saw him coming, Anthea's face opened into a smile.

Mycroft's feet sped up.

As her arms wrapped around his shoulders, he felt his heart heave against the front of his chest. He didn't want to hurt her, not for anything in the world - but it was so hard not to hold her tightly.

"Mycroft," she murmured in his ear, as if just saying his name gave her joy. Her arms tightened.
"You look wonderful..."

"As do you..." Mycroft couldn't bring himself to let her go. It was so strange to think he'd once seen her everyday without fail; those days felt like a lifetime ago. "You're a picture of radiance, Anthea... was the flight comfortable?"

"You..." she chided, softly, and drew back to look at him. Her eyes shone as she took him in. "The flight was perfectly comfortable, thank you. Harry has taken excellent care of me."

"I'm glad to hear it." Mycroft turned to her assistant with a smile, extending a hand. "Harry - good to see you again."

Harry beamed, shifting Anthea's travelling bag onto his other arm in order to shake hands.

"And you, Mr Holmes. You're keeping well, I hope?"

"Sublimely, thank you. I hear heartening things about you, young man. Anthea tells me you're become more indispensable by the month."

Harry glowed. "Anthea's a wonderful employer, sir. I'm very proud to assist her."

"She learned from the best," Anthea murmured, glancing fondly at Mycroft. His heart swelled. "And where are the men of the moment, might I ask? I'd hoped to hear something by now."

"Awaiting their connection in Piarco, when last I texted. I imagine they'll be boarding fairly soon."

Anthea's eyes glittered. "I see. Have you been given any hopeful hint?"

"I'm afraid not," Mycroft replied, amused. "I assume we're expected to wait for the news in person... I'm choosing to surmise that means it's good."

Glancing over her shoulder, he spotted another familiar figure disembarking the boat - and his heart jolted into his mouth.

"Harry," Anthea purred, the very model of discretion. "Let us relocate to terra firma, shall we? Before I'm accidentally tripped backwards into the bay..."

"Yes, ma'am. Of course. Here, let me help you."

As Harry gave her his arm, and they made their way along the pier, Mycroft stepped past them. His heart was leaping behind his ribs.

John Watson - boardshorts, checked shirt and sunglasses, with a hold-all slung over his back - spotted him first.

"Sherlock - " he said, grinning.

Sherlock barely had time to turn. He let out a startled noise and stiffened as he was grabbed - then
recognised the arms now wrapped around his shoulders.

Mycroft felt the tension ease from him at once.

"Hello, brother mine..."

"Hello, Sherlock." Mycroft smiled into his shoulder, breathing in. "I'm very glad you could come."

"John would hardly have permitted me to refuse." Sherlock's arms quietly encircled him; he settled against Mycroft, comfortable. "I'm also pleased to be here. Thank you for inviting us, Mycroft. You're very kind."

"How was your flight?"

"Tolerable, thank you. Where is Greg? We have his birthday gift. It's whiskey. I'm afraid he'll have to cope with festive wrapping paper."

"Currently changing flights in Trinidad," Mycroft said, unable to fight his smile. You recalled his birthday. "He should be here by nightfall. I'm sure he'll be very touched by your gift."

John grinned from ear-to-ear as Mycroft turned to him.

"John - "

"Mycroft..." The hug was brief but tight and very fond, all back-slap and grip. Mycroft found himself struck all over again by how thoroughly he approved of John Watson. "You're looking great. How's life?"

"Rather wonderful, thank you. I trust London is still treating you well?"

"You're not missing anything. How's that?"

"That will do nicely," Mycroft said, amused. He reached for the handle of their largest suitcase, helping John to carry it along the pier. Sherlock was donning sunglasses with a frown, his pale skin bleached bright white in the sun. "You'll be glad to settle after your flight, I imagine."

"God, yes..." John grinned. "In the pool with a cocktail by four, I think. How's New York?"

Mycroft gave him a wry look. "Two degrees in January," he said, "on a good day. Greg is always rather keen to exercise his wanderlust in winter."

"He's here already, is he? Have we heard about the deal? Was it a yes?"

"Not yet," Mycroft said, pleased. "He should be with us in a few hours. Neither Anthea nor I have been informed of any news. We suspect we're being kept in suspense with some purpose..."

"That's got to be good, right?"

"I certainly hope so."

"John?" Sherlock squinted back along the pier at them, pained. "Did we pack sufficient sun cream? I'm being subjected to a greater cacophony of UV rays than I anticipated."

"When you say did we pack the sun cream, d'you mean did I pack the sun cream?" asked John. "Because yes, I did. They don't have December here."
"Clearly," Sherlock remarked, frowning at the sky. "Curious to think it is New Year's Eve..."

As they stepped off the pier, he said,

"What is consumed for Christmas dinner here, Mycroft? I can't imagine it's turkey and roast potatoes."

Mycroft had had passion fruit and whipped cream from Greg's fingers, if he remembered rightly.

"A variety of things," he told his brother, with a smile. "Let me call us all a taxi. Anthea, are you quite comfortable in this heat?"

The villas were barely a minute away from each other. Mycroft ensured John and Sherlock were settling first, then left them in peace to unpack, with a reminder of dinner in Gustavia at eight.

He then called at the next villa, and was shown out to the terrace by Harry.

Anthea and her bump were already settled comfortably on a sun lounger, enjoying a virgin daiquiri and a paperback novel in her bathing suit.

Mycroft was sitting in the lounger beside her before he recognised the book.

"Ahh," he said, with a smile. "Swatting up?"

"Informing myself of what to expect," she said, amused. "He really is rather good, isn't he?"

"So I tell him."

"Such a deliciously unpredictable plot. And the sex scenes are frankly incendiary, Mycroft... I posit that you're a lucky man."

_Darling, you've no idea._ "I will certainly never lament Greg's imagination," Mycroft said, neatly.

"Do you go to the signings?"

"Some," he said. "Always the launches, at least. I try to keep myself innocuous at the back." He couldn't fight a smile. "It's both wonderful and a little strange, seeing people adore him as much as I do."

Her eyes sparkled, face softening with fondness for them both.

"With due respect," she said, "I doubt that's possible, s-Mycroft."

Humour stirred in Mycroft's heart. "Almost."

"Old habits, sir. They die hard." Anthea flipped to the first page of the book, smiling. "This one's dedicated to you, I note."

Mycroft was helpless against his grin. "Yes, they... _all are._"

"Of course they are." Anthea folded the novel around her bookmark, laying it aside with a little smirk. "Is he working on one at the moment?"
"He's just completed a draft, and the next is in its early stages of construction." Mycroft's stomach squeezed happily. "He wakes me in the night with ideas. It's... rather delightful."

"The pair of you will be the end of me," she said. She reached for her drink, taking a delicate sip. "It's no wonder that he's going down so well, of course. Handsome former detective - and British. Does that work in your favour, too?"

"With clients, you mean?"

"Mm."

"I suppose when one works in private finance in New York, there are certain advantages to sounding like the villain in an action film. The presumption of competency is helpful, at least."

"Is it pleasant to live there?" she asked, eyeing him with interest over her sunglasses. "America."

"Busy, but extremely pleasant." Mycroft smiled at her, intrigued. "Why do you ask?"

"I've often thought it would be." Her gaze brightened. "And it suits you marvellously, of course. I can't wait to see Greg."

*Nor can I.* "New York suits him, too. Very much indeed."

"I do believe you suit him, Mycroft. The geography of the thing is a minor factor at best."

"I hope you're still joining us for dinner tonight," Mycroft said. "The reservation is for eight o'clock, if that's alright. We have a table booked out on the sand."

"Of course we will," she said, fondly. "I wouldn't miss it for the world. 'Shellona', isn't it? I've heard marvellous things already."

"It is rather wonderful." Mycroft smiled, feeling his heart expand. "All the more, for such good company."

"Speaking of which," Anthea said, pushing her sunglasses up onto her forehead, "I believe you need a drink in your hand. It's New Year's Eve, after all. Harry?"

He appeared at the patio door a moment later. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Would you be kind enough to bring Mycroft something pink and alcoholic, please? If there's a little umbrella in it, all the better."

---

They talked contentedly for the next two hours, trading news of former colleagues which quickly strayed into shameless gossip - but then, Mycroft found, it was impossible not to gossip while drinking something pink on New Year's Eve through a straw. Harry, the little marvel, turned out to be rather generous with his gin; Mycroft had always known the boy would do well.

Throughout the conversation, a name seemed to be going unmentioned. Mycroft waited for it to arise - and when it didn't, he concluded that Anthea either knew nothing on the matter, or didn't feel it worthy of comment. Considering her elevated rank these days, and the wealth of information she could now access without lifting a finger, it was more likely the latter of the two.
Finally though, as she adjusted the rim of her sun hat, and glanced at him coyly from beneath it, she said,

"I note you haven't asked about her."

Mycroft smiled, stirring the final two inches of his cocktail with the straw. "I suppose I haven't."

Anthea took a delicate sip through her straw.

"Would you wish to know?" she asked.

Mycroft thought about it for some time, then took a drink.

"No," he said, "because I believe I can surmise already... at least, I can narrow the field to two likely outcomes for her fortunes. And as to which of those two transpires to be correct, I'm not overly concerned."

"Indeed?" Anthea sat back in her lounger, neatly recrossing her ankles. "What outcomes do you suspect, out of interest?"

Mycroft smiled, rolling the straw between his fingertips.

"One," he said, to begin. "Following her termination, you've monitored her rather closely. You've taken every discreet opportunity you can to impede her success in life - in small ways, I believe, but over time they've added up deliciously. I imagine speeding tickets are common. Interview processes are curiously stopped without much explanation. Loans are denied on sparse reasoning. She has struggled to make much of herself, and lives an unsatisfying existence without the power over others that so pleases her - and, worse, she is bright enough to be fully cognizant of why her fortunes seem so thin these days."

He took a slow sip of gin, watching Anthea's eyes. No hint of agreement nor denial could be found in them.

"From this," he went on, "I would conclude that Ilka Fielding has learned a valuable lesson. By their actions, an individual has the power to make the lives of those around them easy or hard - often without detriment to themselves. She chose to make lives hard. Those she kicked on her way up are now waiting with a bat on the way down."

"Well-phrased," Anthea noted, and waved a small insect away from her bump.

Mycroft smiled.

"Option the second," he said. "After her termination, Miss Fielding entered the private sector - where she has done extremely well. She found her way into a company as ruthless and success-minded as she is, and has saved them a fortune by slowly depriving its staff of more and more benefits. Her superiors are delighted. Her subordinates suffer, but haven't the power to challenge her. She lives without a flicker of remorse, and why shouldn't she? She has done no wrong. She now presents her termination from the security services as a great success. She lives comfortably and with pride in her achievements. She will, of course, go onto greater success."

He took another sip of gin.

"From this," he added, "I would conclude that every organisation in the world will happily sacrifice the wellbeing of its lower ranks, in order that those in authority can have two holiday homes instead of one. It is the nature of humanity. We are self-minded creatures."
He watched Anthea drink, her face impassive and unreadable.

"And I would find myself very glad that Greg and I now operate outside of the hierarchy," he said, smiling. "We can advance our interests without battling those above us or exploiting those below us. Our financial stability has been hard-won, and the last three years have not been easy - but I applaud our decision, and I would make it again without a second thought."

Anthea's small smile curled the edges of her mouth.

"You seem entirely content either way," she remarked.

Mycroft felt his heart breathe that in. He thought of Greg, and their apartment - happy memories in black-and-white around the walls - the first three years of a life spent together.

"I am," he said. "Without question."

"To clarify the matter would be unnecessary, then."

"So it seems."

Anthea smiled, her eyes sparkling. She took another drink.

"A gratifying outcome," she said, and stretched a little in her sun lounger. "I'm very pleased you have your stability now. Satisfying to have worked for it, I imagine?"

"Entirely," Mycroft said. "I was fortunate to have my savings, to help us settle. I can't present to you that this was achieved from a standing start."

"You worked for your savings too, Mycroft." She regarded him fondly. "You exchanged two decades of your life for them."

Mycroft finished off his drink. "I suppose I did," he conceded, and gave her a small smile. "My compensation is rather fairer these days. Thank God."

"Any future plans?" she asked him, casually, as she adjusted her sunhat. "Now you're both financially secure, that is..."

Mycroft knew at once to what she was referring. He tried to stop himself smirking, masking the expression as he swatted away an insect. "Discussions have perhaps been held."

"Mm? 'Discussions'?"

"Only sensible," he remarked, "for a couple to confirm there is agreement in the expected progress of their relationship."

"Highly sensible. Am I to expect a gold-rimmed invitation at some point?"

_God help me._

"I'm afraid I wouldn't know," Mycroft said, attempting discretion. It was rather hard while smiling. "The developments leading to such an eventuality, I'm informed, are now out of my hands."

"Ahhh."

"Perhaps I too will end up in _Heat_ magazine," he added, smirking, and she swatted at him with her sun hat.
"Rogue," she chided. "I had to send people to their offices. They've been warned never to print another photograph of me again, or their editor can enjoy a lengthy jail sentence... I'm hoping news of the baby can be kept quiet for as long as possible..."

She returned her sunhat to her head, neatening it carefully.

"Did you know there are people on the internet who believe I'm not real?" he said, amused. "'He never tweets about her'. For heaven's sake..."

The patio doors slid open. Harry appeared, tablet in hand. "Ma'am?"

Anthea craned her head round to him, as she sipped the very last of her daiquiri. "Mm, Harry?"

"I've had an update from Saint Maarten. They've arrived safely. It looks like they're taking the shuttle flight rather than the boat, so they should be here sooner than planned."

Anthea and Mycroft shared a smirk.

"Are they indeed...?" she said. "And catch us unawares... hmm. We'd better make ourselves look unaware, then. Thank you Harry."

As Harry nodded and returned inside, Mycroft placed his empty cocktail glass on the table.

"We'll see you at eight o'clock, then?" he said, rising from his chair. "We've arranged to meet John and Sherlock at the restaurant. I hope that suits."

"Mm, perfectly. I'm looking forward to it."

She opened her arms to hug him. Mycroft leant down, put his arms around her and smiled into her hair.

"It's wonderful to be here with you both," she murmured, holding him. "I've - missed you very much."

"I've missed you, too. If our fortunes continue to improve, we might be in danger of establishing a yearly tradition."

"Beginning each year in St Barts? Heaven. Don't tempt me, Mycroft."

Mycroft smiled, drawing back from her.

"Would you be permitted that sort of leave?" he asked. "I seem to recall having to fight tooth and nail for mine."

She gave him a sly glance.

"You smashed quite a hole in the wall as you left," she said. "Enough people fled through it after you that senior officials must now be courted and indulged, rather than chained to their posts."

She reached for her novel again, and resettled herself on the sun lounger.

"They don't really deny us a thing these days," she said. "I've already been told I can work remotely for my maternity leave, and return when I'm quite ready. I think they live in fear that I'll tell them to fuck themselves and run off to New York."

Mycroft's eyes crinkled at the edges.
"I'd recommend it," he said. "Wholeheartedly."

"It does look wonderful," she admitted.

"Mm. It seems I've done quite well, for the most hopeless man who ever drew breath."

Her eyes shone. "So you have," she said. "Enjoy the rest of your afternoon, Mycroft. Give Greg my best... when you're done giving him yours."

As Mycroft let himself into the villa, he found himself smiling almost ear-to-ear. He might only have a few minutes to get ready. He swapped his shirt for loose-necked white linen, checked his hair in the bathroom mirror, applied a little cologne behind his jaw, then took a bottle of white wine from the fridge.

He carried it, along with two glasses, out to the terrace on the hillside.

Though this view never changed, each time Mycroft laid eyes on it he seemed to see it afresh for the first time - the open sky and the ocean, each filled with colours that existed nowhere else in the world. The sun was just kissing the horizon. Its heat would soon ease, and the coolness of the night would blow in across the ocean.

As he poured out two glasses of wine, Mycroft realised his heart was hopping with excitement.

Two nights apart; it felt like two months.

Greg almost hadn't gone - almost ready to tell his agent to rearrange, for the sake of not leaving Mycroft alone here. Mycroft had almost forced him to go. "I'll catch up on work, darling. You'll be back in time for John and Sherlock to arrive, and perhaps with additional reason to celebrate. I insist you abandon me in St Barts."

Soft phone calls, both nights. Words of love and longing.

And now only minutes to wait.

Mycroft attempted to relax on a sun lounger, reached for his wine glass, and watched the sun set as he did his best to foster patience.

It was rather impossible. Time apart was now so rare that the prospect of reunion felt a little like a miracle. At home, Greg kissed him even before stepping into his office for an hour. Their lives were inseparable. A few face-to-face meetings each week, and the rest of Mycroft's time belonged to Greg.

It was still a marvel; it always would be.

He only had to open his arms, *I want*, and Greg stepped into them. They ate out several nights each week. If they wished, they walked the few blocks to Balthazar on Spring Street on a whim for brunch. If they wanted to spend a week out of state together, they could. The laptops came with them. Everything was easy. If it was two o'clock in the afternoon, and Greg cosied up behind Mycroft while he was making coffee, nuzzled into his neck and sent a shiver down his spine, the bedroom was only a few steps away.
As he sipped his wine, watching the sunset, it occurred to Mycroft that this was where he'd first waited, three years ago.

He'd worried he wouldn't be able to entertain Greg Lestrade for a week. He'd feared he'd see the man grow bored with him, grow tired of his needs.

*Three perfect years.*

Nothing would ever change how it felt to wake up, turn over in bed, and find sleepy brown eyes gazing at him, full of hopeful love, waiting for him to be awake. When he was tired, Greg enlivened him. When he was fractious, Greg soothed him. When he put his arms around Greg and whispered, and felt the man sink with perfect trust into his care, Mycroft felt like he was irreplaceable.

There was no better feeling in the world.

The sound of footsteps pulled him from his memories.

Before he'd even thought, Mycroft lifted his head and looked - and there he was.

Perfectly at ease, as if he walked this hillside trail every day of his life, Greg strolled between the low-lying plants. He moved with the same calm and steady purpose that had first caught Mycroft's eye all those years ago. He looked like he was fresh this moment from his meeting, black shirt and leather belt, suit jacket slung over one shoulder, sporting the deep tan that had returned after barely three nights here.

He was grinning from ear-to-ear.

Mycroft's heart heaved with joy inside his chest. He watched Greg approach, unbreathing, realising all over again that he was the single luckiest soul on the planet.

Greg stepped onto the terrace without a word. He passed along the poolside - slow, steady steps - and came towards Mycroft's sun lounger, holding Mycroft's gaze as he did.

Reaching the foot of the lounger, he discarded his jacket on the ground like it didn't matter at all.

He placed a knee between Mycroft's legs, a hand on each arm of the lounger, and leant down.

"I missed you..." he breathed as they came apart for air. Mycroft tightened his fingers in Greg's hair, scrunching it with longing. His lover's eyes flashed across his face. "I missed you to hell... you know that? You're so bloody beautiful..."

Mycroft's heart was pounding. "Greg..."

Greg grinned, biting his lip. "Your brother get here okay?"

"Mhm - "

"Anthea okay on the flight?"

"Yes - she's fine - "

"Yeah? Good..." Greg cupped Mycroft's face in one hand, stroking a thumb across his mouth. "We still on for dinner?"

Mycroft gave a nod as he shivered, his lips parting in instinct. "How was your meeting?" he asked - and as he saw Greg's eyes ignite, he knew at once. "Tell me, Greg..."
Greg's grin widened.

"Signed," he said. "Done. Pre-production starts next month."

"Greg - oh darling, I'm so pleased - "

"They want me as - what the hell was it? 'Co-executive producer'? In with the production team, script-writing..." Greg's grin barely fit on his face. "Looks like it's happening, gorgeous. *Now a major feature film.*"

"Greg, I'm thrilled. I'm so proud."

"Want some more good news?"

"Tell me - "

"Ethan got it. He got the lead role." Greg bit down into his grin. "He's gone to tell Anthea now."

"Signed?"

"Signed." Greg laughed as Mycroft's arms flung around his neck, hugging him hard. "I told them it was part of my conditions, like you suggested. He did the audition piece I wrote him, and they didn't even blink. Said they'd already had him in mind."

"Oh god, I'm so pleased."

"Can't imagine anyone better, they said. Ethan's over the moon. Except..."

"Except?"

"Well, they'll be filming in New York. Keeping it all on location. So Ethan's gonna have to be there for... what, months on end? Which means..."

Mycroft made a deduction.

"Mrs Sterling will find herself either impelled to relocate," he said, smiling, "or deprived of a husband."

"Yeah..." Greg hesitated, reading Mycroft's eyes. "D'you think she's gonna be upset?"

Mycroft smiled slowly. "Something tells me she's put some thought into the matter already."

Greg grinned, stroking back a little of his hair. "You think?"

"Mm. I do."

"I s'pose with the baby on the way, she might take some time off... I guess she and Ethan can talk about it." Greg kissed him gently between the eyes. "Looks like I'm taking you to the pictures then, posh. D'you think you get free popcorn if you wrote the film?"

Mycroft felt his his grin grow with his heart. He wrapped his arms around Greg's neck, pulling him down into the lounger. They squirmed, kissing and shifting until they found a comfortable way to lie side-by-side, their legs wrapped tight, hands in each other's hair.

"I love you," Mycroft breathed between kisses, shivering as Greg's arm curled around his waist. "I adore you. You wonderful, wonderful man..."
"Christ, love..." Greg pulled him closer, breathing in. "I love you, too... you know that? I wouldn't be anything without you. Not a damn single thing. My gorgeous Mycroft."

"You changed my life three years ago. This very night. You changed everything, Greg. I owe you my every happiness."

"Yeah?" Greg grinned, stealing another soft kiss from his lips. "Imagine what I'll do with another three years..."

"God almighty..." Mycroft raked his fingers through Greg's hair as he inhaled, feeling his heart drum with joy. "Just let me love you. Please. It's all I could ever want."

His partner laughed, his voice soft; his hand stroked across Mycroft's lower back.

"Mhm. Sure I can manage that." He leant close, brushing his nose along Mycroft's jaw - then gave a low, fascinated groan. "Jesus, you smell amazing... what is that?"

Mycroft bit into his smile, heart swelling. "New," he said. "A small indulgence. I did hope you'd like it."

"Christ, I love it..." Greg followed the trail of scent to its source at the corner of Mycroft's jaw, breathing in deeply. His arms tightened with longing. "Fuck me up..."

"Can be arranged."

Greg grinned against his neck. "You wearing that tonight?" he murmured. His fingers flexed, pawing at Mycroft's lower back. "Won't be able to keep my hands off you."

"Mm? Unfortunate." Mycroft began to trace a lazy circle at the nape of his lover's neck, feeling waves of overwhelming affection wash through him. "Perhaps it would be safest to take care of you now... ease some of these restless inclinations of yours..."

Greg shivered slowly. "My..."

"But then, will indulging each other now sate our needs? Or just inflame them? History leans us towards the latter."

"Inflame me," Greg breathed, and took a hold of Mycroft by the arse, squeezing. Mycroft's pulse jumped. "Please. Missed you. Couldn't sleep last night when you were gone."

"Greg... you should have called back..."

"Mnh. Wanted more than your voice." Greg inhaled at the corner of his jaw again, drinking the new cologne. "C-Christ, love. Let me watch you come. Please. Don't know if I can wait until tonight."

Mycroft felt his blood heat in immediate response. Tingles cascaded down his neck. "Greg..."

Greg's fingertips cosied beneath the hem of his shirt, stroking across the skin of his back. The brush of his lover's hands felt like the spreading of soft flames; Mycroft gasped, arching, inviting them on.

"What would you like?" Greg murmured against his jaw, voice easing low. "What would feel good?"

Mycroft's breath caught. He ran his fingers through Greg's gorgeous grey hair, stroking it back on itself, and gloriéd in the shiver it caused.
"Let me suck you," he whispered. "I - want you in my mouth, Greg. I want to show you I've missed you."

Greg's quiet groan ignited his nerves in a rush. "Darlin'..."

Breath tightening together, they reached for Greg's belt. As Mycroft found the buckle and undid it he kissed his lover, soothing his tongue into Greg's mouth and stroking with a pointed slowness, promising him, like this. Lazy. Tend to you. Greg shook and exhaled a quiet groan against his mouth. Mycroft took his time with the fastening, enjoying the kiss - it had only been two days, but he'd missed the feeling of gently arousing Greg. Nothing quite compared to being trusted this way. There was a certain vulnerability in being looked after; he'd learned that lying right here, safe in Greg's hands.

Now Greg was safe in his.

He turned Greg gently onto his back on the lounger, wanting him to rest, and loosened the buttons of his shirt. God help me, this shirt. Black with tiny white dots. Greg wore it when he wanted to look both authoritative and approachable, and it worked on Mycroft like a bloody dream.

Only Mycroft got to see the look in Greg's eyes as it was tenderly undone; only Mycroft got to lean down and paint the skin beneath with his mouth, sweeping pleasure and love across Greg's chest.

By the time he reached the open belt, Greg's fingers were tremoring in his hair.

"Baby..."

"Mm?" Mycroft leant down, brushing the very tip of his nose against the fabric of Greg's boxers. He was gorgeously hard already, the black cotton damp with pre-come. "Are you alright?"

Greg's fingers curled hopefully at the back of his neck. "B-Baby..."

Smiling, Mycroft wrapped his lips around Greg's cock through the fabric - teasing, soft. Greg shook and groaned, his head dropping back against the lounger.

"Fuck," he whispered, and as Mycroft caught the waistband of his boxers, lowering them enough to free his cock, he inhaled deeply. "Oh, god..."

Hard for me. Desperate. Mycroft's whole body seemed to burn with it. He leant forward to nose gently along Greg's shaft, shivering and stroking his mouth.

"I missed you, Greg," he whispered, gazing upwards as he flashed his tongue across the head. "I missed you so very much..."

Greg's pupils were huge. "Y-Yeah?"

"Mm..." Mycroft closed his eyes, let his lips part, and took Greg's cock slowly into his mouth.

"Jesus..." Greg stirred, his groan cutting as he swallowed. "Oh Jesus, Myc - M-Myc - "

Mycroft stroked his hands across Greg's stomach, petting, as he concentrated on making this good - wet lips, idle coils of his tongue, slowly taking Greg as deep as his throat would permit for now. As he worked, listening to Greg breathe, he realised this wasn't a chase towards climax. It was pleasure-giving, unhurried and easy; he'd stay here until dinner if Greg allowed him.

After long minutes, he helped ease Greg's trousers and boxers down to mid-thigh - enough to keep
him restrained, but allow Mycroft to cup and tug gently at his balls as Greg liked, massaging them in rhythm with the deeper movements of his mouth. Greg strained against the lounger and began to pant, hips just now lifting with the urge to fuck, to chase, to find. Easy. Mycroft began to disrupt his rhythm with purpose, never sustaining too fast for too long. Greg's soft moans of frustration and longing were more beautiful than any music.

Reaching down the lounger with one-hand, Mycroft loosened the tie of his linen trousers.

Easing out of them took a little time, but Greg was deliciously distracted. His fingers were now restless in Mycroft's hair, scrunching and dishevelling, gentle even in his state of high excitement. His heavy cock stirred in and out of Mycroft's mouth as he was sucked, tiny longing little thrusts against his tongue; Mycroft could feel that fine and beautiful vibration just beginning to thrum in his thighs.

Wanting me. Needing me.

Greg would have what he needed. Mycroft had thought about it all day, burning slowly in anticipation of this moment. How I missed you. How I want you.

He let his trousers slip from his ankles onto the hot tiles, thanking himself for the forethought to forego underwear today. Now bare from the waist down, his mouth and throat still full of Greg's cock, he plucked open a few buttons on his shirt, too restless to undo them all. Greg was panting at some pace, trying to thrust hopefully into his mouth, fingers firm and gentle on the back of Mycroft's neck as they persuaded him towards building rhythm.

As he disengaged his mouth, Greg shook. He let out a weak and desperate sound.

"M-My - My, I need to - "

Mycroft crawled up the sun lounger, took Greg's jaw in both hands and kissed him, hard. Greg's arms dragged around him, hands fisting in the back of his shirt. In every brief breath of air, Greg tried to speak.

"B-Baby, please - " He groaned as Mycroft's tongue pushed through into his mouth, gasping. "P-Please - I'm not kidding - "

Mycroft reached behind his back to catch one of Greg's hands. He squeezed it, then lowered it - nudging it down between his thighs.

Greg's breath hitched at once.

Mycroft had pulled this particular trick enough times for it to be recognised now. As Greg's fingers quickly sought and found the flat base of silicon, his reaction was no less pronounced for the predictability. His frantic moan rasped against Mycroft's mouth, muffled by the curl of their tongues. He pulled Mycroft astride him, panting with urgency.

Mycroft held onto his beautiful jaw, sustaining the fierce kiss as Greg took hold of the plug inside him. He felt it begin to slide, and couldn't fight a desperate moan. Two days. Oh god, two days. Greg didn't wait. He didn't tease. He drew the toy out, dropped it somewhere to the ground, and guided his desperate cock into place.

Fuck - fuck, yes -

No waiting - no teasing - the slick nuzzle, the nudge, the stretch, and Mycroft cried out against Greg's mouth as Greg pushed up inside his body. Shaking hands appeared at his waist, restlessly
pulling him down. More. Please more. Mycroft shook and swallowed, kissing Greg with ferocity as he obeyed the gentle tug of his hands, letting his weight drop slowly onto his lover's cock. Greg slid deeper with every breath; his fingers dug into Mycroft's waist, gripping and holding. Yes. God, yes. At last, as he sank the last inch and shuddered at the sensation, Mycroft felt Greg convulse beneath him.

Greg struggled, cutting the kiss.

"F-Fuck," he gasped. "Fuck, fuck - "

Mycroft panted against his mouth, breathing in his breath. "I love you. I missed you."

Greg's eyes flashed, roaming across his face.

"Show me," he whispered. His hands tightened at Mycroft's waist again, pulling. "S-Show me, baby."

Mycroft braced a hand on each arm of the sun lounger.

He'd meant to go slow - to draw this out, take his time to feel and remember, make Greg wait, make him beg - but as Greg began to move in him, thick and demanding, the urge to fuck overwhelmed Mycroft in a rush. He felt his head fall back, and heard his own voice gasp, "Oh fuck, you're - fuck - "

Greg pulled at his waist, shaking. "My - "

Mycroft began to ride him, hard, rising up as much of his cock as he could lift each time then driving back down with a groan. *Fuck. Fuck me. Oh god. Oh fuck.* Greg groaned and swore and pushed up in response, bucking into his body in desperation.

In only seconds they were panting. In minutes they were sweating, fucking as if they'd never done this before, kissing as if they'd never get the chance again. Mycroft rode for as long as he could, groaning his pleasure against Greg's mouth on every stroke, until the muscles in his thighs began to weaken and a tremor of exhaustion arose in his lower back. Greg felt him tiring before he could even say. He shifted beneath Mycroft, grabbed hold of him tight, and with some squirming and gasping and laughing they managed to switch positions.

As Greg parted his thighs over the arms of the sun lounger, and grinned down at him from between them, hair now on end and still wearing his open black shirt, Mycroft realised he was more in love than he ever had been.

Greg nuzzled back inside him, filling him with a shaky breath; Mycroft shivered, swallowed and wrapped around him.

"You okay?" Greg breathed, and began to thrust - deep, hard and driving.

Mycroft fisted his hands in the back of Greg's shirt.

"Fuck me," he begged, tightening. "Oh, god, *fuck me.* Make me feel it. I *missed* you."

"I missed you too," Greg whispered, burying his face in Mycroft's neck. "I *love* you. I *need* you."

As his teeth closed on the crook of Mycroft's shoulder, Mycroft howled his name across the hillside.

In their afterglow they cuddled in an exhausted tangle, shining with sweat, drinking wine from one
glass as they watched the sun go down.

As it dipped beneath the horizon at last, Greg stroked his hair and whispered, "D'you want me to shift to the other lounger, darlin'? More room?"

Mycroft tightened his arms, and kissed him hard. "Don't you dare."

The others had all reached the restaurant before them.

Finding a shirt that covered Mycroft's new bites had proved impossible, though not through lack of effort.

"Fuck it," Greg soothed him in the end, grinning, and nosed with puppyish fondness against the marks. "Been two days. We've missed each other, and we're on holiday. They'll know we're fucking in a frenzy every chance we get."

From the grinning looks they received as they made their way towards the table, Mycroft was left in no doubt about that.

"Ethan," he said, too happy in this moment to feel embarrassed.

Ethan rose from his chair to hug him.

"Mycroft! It's been too long - good to see you - "

"Far too long. Congratulations upon the role - I'm so pleased for you both. Very well done."

Ethan gripped him, beaming. "Can't wait," he said. "Can't wait to work with Greg, too. It's going to blow the box office to pieces. I know it."

"We can only hope," Mycroft said, smiling as they parted. "I'm so glad."

Greg was now making his way around the table, being greeted and hugged in delight by the others. Anthea folded him into her arms with the warmest of smiles, kissed him on the cheek and glowed as he fondly greeted her bump.

"Twenty-four weeks," she said, as Ethan resumed his seat beside her. He wrapped a loving arm around her chair. "They offered to tell us, but we've opted for the surprise."

"Sophie for a girl," Ethan told them, proud. "Oliver for a boy."

Greg grinned, heading around the table to John and Sherlock.

"And it's 'Greg' as a middle name for both, right?" he said. '"Sophie Greg Sterling'? Catchy."

Anthea and Ethan shared an amused glance that Mycroft didn't miss, their hands sliding together in a knot. Ethan laid a hand on his wife's stomach, kissed her shoulder, and murmured something that made her smile.

Sherlock squirmed as he was enclosed in Greg's arms.
"Aghh. Hello, Lestrade."

Greg grinned, scrubbing his hair. "Hello, mate. Bloody missed you."

"Congratulations on the film deal. You must be very pleased."

"Thanks. Still can't really believe it."

"Have you told your former colleagues at Scotland Yard?" Sherlock asked, and Greg laughed aloud.

"Christ, no. Not yet. Think they'll be glad for me? They were mad enough when I got the book deal... imagine what they'll do when they see me with Ethan at the premiere..."

"Their loss," John said, grinning as stood up to hug Greg, "is your gain."

Mycroft watched them embrace, feeling his heart shine. Indeed it is, he thought.

"Can we get everybody a drink?" Greg offered, looking around the table with a smile. He slipped an arm around Mycroft's waist. "Cocktails, yeah? We've got a new year to see in. Let's do it in style."

"A virgin daiquiri for me, thank you, Greg."

"No worries Anthea. John? Sherlock? Cocktails? We'll get you on a Pink Indies, Sherlock. You'll never look back." Greg kissed Mycroft's shoulder, grinning. "Give me a hand, will you, love?"

As they made their way through the busy restaurant towards the bar, Greg's fingers slipped through Mycroft's.

"D'you remember?" he asked, his dark eyes shining in the lantern light. "First time we were here..."

Mycroft felt his heart squeeze with utter happiness. "How could I forget?"

Mycroft had never been so happy on a New Year's Eve before. The five people around him were assuredly his favourites in the world, and to see them laughing together and sharing food filled his heart with a warmth that didn't feel like it would ever ease. Greg kept an arm around his shoulders throughout the meal, feeding him little pieces of food with a grin, occasionally dipping his mouth low to murmur some delightful little comment in his ear.

"We need to do this every year," he said, as everyone laughed at one of Ethan's stories. "All of us, get together somewhere... things are good now. We can afford it with the film deal, can't we?"

Mycroft couldn't imagine anything more wonderful. "I'd like that too," he said, and squeezed Greg's knee beneath the table, smiling against his lover's jaw. "Thank you for suggesting this. I'm having a wonderful time."

Greg grinned, kissing his temple.

"Thanks for bringing me here, darlin'. Can't believe it's been three years since the first time..." He rolled a cherry tomato from Mycroft's plate and fed it to him with a smile, his eyes dark and beautiful as he watched. "We've had a good three years, you and me..."
Mycroft smiled, swallowing the tomato with a little hop of his heart. "Indeed we have."

"Yeah?" Greg bit his lip, eyes shining. "Would you do it all again?"

"Yes. In a heartbeat. All of it."

"Even all the fuss?"

"Even all the fuss," Mycroft murmured, leant close and kissed Greg's cheek. "For you. Of course I would."

He felt Greg's chest swell gently beneath his hand.

"Darlin'..." Greg murmured, and for a moment seemed overcome by something. He watched Mycroft gently, his gaze soft. "Hope you know what you mean to me."

As Mycroft opened his mouth to reply, his heart drumming with hope, he realised they were being approached. A nervous young woman had stolen shyly up to their table, clutching an autograph pad and a fluffy pen.

"I'm really sorry to intrude," she said, grinning bashfully at them all. "I just... my family's eating over there, and I had to come over... my sister's got a massive crush too but she doesn't dare come say hi. I said I'd do it."

Ethan - more than well-practiced in his routine - gave her a broad and welcoming smile.

"You can tell your sister we're a friendly bunch over here," he said, warmly. "We'd love her to come have a photo. Would she like an autograph, too? Is that her pad?"

The young woman squeezed the book, beaming.

"Oh - no, this one's mine. You honestly don't mind?" she said - and Mycroft realised with a bubble of amusement that she'd barely even glanced at Ethan. Her eyes were centred on this side of the table. "I've gotten so interested in crime since you. We didn't know if it was definitely you or not, but I saw your photo in the paper last year... would you mind?"

Sensing bewilderment beside him, Mycroft smothered a smirk. He poked his fingers discreetly between Greg's shoulder blades. She means you, darling.

"Oh!" said Greg, and sat up with a grin. Across the table, Anthea was now laughing over her daiquiri at her husband's blush; Ethan was attempting to hide himself behind a menu. "Sure. That's really sweet of you."

"I can't believe it," the young woman said, thrilled, and extended the pad - to Mycroft's left. "Sherlock Holmes! I can't wait to tell everyone back at work!"

As John laughed, throwing his head back in delight, a baffled Sherlock took the pad and fluffy pink pen.

He glanced for guidance towards Greg, who was too busy biting into his cheek and staring down at his food.

Suppressing his amusement, Mycroft stepped in.

"Write something nice for the young lady," he said. "Good wishes for the new year, perhaps."
Sherlock arched an eyebrow, wrote, "Good wishes for the new year, SH," and dubiously handed it back to her.

"Thank you so much!" she said, overjoyed. "I'm so glad I got to meet you! I'll go fetch my sister..."

She hurried off between the tables.

John wiped a tear from his eye, still chuckling.

"You two," he said, shaking his head at Ethan and Greg. "One multi-million-pound film deal, and you think you're big shots. Brilliant."

As they came to the end of their desserts, John insisted it was his round of cocktails. He dragged Sherlock up to the bar to help.

His seat was immediately filled by Anthea, sliding sideways to cosy up to Mycroft.

Her husband joined her, smoothly.

The pair of them smiled.

"Why does this look like trouble?" Greg said, amused, as he held half a doughnut dipped in honey for Mycroft to eat. "You're not going to invite us to an orgy, are you? We've been through this, mate. The answer's no."

They both smirked.

"Not on this occasion," Anthea said, and flipped back her hair. "We wished to ask you both something. You're very welcome to decline, but... we'd be thrilled if you'd accept."

Mycroft raised an eyebrow, trying to read it in her face.

She smiled back at him, inscrutable, her eyes glittering with affection.

"Go on," he told her, intrigued.

Anthea glanced fondly up at her husband, who kissed her head and gave her shoulder a squeeze. With a breath, she said,

"Sophie or Oliver Sterling will be needing a godfather. We... thought it might be rather nice, if they had two..."

Mycroft's heart ached. "Anthea..."

"Christ..." Greg breathed beside him. "Guys... are you serious?"

"Completely," Ethan said, his eyes shining. "We couldn't think of anyone better. We'd be honoured."

Mycroft felt his throat squeeze as he swallowed. He knew he'd moved already beyond the point of words. He sat forwards in his chair without speaking, folding Anthea immediately into his arms.

As they hugged, he felt Greg get up to embrace Ethan.
"You are too kind," he managed in her ear. He felt her sigh with contentment. "I - h-haven't the faintest idea how to offer guidance to a child."

"You offered it well enough to me," she murmured. "I'm sure a child will be easier." She smiled against his cheek. "Mycroft?"

"Mm?"

"Ethan and I are moving to New York while he films Greg's book."

"You will like it," Mycroft warned her. His heart swelled with happiness. "You will stay."

She chuckled in his ear. "Perish the thought..."

At fifteen minutes to midnight, as a gin-addled Sherlock tried to explain mass spectrometry to a baffled Ethan, and John escorted Anthea to the dance floor, Mycroft felt a quiet kiss pressed to the back of his neck.

"Hey..." came the hopeful rumble.

Mycroft bit into his lip, smiling at once. "Hello..."

"C'mon. While they're distracted."

"And where exactly are we going?" Mycroft murmured, his pulse picking up, as Greg's hands stroked down his arms.

"S'nearly midnight." Greg kissed the side of his neck. "Want to see in the New Year with you."

Grinning, Mycroft took his hand. He let Greg lead him through the crowded room, winding their way between tables of laughing New Year's revellers, out through the doors into the moonlit night air.

Even before Greg tugged on his hand, Mycroft knew where they were going.

The beach was not entirely deserted. They were a few other couples here, shapes in the darkness under the stars - some dancing slowly, others sitting side-by-side upon the sand. Greg led him all the way along the shore, until the music of the restaurant was just a murmur beneath the hushing waves. Their footsteps crunched softly over the shells and sand, and Mycroft's heart was dancing in his chest, fingers knotted tight with Greg's.

They helped each other over the rocks. Nearly to the cove, Mycroft slipped - Greg caught him before he even knew he'd lost his footing. They kissed, grinning, laughing in relief, and reached the shore safe and sound.

Greg pulled Mycroft into his arms at once. His fingers stroked through Mycroft's hair, brushing it back, sweeping it off his forehead.

"Wanted you to myself for this bit," he whispered. "Is that okay?"

Mycroft's heart was pounding; he felt so in love he couldn't breathe. "New Year?"
"Belongs to you." Greg's arms tightened. "Every year does. Want to end them with you, start them with you. Always with you."

"God..." Mycroft felt himself start to tremble, unsure why. Greg...

"Three years," Greg breathed, nuzzling into his neck, as the waves brushed across the sand. "Happiest three years of my life. No contest. No challenge." His voice thickened. "M'so in love with you. My best friend. I wake up everyday and just look at you, and I..."

_God almighty._

Mycroft shook, holding tightly onto Greg's shoulders. "You are my world," he whispered. "My whole world, Greg. You always will be."

Greg swallowed.

"S'good to hear," he said - and something in his voice caught Mycroft's breath.

"G-Greg?"

There came a bang somewhere in the sky behind Mycroft. He watched the first flash of a midnight firework filled Greg's eyes with a shower of gold. It was followed by another two, crackling and fizzling, and the distant cheers from the restaurant along the shore - and as Greg gazed at him, Mycroft felt his heart take a deep breath.

"Mycroft..." Greg said, and took his hands.

_Oh._

_Oh. God._

"Myc..." he whispered, and sank to one knee.

Mycroft's heart shattered into fragments. His eyes blazed with instant tears.

"Yes," he gasped. _"Yes, I will."_

Greg gripped his hands, hard. His expression ruptured into relief, shoulders shaking, and the grin that broke across his face was the most perfect sight of Mycroft's life.

"I h-haven't asked you yet, posh. I've got to ask first. Then you say yes. S'how this works."

Mycroft's sob and laugh escaped him as a single breath.

"Oh, _fuck._ Ask me. For Christ's sake, _ask me._"

Greg gazed up from the wet sand. His hands shook, his eyes shining with tears and fireworks.

"Marry me," he begged. "I'll make you happy. Forever. I promise."

Mycroft broke down. He couldn't speak.

He found himself kneeling with Greg in the sand, crying and laughing as seawater soaked into their trousers, holding onto Greg so tightly that Greg's heartbeat felt like his own. The sky erupted in colour and sound behind them. It was the first of January.
And he was Greg Lestrade's fiancé.

Greg rubbed his back, rocking him, laughing in his ear as they cried.

"Christ! Wait - " Greg scrabbled for his pocket. "Jesus, I was meant to - "

As he produced a ring box, Mycroft felt his heart blow apart in a shower of sparks.

"Oh my God - "

The ring was platinum - masculine, gorgeous, inlaid with a double groove. Mycroft covered his mouth in desperation, tears now streaming unchecked down his face.

Greg gave him a pained look. "I was probably meant to show you this first? Bloody hell..." He bit into his grin, shaking. "Can we go back over the rocks, please? And we'll try this again. C'mon."

Mycroft collapsed into tears once more.

Greg dragged him back into his arms.

"God, gorgeous... here, let's..." Greg took his hand.

Mycroft convulsed as Greg slid the ring into place on his finger. It settled as comfortably as if it had always been there. He wrapped his arms around Greg's neck, wept into his shoulder without shame, and they knelt together in the sand until the fireworks were almost over.

"I love you," Greg breathed in his ear. It rolled through Mycroft in a wave of utter joy. My fiancé. My fiancé's first I love you. "I'm going to love you everyday. Every way I can. I'm never, never going to let you forget."

"God almighty..." Mycroft pushed a hand across his eyes, trying to wipe away the tears. "D-Do they all know?"

"No, love... just you and me. Kept it quiet." Greg pulled back to cup his face, grinning, brushing away the tears with his thumbs. "Where're we getting married? Here in St Barts?"

Oh god. "Oh god - yes - "

"Yeah? We'll have whatever you want, love. Everything. We'll plan it all together. Make it perfect."

Mycroft began to weep again. "For god's sake - Greg - "

Greg laughed, leaning forwards to kiss him. Mycroft's heart heaved against the front of his chest. He pulled Greg close and they wrapped their arms around each other, shaking as they kissed.

When they came apart, Greg was shivering with joy and relief.

"Shall we head back soon?" he whispered. His face shone in the moonlight, gazing at Mycroft as if he were everything. "Tell them all the news..."

Mycroft looked into his eyes, overwhelmed.

"F-Five minutes more," he said, as he stroked Greg's cheek. My fiancé's face. My husband's eyes. "I-w-want you to myself a little longer."

Greg cupped the back of his head, grinning.
"You'll have me to yourself forever," he breathed. "Every single day of your life. Whenever you need me, whenever you want me, I'm gonna be right here. I promise, darlin'. You can count on me..."

As their lips met Mycroft let his eyes fall shut. He buried his fingers in his fiancé's hair, happier than he could ever remember being. Greg kissed him, stroking his back.

As they exhaled, the ocean breathed with them.

Neither was ever lonely again.

The End

Chapter End Notes

Guys: thank you. Thank you so much for being here for this story. I know I put you through the emotional wringer, but you stuck it out. I can't tell you what that means to me. Your kind comments and kudos have breathed life into me as I write. I appreciate your support and encouragement so so much, and I can't wait to hear what you think. <3

Every time I bring Greg and Mycroft to a happy ending, it reminds me that I'm kinda living mine. Just being able to write for you all brings me so much joy and puts so much meaning in my life. It's sappy but it's true. Thank you for being my readers - I think about you all constantly and I owe you so much.

I really hope you've enjoyed End Game. Let me know if it was good for you - and until next time, thank you. Thank you over and over again.

Less than three. <3

Works inspired by this one: Seven by HastaLux

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!